

The Question of Ageing*

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Abstract

For humans, as for other animal species, old age is a good, provided that the disease and decrepitude that often accompany it are not so severe as to swamp further flourishing. This accords with Aristotle's holistic account of flourishing, which embraces the entire biological lifespan. However, Aristotle's stress on rational activity as the key to human fulfillment suggests flourishing may be eroded in proportion as the intellectual faculties deteriorate. The Judeo-Christian tradition, by contrast, construes human flourishing primarily in terms of moral integrity, so allowing that old age (and its associated infirmities) can bring with it its own contribution to a worthwhile life. These Judeo-Christian lessons on ageing do not, as is commonly supposed, depend on whether there will be an after life in which the pains of aging will be eliminated.

*Old age is never considered an enviable state. In the echo returned by our hearts to the declaration that "God has made every thing beautiful in its season," the season of old age is always excepted. We see no beauty in it. It hath infirmity and deprivation, but no attractions. We speak of it in tones of commiseration, as though it were one of the greatest, as well as the last trial of our humanity.*¹

1. Human nature, animal nature, and old age

Much contemporary moral philosophy, following an increasingly technical and quasi-scientific model, has pulled away from the grand traditional questions that occupied the great philosophers of the past. In the Classical and medieval epochs, by contrast, the agenda for moral philosophy followed that inaugurated by Plato and Aristotle, and philosophers saw their task as that of determining *to anthrôpinon agathon*— the good for humankind. What this consisted of might be variously understood— in Platonic, Peripatetic, Stoic, Epicurean, or Judaeo-Christian terms, or in terms of elements drawn from any or all of the above; but the object of the exercise was to help us to understand the human condition and how we might achieve fulfilled and flourishing lives.

Yet the 'we' in that last sentence conceals multiple ambiguities. For what it is to be human is itself a vexed philosophical issue. As Martin Heidegger notably put it, a human is the only being for whom being is a question.² And if what it is to be human is open to philosophical question, it follows that the nature of the good for humankind will be correspondingly debateable. By contrast, there is no serious philosophical issue about what a horse or a pig is; and as a result, the good for pigs or horses is absolutely (and indeed scientifically) determinable: we can establish beyond any reasonable doubt what is needed in order for them to flourish and to lead lives that are good for beings of their kind.

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¹ S. K. Lothrop, *The Consolations of Old Age* (Boston: Eastburn's Press, 1846), pp. 7-8.

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], trans. J. Macquarrie (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), Introduction, I, §4 (p. 32).

This familiar contrast gives us an immediate focus for considering the question of ageing. For a horse or a pig to grow old is natural enough; there have always, since time immemorial, been specimens of these and most other common species that outlive the perils of disease and predation and reach what we call a 'ripe' old age. Depending on prevailing environmental conditions, it may be a larger or a smaller percentage that makes it through to this stage; but for all that, the condition of old age, however many actually attain it, is perfectly natural for these species. In the modern world, where artificially safe environments are provided by farmers or equestrian enthusiasts or zookeepers, it is possible for much larger numbers of animals than before to reach this stage; but the natural life span of a horse or a pig has not changed as a result.

Exactly the same, *mutatis mutandis* is true for humans: for them to grow old is perfectly normal and natural. People sometimes get very confused about this, mistaking the statistical matter of 'life-expectancy' for a natural tendency to live for a certain number of years. So one hears even intelligent historians and anthropologists who ought to know better say things like 'in Saxon times, someone of thirty five was considered an old man.' That, of course, is nonsense. A man of thirty-five in Saxon times was, and was considered, in the prime of life, just as today; a man of seventy was, and was considered, fairly old, just as today; and an octogenarian was, and was considered, of considerably advanced years, just as today. 'Three score years and ten, or four score, if they have the strength'.³ This biblical tally, accepted millennia ago, still holds good. The natural life-span of a species is written in the genes, and survival rates, depending on disease, predation, warfare and so on, don't affect that in the slightest. (This basic point holds notwithstanding the possibility of genetically engineered stretching of the lifespan at some point in the future.)

Granted the naturalness of the ageing process, let us now ask if it is *good* for humans and for other animals to reach old age. In the case of a horse or a pig, the answer, pretty obviously, seems to be— yes. It is good for it to have survived infections and the threats of being devoured by a predator. It is good for it to be able to continue its equine or porcine activities— happily munching grass, digging for truffles, and so on. But what if its teeth are worn, so that it can no longer chew or digest the grass properly; or what if its sense of smell has so deteriorated that it can no longer find truffles, and has to depend on rotten scraps and leavings from other members of the herd? What if, as a result, it grows thin, and unable to resist the cold and damp so well as it used to? What if, instead of displaying a well-toned musculature and a sleek glossy coat, it now looks mangy and wretched? What if the internal and external parasites it was once able to shake off now move in and make its life a misery? Its life, clearly, is now not so good, and maybe not good at all; and this is not a subjective assessment, or a 'value judgement' (in the pejorative sense of just someone's own personal view), but is a perfectly objective fact. Any careful observer can see at once that it is no longer flourishing. Of course, if there is someone who is prepared to care for it, summon the vet, and generally look after it, it may be possible to restore it to something approaching contentment for a little while longer. But there will clearly come a point when its continued existence no longer allows any realistic scope for equine or porcine flourishing.

So the conclusion, in the animal case, is that reaching old age and continuing to live in old age is a good; but a problematic good. It is a good, as it were, with proviso. And the proviso is that the vulnerabilities attendant on age do not lead to disease or decrepitude so severe as to swamp the possibility of continued flourishing.

³ Psalms [1st millennium BC], 90 [89]: 10.

Notice, incidentally, that even the addition of this proviso does not in itself licence any inference about the appropriateness of an animal's being 'put down' once the proviso is no longer satisfied. Certainly, many of those who look after animals will consider that terminating their lives is the compassionate course of action, once the aged beast is so wretched that it can no longer be said to flourish, or have a realistic prospect of being restored to flourishing. But others may make a plausible case for saying we should beware of extrapolating from our own distress at *witnessing* the wretched condition of the animal and projecting such distress onto the animal itself. Maybe it has little or no self-awareness. Maybe it is wretched, but does not *know* it is wretched, and so does not experience distress in any way remotely analogous to the way a fully conscious adult human would.⁴ Or maybe, even if real suffering is going on, the animal itself, could it express a preference, would still prefer to be left alone. So maybe the intrusive intervention needed to terminate the life is a greater evil than letting nature 'take its course', until the pressure of external constraints and internal decay finally overwhelms the life. I add these remarks not to settle the question of animal euthanasia one way or the other, but simply with an eye on the way in which some of the distressing conditions often accompanying ageing have been cited in debates about legalizing human euthanasia in cases where patients cannot any longer speak for themselves. Whatever the rights and wrongs of that debate, we should be alert to the problems of basing life-and-death decisions for inarticulate or incapacitated human patients on 'quality of life' assessments, given that these may turn out to be quite problematic even in the much simpler case of non-human animals suffering from terminal conditions often associated with senility.

Back to the main thread. We have reached the provisional conclusion that for a non-human animal, whose conditions for flourishing are fixed and uncomplicated, life in old age is a provisional or *prima facie* good. Can the same be said of humans?

The answer might seem obviously to be affirmative. Just as it is good for the horse or pig to have survived the risks of disease and predation, and to live to a ripe old age; and just as, despite the inevitable diminutions due to age and infirmity, it is good for it to continue to engage in the equine or porcine activities that make for its flourishing, so, surely, a human being, even an aged and infirm one, may continue to flourish in old age, albeit with inevitably diminished energy and vigour.

But now our original Heideggerian question starts to re-surface. We were able to reach relatively swift and easy answers about an aged horse or an aged pig because there is no serious doubt about what the being of a horse or a pig consists in. But what kind of being is a human being? Only if we are clear about that can we begin to answer the question of what are the characteristic activities that make for human flourishing, and how far they may be affected by the vulnerabilities of the ageing process.⁵

2. *Being human and growing old*

Philosophers have had radically different views about what is the essential nature of a human being, or even whether there is such an essential nature at all. Socrates, in the

⁴ See Fred Dretske, 'The Epistemology of Pain' [2004], <http://www-csli.stanford.edu/~paulsko/papers/DEP.pdf> accessed 29 April 2012.

⁵ In saying this, I very much agree with one of the conclusions reached in Helen Small's very stimulating examination of philosophical and literary discussions of ageing, namely that 'we understand old age best when we view it, not as a problem apart, but as always connected into larger philosophical considerations The really interesting questions about old age arise out of how we think more generally about lives and persons.' Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 266.

Phaedo, famously characterises human life as a ‘preparation for dying’: the goal of our existence is to purify the soul from its damaging attachment to the body and ready it for the pure rational activity that is its ultimate destiny.⁶ On this dualistic view, which has of course profoundly influenced so much subsequent philosophy, it seems to follow that old age is nothing to regret, since it brings us nearer to our proper destination—the eventual separation of soul from body. Indeed, the infirmities of old age would seem, on this dualistic view, to be a help, not a hindrance, in the necessary Socratic process of learning to despise the bodily pleasures and attachments that hinder the functioning of the immortal part of us.

The purity and austerity of the Platonic position (vividly reinforced in the *Phaedo* by the dramatic and moving account of the noble death of Socrates) is actually by no means as unproblematic as might at first appear, at least as far as its implications for the problem of ageing are concerned. For the crucial activities attributed by Plato to the soul, such as philosophical reasoning and theoretical contemplation, are self-evidently *not* facilitated or increased by the increasing decrepitude of the body. On the contrary, ordinary observation, supported by a wealth of medical and scientific evidence, clearly indicates that intellectual activity is characteristically diminished in varying degrees by the infirmities of ageing, and, in the case of some specific conditions (such as Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia) is curtailed, or even eliminated altogether. The determined dualist could of course argue that the activity of the soul is not actually being damaged or eradicated in such cases, but simply subjected to swamping or interference from distracting bodily signals (rather as the operation of a radio receiver might be temporarily swamped by an external source such as an electrical storm, without the radio losing its pristine power to do its job perfectly once the storm has subsided).⁷ But the overall assessment of the old age on the Platonic conception, even were one to accept the doctrine of an undamaged immortal soul, does not seem to be very encouraging for anyone who expects to grow old (which of course means the great majority of human beings in the modern developed world). The senescence of the body, admittedly, does not emerge from the Platonic account as something intrinsically terrible, since it turns out to be irrelevant to our ultimate destiny as immortal souls. But the actual typical conditions of ageing nevertheless emerge as likely to interfere, if only temporarily, with the functioning of the most important part of us; so old age risks being a ‘limbo’ period, where the soul has to put up with a greater or lesser interference with its powers, until it can escape from the body entirely.

In contrast to this, Aristotle’s general position on human nature, in the light of his famous definition of man as a ‘rational *animal*’, seems considerably more ‘body-friendly’ than Plato’s: our biological or corporeal nature, on the Aristotelian account, is an essential part of what we are. This biological orientation seems to leave the way clear for the kind of conclusion we argued for earlier by drawing an analogy between the human case and that of other animal species: the condition of old age will turn out to be a *prima facie* or provisional good, in so far as there is continued scope for the characteristic activities of our species to be carried on.

There is, moreover, an additional feature to Aristotle’s conception of the flourishing life which has further important implications for the question of ageing. This may be labelled for convenience the *holistic* dimension. Aristotle insists that *eudaimonia*, human fulfilment or flourishing, has to be measured *over a whole*

⁶ Plato, *Phaedo* [c. 380 BC], 67e.

⁷ Compare Richard Swinburne’s defence of traditional substance-dualism in *The Evolution of the Soul* [1986] (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005).

lifetime.⁸ What he explicitly calls to our attention is that a flourishing life may be spoilt, towards its end, by some unforeseen disaster (as in the case of Priam);⁹ and the same would presumably apply to falling prey to one or more of the maladies and infirmities associated with ageing. But I think there is more to Aristotle's 'complete life holism' than a standard cautionary tale of Ancient Greek culture ('call no man happy until he is dead').¹⁰ The underlying Aristotelian account of flourishing clearly draws analogies between the good for humankind and the good for any other biological species.¹¹ Thus for a plant—for example an olive tree—to flourish is for it to grow, slowly and steadily, towards an end-state. So the good man, we might say (borrowing from an early and very different text, but one that curiously captures something of the spirit of Aristotle), is 'like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever he does prospers.'¹² There is a rhythm, a growth towards perfection, or *entelechy*;¹³ and this unfolds over time, over the complete lifetime of the organism. This does not simply mean that we need to total up the various satisfying activities spanning the seventy years or so of a typical human life. Nor does it even mean that we need to assess the extent to which the various activities offer scope for the exercise of our specifically human capacities and faculties. Aristotle makes it clear that there is more to the flourishing life than a mere summation of separate valuable activities. There needs to be an overall teleological pattern, which means that his conception of the good life is *inherently* holistic.¹⁴ The life of virtue not just an aggregation of excellences, but a life in which all the excellences fit harmoniously together; for Aristotle insists that the possession of one virtue implies the possession of them all.¹⁵ This apparently paradoxical claim about the virtues all going together has been endlessly debated and dissected by commentators. But the underlying point is, I think, a simple one: the good life, for Aristotle has an *organic unity*. There is something that the human being is meant to be—a unified, flourishing organism, developing its characteristic and interlocking excellences over a complete lifetime.¹⁶

Old age is important, on this conception, because it allows scope for the unfolding of the 'entelechy', the fullest actualisation of the valued potentialities of the human organism. Construed simply in terms of physical abilities, there is, to be sure, a falling away in later life; and the intellectual capacities are not immune from this process either. But the moral excellences, which Aristotle stresses as so vital for a good human life, clearly need to continue growing and maturing over a complete lifetime.

⁸ Ἐν βίῳ τελείῳ (en biō teleiō); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [325 BC], Bk I, Ch. 7 (1098a18).

⁹ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I, Ch. 10 (1101a8).

¹⁰ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* [458 BC], 939.

¹¹ Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I, Ch.7.

¹² Psalms 1:3. The dating of the Psalms is a vexed issue: some scholars consider they were mostly composed after the Babylonian exile (537-538 BC), but many hold that some of them date from much earlier.

¹³ The term has many meanings in the history of philosophy, some of them derived from misunderstandings or distortions of Aristotle. I here use the term in the first sense identified by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (online version) as Aristotle's primary use: 'The realization or complete expression of some function; the condition in which a potentiality has become an actuality.'

¹⁴ Not to have your life planned towards some end, says Aristotle, is a 'sign of great folly'; *Eudemian Ethics* [c. 325 BC], 1214b10-11.

¹⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Ch. 13 (1145a1-2).

¹⁶ For a development of this idea that goes beyond Aristotle's framework, see J. Cottingham, 'Happiness, Temporality, Meaning', in L. Bortolotti (ed.), *Philosophy and Happiness* (London: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 21-36.

The organic unity of virtue which Aristotle stresses has to unfold not just synchronically, in a given choice at a given moment or on a given day, but diachronically, over the entire trajectory of the virtuous person's life. Each time a virtuous action is performed, the resulting satisfaction reinforces the contribution that action makes to flourishing. Notice that the *satisfaction* that accrues here is not the end or goal of the action, but is rather a kind of seal set on virtue,¹⁷ a sign that all is working as it should, towards the good of the whole. And each time this occurs, the disposition of the virtuous agent, to spontaneously take pleasure in making the right choices, is strengthened and reinforced. As the life unfolds, so do the virtues or excellences that enable us to flourish; and reason and the emotions (both of which are crucially involved in Aristotle's conception of virtue)¹⁸ operate in an ever closer and more resonant harmony.

This complex organic model has been reduced by some modern interpreters of so-called 'virtue ethics' to a travesty, in the form of a supposed test for a good or right action: 'An act is good if and only if it is the kind of act that a virtuous person would perform.'¹⁹ This sterile criterion, aping the kind of thing one finds in a utilitarian calculus, ignores everything that is most important about Aristotelian ethics, making it seem as if it is a theory designed to evaluate an action in isolation from the entire context of the agent's unfolding life—and as a result robbing it of everything that gives it ethical significance. What I believe Aristotle is reaching towards, though he does not have an explicit term for it, is the idea of *integrity* as central to the good life. And integrity is not just a matter of making consistent and harmonious decisions at any given period of one's life; it is a matter of growing stability and unity of purpose, developing over time. Just as the beginning of virtue is not an isolated event but a matter of the right habits being laid down and reinforced over the extended years of childhood, so the flowering of virtue is not a sudden efflorescence that quickly withers, like the blooms of the daffodil or the rosebud,²⁰ but is a continuous process that unfolds over a complete lifetime. (One of the things that is tragic about an early death, perhaps the most tragic, is not just the loss of opportunities for future enjoyment and delight, but the fact that the moral character has not had time to be properly tested and tempered by experience, and the moral sensibilities have not been fully deepened by loss and suffering and the growing empathy that springs out of them.)

The notion of integrity also has a central place in the very different context of Judaeo-Christian ethics. In the Hebrew bible, in one of the later Psalms (86) we find the prayer 'Give me, O Lord, an undivided heart'— a petition for a psychological and ethical unity.²¹ And the Christian gospels speak of the importance of finding one's *true*

¹⁷ Pleasure perfects the activity 'as a sort of supervening perfection, like the bloom that graces the flower of youth'; *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk X, Ch. 4, 1174b33.

¹⁸ See John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch 2, pp. 41-44.

¹⁹ For formulations of this kind, see the useful survey by Justin Oakley 'A Virtue-Ethics Approach', in H. Kuhse and P. Singer (eds), *A Companion to Bioethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), Ch. 10.

²⁰ Themes explored by the poet Robert Herrick (1591-1634). See especially the poems beginning 'Fair daffodils, we weep to see you haste away so soon'; and 'Gather ye rosebuds while you may/old time is still a flying/and this same flower that blooms today/tomorrow will be dying.'

²¹ Psalm 86 [85]:11. In Hebrew the Psalmist prays to God *yahed levavi*, literally 'unite my heart!' (the imperative verb *yahed* comes from the root *ehad*, meaning one).

self. Even gaining the whole world is not enough to compensate for the loss of oneself (*heautos*), says a famous passage in St Luke (9: 25). The crucial point, once again, is that this ‘finding’ is not a one-off event, like finding a piece of treasure and putting it in one’s pocket, but is a continuing project for a whole lifetime. The story of the prodigal son, also found in Luke’s gospel, tells of a young man who goes into exile to squander his inheritance, but through suffering is shaken out of his selfishness and starts ‘coming to himself’ (*eis heauton elthôn*) (Luke 15:17). As the Dominican writer Timothy Radcliffe has put it, the prodigal’s decision to go back to his home and family is really the same as starting to rediscovering his true self, ‘since his exile from his family is an exile from his true identity as son and brother. He can only find himself again with them.’²²

The idea here is that I have a ‘true identity’, a unified, integrated self, the self I am meant to be, the self that expresses all that is best and most distinctive about me; and further, that the goal of my life should be to grow into that unified self. This may seem to some people to be a very exalted and idealised conception of the good life. But I think this is the direction our thinking has to take, once we start to reflect seriously about what the concept of integrity involves.²³ Integrity, as its etymology suggests, has to do with wholeness—it involves the fullest integration of the whole self. And given this, the process of moving towards old age emerges as a vital part of the fullest human flourishing: it is precisely that process which (though of course it does not guarantee it) allows space for there to be a sense of meaning and connection over the entire span of a life.

3. *Integration, teleology and senescence*

But what does integration actually mean in ethical and psychological terms, and how should we best interpret today? Our contemporary cultural landscape, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, is one where we seem to have lost sight of this value altogether, replacing it with a fragmented vision of human life, one which:

... partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms. And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each, and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts, in terms of which we are taught to think and to feel.²⁴

Fragmentation is damaging in many ways. First of all, it erodes the *meaningfulness* that is an essential ingredient of true human flourishing. To understand the meaning of what I am doing now, I need to have some sense of how my previous life, going back to early childhood, has shaped and influenced the choices and goals I have now. To suppose I am a wholly autonomous and independent being, isolated from processes that formed and fashioned me, is not only a dangerous piece of hubris; it also hides the true significance of my life, even from me, the supposedly sovereign agent.

²² Timothy Radcliffe, *Why Go to Church?: The Drama of the Eucharist* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 20.

²³ Some of the points developed in this and the following section are based on J. Cottingham, ‘Integrity and Fragmentation’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 27, no 1 (2010), pp. 2-14.

²⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1985), Ch. 15, p. 205; punctuation modified.

And what applies to the past also applies to the future—the maturity and ageing that is yet to be realised. As Charles Taylor has eloquently argued, to make sense of our lives, and indeed to have an identity at all, ‘we need an orientation to the good’; we need to have some sense of our lives as moving towards moral growth and maturity. It follows from this that our lives have a narrative shape: as I develop, and learn from my failings and mistakes, there is always a story to be told about how I have become what I now am, and where my current journey towards improvement will take me. Just as my sense of where I am in physical space depends on how I got here and where I am going next, so it is, Taylor argues, with ‘my orientation in moral space’.²⁵

If Taylor’s view is right, then it is strikingly compatible with the holistic conception found in the Aristotelian account of human flourishing. Such a conception offers the hope that ageing, instead of being viewed in a predominantly negative light, might play a legitimate role in the overall functioning of a harmonious and integrated life.

Nevertheless, there remains one serious problem about whether Aristotle’s account of the good life can properly accommodate the full span of a human life, including the final phase of senescence. The Aristotelian emphasis on rationality as the key to our essential nature, and as a crucial element in moral virtue,²⁶ seems (certainly to our modern ears) to imply a model of human flourishing which privileges above all the independent and autonomous activity of the intellect. And in so far as the loss or diminution of our rational autonomy in this sense is one of the things which many people now most dread about old age,²⁷ the general prospects for senescence emerge, on Aristotle’s view, in a somewhat gloomy light. In choosing to highlight as our defining human characteristic the power of independent reasoning, Aristotle seems, wittingly or not, to have set the stage for a picture in which human flourishing depends on the maximum degree of self-sufficient intellectual activity. The disturbing implications of this have been well brought out by Alasdair MacIntyre:

[Facts] . . . concerning our vulnerabilities and afflictions and those concerning the extent of our dependence on particular others are so evidently of singular importance that it might seem that no account of the human condition whose authors hoped to achieve credibility could avoid giving them a central place. Yet the history of Western moral philosophy suggests otherwise. From Plato to Moore and since there are usually, with some rare exceptions, only passing references to human vulnerability and affliction and to the connections between them and our dependence on others . . . [M]oral agents [are] presented as though they were continuously rational, healthy and untroubled . . . Aristotle [anticipated] a great many . . . in importing into moral philosophy the standpoint of those who have taken themselves to be self-sufficiently superior and of those who take their standards from those who take themselves to be self-sufficiently superior.²⁸

Now of course we could just bite the bullet and accept the bleak implications of the ‘self-sufficient superiority’ conception. We might subscribe to what looks like an inherently elitist conception of human flourishing such that only those in the full

²⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 46–52.

²⁶ Compare the role assigned to *phronesis* in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI.

²⁷ See for example Mary Warnock and Elisabeth Macdonald, *Easeful Death: Is there a Case for Assisted Dying?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999), pp. 1-2 and 7.

autonomous possession of their intellectual faculties can qualify as fully flourishing human beings. I do not think there is any strict philosophical contradiction in such a position, any more than there is in the even more extreme position of Friedrich Nietzsche, that the only truly flourishing individuals are the ‘supermen’, capable of ‘revaluing values’, and ‘overcoming themselves’ so as to rise above the herd by a heroic act of creative will.²⁹ But if we do accept such conceptions of human flourishing, some disturbing consequences will follow. The great majority of the elderly, together with the infirm, the handicapped, the dependent (including infants and children), and the physically and mentally vulnerable, will be excluded from the possibility of qualifying as flourishing human beings. And even aristocratic Athenian gentlemen like Aristotle, or aspirants to heroic greatness such as Nietzsche, will themselves fall away from their privileged status as candidates for true human flourishing in proportion as their powers inevitably start to diminish. These bleak consequences do not of course logically refute elitist conceptions of flourishing: the restriction of the good life to a fortunate few may simply be the way the world is, and perhaps we had better simply face it. But before we do so, it seems at least worth examining if there are other less elitist, more universalist, traditions that look on human vulnerability generally, and the vulnerabilities of ageing in particular, in a more benign light.

4. Ageing and the Judaeo-Christian philosophical tradition

It is a commonplace of intellectual historiography to say that Western culture has been shaped by two principal influences—Athens and Jerusalem. And certainly if we look at the second of these, at the Judaeo-Christian approach to human life and morality, we find a markedly more universalist perspective than that typical of Graeco-Roman culture. The Hebrew Bible speaks frequently of the need to respect and care for those among us who are weak and vulnerable—the ‘fatherless and the widows’, ‘aliens and strangers’.³⁰ And the theological background to this, which becomes prominent in so much Christian moral thinking, is that God is the loving father of all; that he does not show favouritism;³¹ and that the ‘kingdom of heaven’ is open to everyone, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, irrespective of talent or ability.³²

Set against this background, the ills and infirmities of ageing appear in a rather different light. For question becomes not ‘How well is this individual exercising those characteristic activities that make for human excellence?’, but ‘Is this individual a child of a loving God who desires the salvation of all?’ And salvation, again in accordance with the fundamental moral insights of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, depends not on achievement, but on the right moral orientation—turning to God and to fellow-man in love and humility. This is perhaps the meaning of St Paul’s remarks, written in conditions of great stress and affliction: ‘For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.’³³

²⁹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [*Also Sprach Zarathustra* 1883].

³⁰ ‘The LORD preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and widow’; Psalm 146:9. ‘You shall treat the stranger who sojourns among you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’; Leviticus 19: 34. Cf. I Peter 2:11. For the (often overlooked) Biblical roots of our conception of universal rights, see Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³¹ Acts 10: 34-5; cf. Romans 2:11.

³² Descartes aptly sums up this standard Christian teaching in the *Discourse on the Method* [*Discours de la méthode*, 1637], part i, where he remarks that ‘the kingdom of heaven is no less open to the most ignorant than to the most learned.’

³³ II Corinthians 4: 16 (the letter dates from around AD 57).

A proper understanding of this may be difficult in our contemporary philosophical culture, given the prevailing prejudice against religious modes of thought (most modern philosophers pride themselves on avoiding any supernaturalist or ‘spooky’ forms of thinking, and insist that reality includes no ‘strange entities’, as Derek Parfit declares).³⁴ But it is important, I think, not to allow the luminous moral insights found in biblical and other religious writings to be occluded by whatever intellectual reservations many people nowadays have about the metaphysical claims associated with traditional religion. Just as it would be a tragic waste if anyone refused to read Shakespeare’s history plays on the grounds that they are not factually accurate as a record of actual historical events, so we need, I suggest, to look with an unprejudiced eye at the moral core of the great writings in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, without constantly pulling back from them because the language includes references to God or to the afterlife which many present-day philosophers find unacceptable or unwarranted.³⁵

The case of the afterlife is particularly relevant here, since there is a long line of Christian ‘consolation’ literature which offers what purports to be the Christian ‘answer’ to the ills of ageing (and the other ills of human life for that matter) by invoking the next world. Now I do not want to pronounce one way or the other on the question of whether the idea of a future post-mortem existence makes sense; this is a highly complex issue for reasons to do with the notion of personal identity, and coherence or otherwise of the idea of survival of the destruction of the body, and I do not myself believe that philosophical or scientific reasoning can finally settle the matter.³⁶ But what I will claim is that there is something of vital moral and religious importance that is left out of the picture if we attempt to understand the Christian approach to old age and its ills *merely* (or perhaps even *mainly*) in terms of the supposed consolations of the afterlife. Such attempts, I believe, suffer from the same kinds of weakness that beset attempts to tackle the problem of evil or human suffering merely by reference to the next world.

The reason I describe such attempts as deficient is not because I regard the concept of the afterlife as false or incoherent (I have already said that I do not think this matter can be settled by natural philosophy), but rather because the type of strategy employed seems in a certain way too *easy*. It is as if, faced with the Gordian knot (the apparently pointless and degrading pains and discomforts of senescence), we simply get out the knife, cut the knot, and say ‘No problem: it will all be made right in the next world.’ Whether or not it will be made right (and I do not deny that it may), it seems to me that the religious perspective requires us to do something much more than simply running this article of faith up the masthead: the task is to strive to find meaning and value, or at any rate the possibility of redemption, in *the world as we have it*, not to retreat into a future world in which the problematic features are no longer present. It is significant, I think, that one of the best recent, and arguably best ever, books written on the problem of evil, Eleonore Stump’s *Wandering in Darkness*,³⁷ takes four biblical protagonists (Job, Sampson, Abraham and Mary of Bethany) and, rather than appealing

³⁴ Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 487.

³⁵ For the philosophical prejudice against the use of scriptural material in moral philosophy, see J. Cottingham, ‘Demandingness, moral development and moral philosophy’ in T. Chappell (ed.), *The Problem of Moral Demandingness* (London: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 86-103, at note 39.

³⁶ See however J. Cottingham, *Why Believe?* (London: Continuum, 2009), Ch. 6, §4. For a fascinating discussion of some of the problems connected with post-mortem survival, see Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³⁷ Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010).

to the supposed consolations of a post-mortem existence (which actually play no role in the respective biblical texts), endeavours instead to show how the profound tribulations these characters endured, terrible as they were, ended up playing a role in their ultimate flourishing by bringing them, finally, closer to an integrity of life that had eluded them before.

In the same way, the sermon of the nineteenth-century Unitarian pastor Samuel Lothrop, entitled *The Consolations of Old Age* (from which the epigraph at the start of the present paper is taken), does not simply wheel in the afterlife as a panacea. The ‘consolations’ that are unfolded in the sermon, though they do include the hope of immortality (especially in the grand final peroration), lay great emphasis on the moral growth of the individual over a complete lifetime, and the tranquillity attendant on a life well-spent. But none of this allows the author to gloss over the actual suffering that is typically attendant on old age—on the contrary, as our opening epigraph illustrates, it is resolutely confronted. It is as if the author is interpreting the Christian message as saying that the Resurrection should only be brought in at the *end* of the story: it cannot be anticipated, or invoked to provide a ‘consolation’ to the victim still on the cross. How easy it would be to rewrite the Gospel stories as a grand triumphalist narrative where the glorification of Christ and the confounding of his foes is all celestially guaranteed in advance, so that the suffering turns out to be nugatory against the backdrop of eternal triumphant bliss that awaits him. But the actual gospel narrative is inexpressibly more profound, and the ‘glorification’ achieved in the passion of Christ infinitely more complex than that;³⁸ and the fact that not one element of the horror or the agony is omitted from the story is the signature of its authenticity and moral depth.

‘If I am lifted up from the earth,’ says Christ before his Passion, ‘I will draw all people to myself’ (John 12:32). The disciples, who in this narrative never seem to understand anything until it is too late, will evidently assume that this refers to some kind of traditional kingly exaltation, perhaps as the triumphant ruler of a restored independent kingdom of Israel, freed from Roman domination. But the eventual reality of being ‘lifted up’ turns out to be a glorification of a wholly different kind. The mystery of this ‘kingship’ is captured in the ancient hymn *Vexilla regis prodeunt* by Venantius Fortunatus (530-609), finely, if freely, rendered into English by Ralph Wright OSB (b. 1938):

The regal dark mysterious cross
In song is lifted high,
The wood on which our God was raised
As Man against the sky.

Upon this wood his body bore
The nails, the taunts, the spear,
Till water flowed with blood to wash
The whole world free of fear.

³⁸. Compare (though she does not discuss the Crucifixion) Eleonore Stump’s account of the term ‘gloriousness’, in *Wandering in Darkness*, pp. 254ff.

At last the song that David sang
 Is heard and understood:
 “Before the nations God as king
 Reigns from his throne of wood.”³⁹

In one of the stories of the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, some of the disciples ask him; ‘Lord, will you now restore the kingdom of Israel?’ (Acts, 1:6). With telling insight the narrator seems to be acknowledging here that even after the cataclysmic events of the Passion and its aftermath, some of the closest witnesses to those events *still* did not ‘get it’: they still had in mind a ‘happy ending’ which would transform the suffering of Christ into a distant memory, overwritten by a grand regal success in which they could all share. One standard theological interpretation of such passages construes the disciples’ mistake as simply that of hoping for a *this-worldly* happy outcome, instead of realizing they should look for it in the ‘world to come’: in other words, they were right to anticipate a spectacular triumph, but wrong to think of it in political terms. But one reason such triumphalist⁴⁰ readings are inadequate, in my view, is that they incur the suspicion of being motivated by what Mark Johnston has aptly called ‘spiritual materialism’: the desire to have our cake and eat it, to subscribe to the redemptive value of pure love and self-sacrifice, yet retain our allegiance to our ordinary mundane bestowers of meaning — security, comfort, esteem, success — by wheeling in the magical intervention of supernatural forces to guarantee them, albeit in a future existence.⁴¹ This, if you like, is a way of reducing the costs of unconditional love for the good, or God, by conveniently reconciling it with of our ordinary desires for success and personal triumph.

Whatever the Resurrection can mean, it cannot mean that. The meaning of Christ’s self-sacrificial life and death surely cannot be read off, as it were, from the fact of his post-mortem victory *per se*, for that would be an all too convenient resolution, an altogether too tidy construal of the mystery of redemptive love and suffering. Rather, the core of meaning in Christ’s death and passion must lie somewhere in the fact that human beings are made for love, which is our greatest good; that love requires self-sacrifice; and that here lies the ultimate purpose of our lives. One way of putting this interpretation would be to say that on the Christian worldview the Cross and the Resurrection are wholly inseparable. And indeed the authentic Christian picture has never been that the Resurrection is a kind of external or logically detachable compensation for the Crucifixion. The Church’s annual celebration of the mystery of the Triduum gives expression to the fact that the meaning of Easter Sunday is inextricably bound up with that of Good Friday, and vice versa.⁴² The glorification of Christ by the Father, in other words, is not that which *confers* meaning on his life *ex*

³⁹ The thought is that the wood of the cross becomes the kingly ‘throne’ on which it is declared by ‘David’ (i.e. the psalmist) that God reigns over the nations (see Psalms 47:8).

⁴⁰ For a survey and critique of such ‘triumphalism’ (combined with a theologically rich discussion of the multiple layers of meaning in the Resurrection), see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), ch. 19.

⁴¹ See Mark Johnston, *Saving God* (Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 123-4.

⁴² In the ancient Latin wording of the Third Preface for Easter, Christ is described as *agnus qui vivit semper occisus* (literally, ‘the lamb who lives forever slain’). Timothy Radcliffe aptly comments: ‘If the risen Lord did not still bear his wounds, then he would not have much to do with us now.’ *What is the Point of Being a Christian* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 75.

post facto, but rather that which honours the meaning that is *already there*, in the perfect life he led and the loving death he endured.⁴³

5. *The end of flourishing?*

Notwithstanding argument of the previous section, an objector may still complain that whatever the correct interpretation of the Christian story may be, it hardly advances the case for saying that human flourishing can survive the depredations of extreme physical suffering, and more particularly the insidious degeneration likely in many cases to attend old age. The example of Christ may show that even the extremest physical agony need not prevent the flowering of virtue, manifested in love and forgiveness continued to the very end. But for most ordinary mortals, the probability of a rapid collapse of virtue, and of all the other qualities that make for human flourishing, must surely be depressingly high, at least in such circumstances of extreme physical agony. True, most of us have some hope that if we fall victim to an agonizing final illness, modern pharmacology will spare us the worst torments; but being doped up, even were one granted periodic moments of lucidity, hardly looks like a condition conducive to human flourishing.

The universalist ideal that makes the Judaeo-Christian outlook so appealing—that not one precious God-given human life is cut off from possibility of flourishing and final redemption—may now appear to be on shaky ground (at least if the doctrine of a compensatory afterlife is left out of the picture). Admittedly, even a grim and debilitating final illness may sometimes allow for a final reconciling or ‘completing’ act of a life, as in the moving account of the last moments of Lord Marchmain, in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*.⁴⁴ But the mental degeneration suffered by so many of the elderly seems to present a more intractable worry. For unlike the case of physical agony, which we know can at least sometimes be overcome (as is demonstrated, for example, by attested accounts of heroic endurance in wartime), when we come to senile mental decay there often does not appear to be even the opportunity for redeeming heroism or love, or any other flowering of human virtue, but merely, to put it at its worst, a helpless slide into gradually increasing imbecility and blankness. In the face of this, can the religious worldview offer anything beyond a sad admission that in such circumstances old age must be counted a severe impediment to, or even destroyer of, our natural human capacity for flourishing?

Here, it seems to me, any possible defence of the religious outlook must start by squarely facing the facts. Terrible things happen to people; there is no getting round that. Flourishing can be eroded, cut short, cut off—and this of course is true for many young people, as well as for a significant percentage of the ageing and elderly. In this sense, some of the evils of ageing just referred to are but one facet of the more general ‘problem of evil’, or of human suffering. And we should all by now have learned to be very wary of glib philosophical and theological ‘solutions’ to this problem. I mentioned earlier Eleonore Stump’s *Wandering in Darkness*, and one of the great virtues of this work is the unflinching honesty with which the author acknowledges, both right from the start in the book’s title (which comes from a fragment of a poem by an anonymous inmate found on a wall at Auschwitz), and also explicitly in the closing chapter, that it

⁴³ This paragraph draws on material from J. Cottingham, ‘Spirituality’, in C. Taliaferro, V. S. Harrison and S. Goetz (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Theism*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 654-665.

⁴⁴ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* [1946].

will sometimes be the case, for those who are compelled to wander in darkness, that ‘the suffering a person endures breaks that person past healing’.⁴⁵

The rich and complex theodicy that Stump presents in the context of her chosen biblical examples is the subject for another paper; but whatever its merits, its scope cannot be extended to the cases of senile degeneration now under discussion. For Stump’s strategy, construing great tribulation as a possible route to ‘gloriousness’ through moral growth and deepened integrity, is explicitly intended to apply ‘only to the suffering of mentally fully functional adult human beings’.⁴⁶ So we are left with the appalling residue of what may be called *overwhelming* suffering—the kind that, as in the case of much senile mental degeneration, swamps entirely a person’s capacity for resistance or redemptive moral agency, or even eradicates the very capacity for such agency. Can anything be said about this, short of concluding that the tormented senility that frequently marks its end constitutes a decisive obstacle to any providentialist view of our natural human lifespan?

This is perilous territory, and to say anything at all here, at a safe distance from the actual lived distress of those involved, risks charges of glibness and insensitivity; but it may be worth venturing just a few brief thoughts by way of drawing to a close. First of all, it does not require explicit adherence to the Judaeo-Christian, or indeed any religious worldview, to subscribe to the Socratic dictum that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.⁴⁷ If we take this dictum seriously, then some important consequences follow. Who, for example, will we want to say had a better, more flourishing life: Cain, who murdered his brother, or Abel, whose life was cut off in his prime? The answer must surely be: the latter. Abel unquestionably suffered a terrible tragedy—his life, and therefore his capacity for human flourishing, was cut short through no fault of his own. But he lived a good life: his offering, we are told, ‘found favour with the Lord’, which we make take for present purposes to mean that he achieved an acceptable degree of righteousness. His life, though cruelly ended, was a good life, a flourishing human life. Cain, on the other hand, irrevocably ruined his own life. He gave way to poisonous envy and did irreparable evil; and however long he may have lived, he remained a ‘restless wanderer upon earth’—his peace was destroyed.⁴⁸

If there is a message that emerges from this and many such stories in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, it is that our task as human beings is to strive to do what is right, and to live in love and peace with our neighbours. What the Judaeo-Christian outlook affirms, and it is an affirmation that many non-believers may well also subscribe to, is that addressing this task is the key to true human flourishing: it is the right way to use the precious gift of life, the way we can make an ‘acceptable offering’. There is no guarantee that such commitment to the good will stop terrible things happening to us, which may erode or truncate our continued flourishing; and there is even a likelihood that if we live long enough we may risk such erosion creeping up on us through the characteristic maladies of old age. But a life so eroded or truncated can still have been a flourishing life. And even if the degenerations of age are such as to undermine entirely the continued capacity for moral action or sensibility, then, to be sure, the sufferers may be pitied, and may need the care and compassion of others, but they will not, in virtue of that condition, have turned away from the good and blighted their lives, as Cain did.

⁴⁵ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 480.

⁴⁶ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, p. 476.

⁴⁷ Plato, *Gorgias* [c. 390 BC], 473-5.

⁴⁸ For the story, and the phrases quoted, see Genesis, Chapter 4.

Let me conclude by quoting from a much more recent text, written in 2010 by a seventy-six year old patient, at a time when his wife was undergoing treatment for cancer, and when he, having himself recovered from cancer, was now battling with the fast-progressing motor neurone disease that was to end his life later that same year:

I see life as a continuous learning process. I learn how to live in the process of living. The learning is lifelong, and continues until the end... As I become increasingly helpless to deal with the world “out there”, the world “in here” becomes increasingly intense. A minor frustration can trigger infantile rage. I want to strike out, but am helpless to do so... The speed of these changes is turning our lives upside down. The rules of the game are changing faster than we can adapt. And in the midst of this chaos, some patterns are becoming clear. One is to do with time. I am getting a sense that there is no limit to the depth of now; no limit to the journey into the deep. We are being drawn to live more deeply in the here and now. And as we live more deeply in the here and now, we come closer to one another and closer to God... To live more deeply in the here and now is to make the journey into the depths of the human heart where God is always here now... And for some the journey passes through hell.⁴⁹

The passage recapitulates many of the themes that I hope have emerged in this paper: the idea of moral growth as a continuous learning process that is lifelong; the idea that age and its trials can afford scope for the deepening of that process; and the idea that a religious framework for interpreting these things is very far from a matter of turning glibly away from our human sufferings and vulnerability towards the post-mortem consolations that are so often assumed by critics to be the main focus of attention.

So, finally, is old age an ‘enviable’ state? Sometimes, it can be— at least when we focus on the goods that can often enrich the closing stages of a life if all goes well, and provided we include the good health that René Descartes declared to be ‘the foundation of all the other goods in this life’.⁵⁰ There are indeed many blessings which, as Macbeth puts it in Shakespeare’s tragedy, should accompany old age: ‘honour, love, obedience, troops of friends...’⁵¹ But when Shakespeare, in describing the end of Macbeth’s life, puts these longings into the doomed protagonist’s mouth, he is, with characteristic and consummate skill, revealing the corrupt and wistful self-pity that underlies them. Macbeth knows he cannot have these blessings, since he has lost them by succumbing to the temptations of false ambition and wading through slaughter to the throne.

The reality, for humanity at large, and outside the magnifying lens of grand tragic drama, is more prosaic. Many people, even though they have fallen into what Macbeth calls the ‘sere and yellow leaf’, are fortunate enough to enjoy the fruits of affection and respect; but there is an equally serious risk, the older one becomes, of being stricken by illness, bereavement, and increasing erosion of one’s independence. But if the argument of this paper has been anywhere near the mark, it is also true that the later stages, and even the final closing stages, of life can be an integral part of the lifelong process of moral development. None of us can know in advance how we will cope with the suffering likely to attend on old age, or indeed how long we will be able

⁴⁹ Philip Sheppard, ‘Conclusion of a Life’s Journey’, *The Douai Magazine*, 173 (2011), pp. 16-17.

⁵⁰ René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* [1637], part vi.

⁵¹ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* [c. 1605], Act V, scene 3.

to retain all or any of the human capacities that make for a flourishing life. What we do know is that an eventual extinguishing of those capacities, whether abrupt or gradual, is the lot of every natural human life. But there remains the hope that what time is left to us will continue to allow scope for further growth in knowledge and love of the good.⁵²

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