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Book Review

Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations About Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, & Regret

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Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations About Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, & Regret

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Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore have given their book *Aging Thoughtfully* the structure of a conversation. The authors offer essays on each of eight topics, drawing on their own areas of expertise—Nussbaum often discusses classical texts, operas, plays, and philosophy, and Levmore frequently writes about law and economics. They also respond to each other's points, as we can imagine them doing over coffee at the University of Chicago, where they both teach. Sometimes the result feels formidable and overly oriented to the elite and the privileged, in contrast with the universality of the most basic questions about aging. Nevertheless, the book is very often interesting, especially when the authors talk about their own experiences (they are both in their 60s). The reader wants to be part of the conversation, especially if, like me, they are also in the same age bracket.

Nussbaum's section of Chapter One starts off with a discussion of Act I of *King Lear*, but her next topic is more fundamental to the book. She contends that philosophers have particular trouble tackling a topic like aging because they like to generalize—that's what philosophers *do*. But aging is different things for different people, even more than childhood is, or middle-age is. Exhibit A in her case that philosophers tend to over-generalize—and stigmatize and indulge stereotypes—is Simone De Beauvoir's book *The Coming of Age*. Boy does she hate this book. She writes, "I shall announce my conclusion ahead of time: this is among the most preposterous famous works of philosophy that I have ever encountered..." (18-19).

Beauvoir says that old age arrives suddenly. "At one level one may feel young within, but seeing the sudden scorn of society, one experiences a dramatic subjective shift, since that being-seen is also a part of who one subjectively is" (19). After a torrent of reasonable objections, Nussbaum responds personally: "As for me, I feel healthy and vigorous, and probably never more admired than now, although I have to say that I do not feel attached to honor from others as Beauvoir tells me I essentially must be" (19).

Nussbaum thinks Beauvoir is not only over-generalizing, but guilty of "an act of collaboration with social stigma and injustice" (20). She calls Beauvoir's book "mendacious" and thinks Beauvoir should have confessed that she's merely describing what she's been taught about old age, as a person living at a particular time and in a particular era. Nussbaum insists that it's not enough that Beauvoir does grant that some exceptional people can escape the tragedy of old age by pursuing important causes on an individual and social level.

Beauvoir's account of society's scorn doesn't seem as worthless to me as it does to Nussbaum. At 69, Nussbaum's age, most of us can't say that they have never been more admired. In fact, I hear people over fifty—especially women—talk about feeling invisible

and being found less interesting. Nussbaum makes it seem as if there's no problematic discrepancy between inner and outer age worth discussing. That dismissal is also an over-generalization, though perhaps a more age-positive and cheerful one than Beauvoir's. The issue of problematic over-generalizing will be a recurrent theme in this review.

Levmore's contribution to Chapter Two is a thought-provoking discussion of mandatory retirement, a practice in the US for very few professions (for example, airline pilots must retire at 65). Another possible arrangement is for businesses to build a retirement age into employee contracts; however, Levmore concedes that contracts like that are prohibited by age discrimination laws, with only a few exceptions. Businesses could also incentivize retirement by creating age-specific retirement plans. But why do any of this?

Levmore thinks workers tend to decline with age, so a cut-off would make room for younger, more capable employees. He argues that incentivizing or requiring retirement would also reduce the stigma associated with old age. Instead of specific problematic employees being unceremoniously dumped, and others wondering when it's going to be their turn, everyone would make their way to the exit door with dignity. He argues that deep down we must agree that younger workers are usually more capable. Suppose you were at a bank and had to choose which teller to approach. "In my experience, tellers in their thirties and forties appear to be the favorites," he writes and speculates further about why most people will agree. (Bank tellers? Online banking is the only thing most people know these days!)

And Levmore makes more arguments. If employees have the option of working forever, that could lead to decisions not to hire the middle-aged. "However, if the entire pool could be counted on to retire by age seventy, it would make more sense to hire middle-age applicants" (47). He also hypothesizes that a graying, unproductive, highly paid professoriate might be one of the factors behind the growing use of cheap contingent faculty. Academia could offer better jobs to more people if they weren't jobs that were kept into late old age.

Nussbaum isn't impressed, to say the least. Involuntary retirement would be a "horrible fate" for her, she writes. That's what she sees colleagues in Europe and Asia going through, as there are many countries with mandatory retirement ages. Finland, she points out, is a country where there's compulsory retirement in all professions. She says she knows people who, at her age, have been "turned out to pasture" (54) and put "on the shelf" (59). For her, work is absolutely central to well-being, so she thinks her retired Finnish friends have been robbed. She concedes that that's not what she'd say about retirement among people who do strenuous blue-collar work or tedious white-collar work, but among creative, intellectual types, no longer being able to work is surely a major loss.

The problem is that her Finnish colleagues don't see it that way. What's going on? Her speculation is that the Finns have an adaptive preference for retirement. They're stuck with retirement, so they make their peace by learning to love it. Might she be overgeneralizing—as philosophers tend to do (see Chapter One)? Considering the way in which creative and intellectual work tends to be bound up with a person's identity, sense of self-worth, and ability to earn the respect of others, it can be difficult for many to step away from work. The person who *has* to retire may be more able to admit what has become the truth for them: Work has started to be repetitive and boring. Retirement would open the door to other appealing activities. Compulsory retirement may free people to see the real merits of retirement, as opposed to making them imagine these merits.

But it's discriminatory! Nussbaum calls compulsory retirement “the leading form of age discrimination” and “one of the great moral evils of our times” (61). On the other hand, Levmore points out that we don't see a driving age, a drinking age, or a voting age as discriminatory, even if the result is to exclude some unusually mature young people from driving, drinking, and voting. Why is it discriminatory to exclude some unusually capable old people from working? Well, I would say that it's a life-or-death matter who drinks and drives, and also quite vital who votes; it's not so consequential who continues working as a philosopher or law professor. Perhaps Nussbaum has understated the advantages of mandatory retirement, but she effectively raises worries about age discrimination.

Both authors have interesting and often amusing things to say about aging bodies and whether and how to “fix” them (Chapter Four). A wonderful and revealing passage of Nussbaum's section concerns her willingness to experience a colonoscopy without sedation, both because of her work ethic (a topic in many chapters) and also to get a peek at what's inside. This body-affirming stance contrasts with the “disgust” (Nussbaum's term) people seem to feel toward aging bodies. A particularly direct chapter (there are no formidable discussions of creative works and texts), it's altogether interesting, but I did find myself wondering about the exact sort of negative feeling that people have toward aging bodies. Is it really disgust, exactly, or is it some other sort of non-attraction?

On the issue of age-defying hair color, Botox, cosmetic surgery and the like, the authors are non-judgmental. Considering that hair coloring is extremely common among young women, and out in the open (so much for the old ad-jingle “only her hairdresser knows for sure”), Nussbaum asks why on earth older women should be expected to accept gray hair. Readers of a certain age will appreciate the authors' reflections on such very practical issues.

Chapter 5 is about looking back in old age—should we do it a lot, a little, or not at all? Nussbaum’s essay has a scholarly entry point (Cicero, Seneca, Euripides, psychoanalysis), but the early pages lead into a fascinating and touching account of her grandmother, who was a cheerful fun-loving woman who lived to the age of 104 and never seemed to look backwards. In fact, she had a lot of complicated living to look back upon (I’ll avoid spoilers because this is such a good story). Nussbaum finds fault with her grandmother for the fact that she has no backward-looking emotions—no regret, no grief, no guilt (emotions that Nussbaum has explored in previous books). She finds too little looking back at modern retirement communities, where life is all about short-term pleasures in the present. Of the residents she says, “There is a project of being a whole person that they are not executing, a project that requires facing difficulty, loss, and error” (140).

Levmore finds more to admire in retirement communities, amusingly comparing them to the “safe spaces” that college students these days want for themselves. To younger people, and especially to intellectuals, these places may appear dull and vapid—Levmore mentions the “dated pop music,” the chirpy tone of attendants, the myriad mindless activities, and I would add, “What’s with all the mauve?”—but why not enjoy the last decades of life as much as you can and in the way that suits you, Levmore asks.

Nussbaum draws on opera and theater in her portion of Chapter Six, which is about romance and sex. She’s appalled by the depiction of an older woman as desperately consorting with a mere boy in Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*, and also rejects *Romeo and Juliet* as the model of ideal love (too dreamy, too dazed, and too dysfunctional). A relationship she admires is the one depicted in *Antony and Cleopatra*, for this is the love of “people who enjoy being grown-ups together” (159). The two eat together, joke together, and they are “supportive colleagues with a great deal of work to do running their respective and interlocking empires” (159). Here and throughout the book, Nussbaum’s “romance with work” (as she calls it in the chapter on retirement) is on display.

After commenting on these high culture romances, Nussbaum turns to four recent movies about aging women in romantic relationships with men of different ages, and draws this surprising conclusion: “Both women and men cease being either sexy or romantic when they have no work to do” (166). Based on her analysis of the movie *I’ll See you in My Dreams* (2015), she speculates that “when one has no work to do it is a great hindrance to real love, encouraging lassitude and detachment from life” (166). In the movies with models of love she finds appealing (e.g. *The Hundred-Foot Journey*, in which Helen Mirren is paired with Om Puri), she says that love flourishes because the characters are “excellent professionals pursuing excellence, and that makes it possible for them to find love, since they are immersed in life. In other words, professional

commitment, far from being a distraction from personal life, is a great help to it in later years, keeping the whole personality vivid and vigorous” (166-67).

Nussbaum’s tendency to over-generalize is on display especially here. It may be true that being immersed in life makes one more likely to love and be loved, but there are many ways to be immersed in life. I know people who are immersed in life who don’t do any professional work, but instead travel, or help with their grandchildren, or have a passion for romance novels, or a hundred other things. One suspects that work is the thing that keeps Nussbaum feeling vital, and many readers will find themselves in sync with her, but she’s projecting when she supposes this is the *sine qua non* for everyone’s vitality.

Ironically, it’s Levmore who discusses a fact about love in old age that’s a particular concern for older women. Older men not infrequently leave their older wives for younger women, or after a divorce, take up with younger women, so that it becomes increasingly difficult for women to find partners as they age. He’s brutal and insightful about the logic of these “gap” relationships: it’s mostly older *rich* men who have access to much younger women. (His dissection of the marriages of Donald Trump is revealing as well as funny.) He observes that older rich women don’t seem to have as much access to younger men because it seems to make older men feel younger to know they’ve attracted a younger woman, but it makes older women feel older to be standing next to a younger man.

Finally, in the last two chapters, we come to inequality among the elderly and how we give away our wealth. Levmore proposes ways of raising the income of the least prosperous senior citizens, while Nussbaum draws on her own work on justice—the capabilities approach—to argue that a society should aim to give all citizens the opportunity to exercise their core capabilities, which may require inequalities, income-wise.

Aging Thoughtfully touches on a very wide range of subjects about aging, but there are a few fundamental topics that are omitted. The most fundamental is this: should we think that as people age, their lives typically get worse and worse? That’s not at all the message of the book (Nussbaum praises Cicero, who argues for just the opposite view), but it’s not clear how Nussbaum could avoid that assessment. On the capabilities approach, as she explains it in *Frontiers of Justice* (181), the use of our basic capabilities at a high level makes for a good human life. When the capabilities are minimally used, or not used, presumably a life can’t be good.

People tend to decline in their ability to make use of their most basic human capabilities, and so it seems Nussbaum *must* see life as usually getting worse as we age. She could avoid that assessment if the set of capabilities relevant to a person’s life varied with stages

of life, but in her previous writing on disability, Nussbaum explicitly rejects different sets for different people (and here she says the issues about aging and disability are overlapping). People with disabilities shouldn't have their lives assessed by separate standards, she argues in *Frontiers of Justice*, because that would be to see them as members of other species (*Frontiers*, 179-195). Thus, in the earlier book she suggests helping people with disabilities have some modicum of success in every category on her list—for example, helping them attain *some* sort of participation in political life, even if it's beyond their ability to vote (*Frontiers*, 194).

Accepting that life usually gets worse because people decline in their ability to exercise basic human capacities seems like a bitter truth one must face, but I find myself looking at the matter in a different way, based on interactions with my own 91-year-old father, who has advanced dementia. As of just a year ago, he was still a huge fan of the *New York Times* and constantly expressed appreciation for the subscription I'd been giving him for years. In that respect, but in few others, he was still *somewhat* exercising Nussbaum's fourth capability—sense, imagination, and reason. Nine months ago, he no longer seemed to understand what the paper was and never touched it. I cancelled the subscription with a heavy heart, and then gave some thought to my distress.

What seems true to my experience is that we do retain the usual standard (so yes, in a way it's sad that my father has forgotten his beloved newspaper), but the usual standard becomes increasingly external and unimportant. I would be looking at my father from a harsh and minimally relevant distance if I focused much on the abandoned paper. I'm looking at him based on the relevant standard when I bear in mind what his possible satisfactions actually are right now. On the standard that counts *now* it matters that dinner tastes good and it doesn't matter that the *New York Times* is gone.

Does this shift make elderly people a different species than younger people? Not really. It makes the elderly human beings *at* a particular stage of life. It's fair to say it would be better if that stage could be avoided, but once there, the standard for evaluating a person's life isn't the one that pertained when they were 25 years younger. Or so it seems. I would have enjoyed a discussion of these issues, which arise so naturally whether we're anticipating our own decline or interacting with people who have declined.

Besides this very basic issue about whether life gets worse as we age, and whether our lives should be assessed by a static standard, there are other good questions not covered in the book. Is there such a thing as “acting our age”? Is it bad to not act your age? Are there virtues particularly relevant to old age? But I can't complain. This book explores the topic of old age far more extensively than any other philosophical book I can think

of. Considering that aging has been a subject mostly neglected by philosophers, it's no wonder that there is room for other authors to say more.

References

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