

## Gateways to humanistic gerontology

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The contributors to this fine volume on humanistic gerontology come from a broad array of fields and quite a number of countries and languages of origin. For most, the study of ageing was not the focus of their formal education. Something must have lured them into the realm of the ageing – a favourite grandparent, an opportune moment for a dissertation topic, grant money to research one of the ‘challenges’ faced by older adults, or possibly an intriguing aged character in a novel, such as the ‘ancient clerk’ Mr Chuffy in Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

Whichever gate they have traversed, once humanistic scholars enter the land of older people they are bound to encounter familiar faces – their own. That’s when the fun begins. For here is a hermeneutic circle or set of concentric circles through which, by virtue of the scholar’s own ageing process, he or she moves ever closer towards the centre. As the scholar attempts a deeper understanding of what it means to grow old, he or she must struggle with the problem of finding a suitable framework – one that includes the student of ageing as well as the subjects.

My first gateway beckoned to me in the autumn of 1976 as I planned to offer a course on philosophers’ autobiographies at a senior centre in Olympia, Washington. I was just then teaching at a highly innovative undergraduate college nearby and had my students reading John Stuart Mill’s (and likely his co-author in shadows, Harriet Taylor’s) famous essay on *The subjection of women* (Mill, 1869). In this fiery critique of ‘The legal subordination of one sex to the other’, Mill says of women’s character, ‘we do not yet know who they are’. Given the social conditions of inequality with respect to suffrage, divorce and property law (not to mention access to independent careers), women’s development had been severely restricted to the degree that their true merit and contributive powers were as yet unknown. Mill was not a great believer in arguments ‘from nature’ as he was also an ardent critic of arguments from religious revelation or church authority in general. Yes, he was a man of reason, though he tipped his hat to the life of feelings.

My first reaction to my small and educationally and socioeconomically eclectic senior centre group was right out of the Mill/Taylor essay. Of older people, I thought to myself, given the pervasive stereotypes (my own included), social messages encouraging older people to disengage from both work and social life, and beliefs about ageing as a disease, *we do not know who they are*. I was convinced that, by bringing to my group some of my favorite philosophers – albeit through their personal narratives rather than abstract essays – I would help to liberate

these students from the shackles of inequity. Works of the humanities, I then believed, provided a mirror to the soul and a window into the lives of others. And so off we went, reading about Mill's psychological depression in his early 20s and about how he fell in love with Mrs Taylor. We eavesdropped on Simone de Beauvoir's account of her youthful affair with Jean-Paul Sartre. And we gazed into the seemingly empty swimming pool in the metaphysically minded T.S. Eliot's personally reflective poem 'Burnt Norton'.

A mystical lotus ascends from Eliot's watery mirage, Jean-Paul jilts Simone and John Stuart comes to the realisation that the faults in his own upbringing reflect wider inadequacies of his society. The lotus led us into a discussion about supreme powers, revealing the traditional believers and the doubters among us. The antics of the French existentialists threw open the door to discussion about love, sex and marriage, past, present and future. And Mill's turning the microscope of self-examination into a telescope of social criticism launched us into an examination of whether the experience-based knowledge and cultural heritage we brought with us from the past still meant something in the present.

'Old men should be explorers,' the less than liberated Mr Eliot told us. Given my initial framework, I was sure Eliot was talking about the life of the mind, the kind of thing that philosophers like to do – reflect. Wasn't that exactly what my group was doing by relating important ideas drawn from famous thinkers to their own experiences and beliefs? Ageing, I thought, was a philosophical time of life. Echoing Schopenhauer, if the first half of life is the front side of a quilt, the second half reveals how the quilt was made. Just look at that incredible needlework! But, oh, there do seem to be a few loose threads.

Engaged in life review, our little group, gathered around pushed-together bridge tables, was showing how we had played our cards in life. Some had a full house while others felt they had been dealt from the bottom of the deck. Does your life add up to something that feels complete or do you feel you've missed out on opportunities or made some bad choices over which you are still brooding? As if we had lifted a chapter out of Erik Erikson's (1980) discourse on the eight epigenetic stages of life, there we were negotiating 'integrity versus despair', the dialectic of old age, with the looming goal just ahead of us: wisdom. It was right around the time that wisdom popped up that my group took an unexpected turn and knocked over my framework.

'We want to know whether our views are still relevant to a younger generation,' said one member. 'Why don't you invite some of your students from the college to join our group?' suggested another. 'Should we be doing something more with the great stories people have been telling? Maybe write them down?' asked another.

So there I was, caught in the transition from the disengagement theory to the activity theory of ageing, without the benefit of knowing anything about either. The group members were not satisfied with contemplation. Mirrors and windows were fine, but they wanted action. Prompted (or rather, prodded), I organised us into a planning group and soon we had an intergenerational class, a public

lecture series entitled ‘What should be the future of our heritages?’ (funded by the Washington Commission for the Humanities), and all kinds of classes on writing memoirs, poetry and doing living theatre. I was now in the empowerment business. And the ‘deserving elderly’ were taking their cues from the likes of Gray Panthers provocateur Maggie Kuhn. ‘Deserving, hell!’ they shouted.

Over 30 years later, I preside over the North Carolina Center for Creative Retirement (NCCCR) in the mountain town of Asheville, NC. NCCCR is part of the University of North Carolina at Asheville. Like most lifelong learning institutes (LLIs) in the US, the Center is member-led and thrives on peer learning and teaching. With 1,800 annual members, several nationally acclaimed weekend workshops, an environmental education programme, community leadership seminars and an applied research arm, the Center is like a small college within the larger campus setting. We even have our own building.

Across the interval of these decades, I have seen and tried out several other frameworks for understanding ageing and the enterprise of lifelong learning: productive ageing, spiritual ageing, gender liberated ageing, transformational ageing and even, I hate to admit it, ‘silver industries’ ageing (the Center is two thirds funded through revenues). While critical gerontology was busy revealing the dark side of the science of ageing (the hidden ideological agendas, the dependency-making social policies, the evils of instrumental reason and their practitioners who want to cure us of ageing by manipulating our telomeres), others were pointing out that the whole enterprise of the study of ageing was something of a hypostatised sham. ‘There is no such thing as ageing or the elderly,’ announced Gilleard and Higgs (2000) in their insightful *Cultures of Ageing*. ‘We’ve made it up.’ Moreover, especially with the coming of age of the boomers, the very people whom we identify as ‘the elderly’ shun the label. There are, in fact, multitudes of ways that we age and identify with our chosen peers but these are so diverse (ethnicity, geography, gender, sexual orientation, social class, educational background, religious orientation, work status) as to resist easy classification.

What happens then to a centre for ‘creative retirement’ if our prospective clientele claim at age 70 that they’re still ‘too young’ or too busy still working to sign up? If age and retirement status are no longer the attributes on which affinities are based for our ‘learning community’ then what is the social glue that both attracts and keeps people involved in helping to plan curricula and teach courses, monitor budgets and render marketing campaigns, conduct research and disseminate findings? As age and retirement status become irrelevant, we move toward a new paradigm – age neutral. Many organisations are making this shift – senior centres become enrichment centres, a College for Seniors becomes the Evergreen Society, a developer’s Senior Living division becomes Heritage Habitations. The organisation that was known formerly as the American Association of Retired Persons has legally changed its name to just AARP (hoping, as was the case with IBM, that gradually no one will know what the acronym used to stand for). Ageing is out; age neutral is in.

Does this amount to a paradigm collapse? More likely it's that there are multiple both overlapping and mutually contradictory paradigms coexisting in our various disciplinary domains and cultural milieus. Likewise, there are mixed and contrary messages coming from the media of popular culture that range from articles on how to stay youthful by using anti-ageing potents, to tips for reinventing yourself in retirement (how to morph from being a high school algebra teacher to a stand-up comic), or advice on how to age gracefully and become a wise elder (in part by attending special workshops). There is no cultural consensus about the one right way to grow old. If ageing and later life is a matter of social construction but there are no certified architects, then it's each person for themselves.

And what does this mean about the role of the academic humanist who has stepped through the gateway to ageing? Do we have privileged knowledge that would guide the masses of midlife and older adults toward an ideal of maturity? Or, through our various critiques and subtle interpretations, are we contributing to the blurring of later life as a distinct stage with unique qualities and characteristics and only adding to the increasing ambiguity of what it means to grow old? Academic humanists have a penchant for the subversive. That's part of our training – to notice what others have overlooked, to question what others take for granted, to find the exception to the rule, to work from the parts to the whole and back again to the parts. Perhaps the role of the academic humanist in stalking the elusive older person is precisely to loosen the bounds of prejudice and two-dimensional thinking. The humanist, in the postmodern era, lauds the multiple meanings, values and pathways of the neo-elderly. And if age-neutral is the talisman of liberation, so be it.

But wait. There is one other paradigm that seems to be making a comeback – 'positive ageing'. Floated as a potentially viable term in the early 1980s, positive ageing addressed the strengths of mature adults while acknowledging the inevitable weaknesses and losses. Somehow, the campaign for positive ageing failed to elect a slate of leaders. But the term has been resurrected recently, perhaps revived by the popularity of the 'happiness school' of psychology, 'positive psychology'. This has given the field of ageing new research possibilities for understanding – for example, how an attitude such as optimism might be correlated with vitality and longevity. Positive psychology claims Aristotle as its godfather, citing the Schoolman's discussion of *eudaimonia* in the *Ethics*, where Aristotle makes happiness ('activity in accordance with virtue') the goal of development.

The jury is still out on positive ageing, though one of its strengths is precisely the ambiguity of the term, since it can serve as a rallying cry for a multitude of age-liberation endeavours, as well as an umbrella for the emerging 'life coach' industry that is hoping to guide (for a small fee) the bewildered baby-boom generation to Elysian fields of the ageless body and timeless mind (Chopra, 1993).

This volume opened with the editors' assertion that 'the problem of meaning' is the 'essential core of humanistically oriented gerontology'. Meaning, in turn, implies 'norms and values', which, in turn, 'makes people's experiences into *life courses* rather than simple concatenations of events'. The goal then of this

volume is to demonstrate how humanists and the humanities can unite what has been rendered asunder by the fragmenting influence of highly specialised, compartmentalising scientific enterprises with their unique nomenclatures and guild-approved methodologies. What we are searching for is an embracing discourse of discourses that nevertheless makes no claim to produce the 'master narrative' that would eclipse all other narratives. One thinks of O.E. Wilson's (1998) term 'consilience', the attempt to discover the intrinsic order of the universe through rational means. Wilson hoped to build a bridge between the natural sciences and the humanities, domains that would be united through a common quest.

Whether the study of ageing will eventually disclose an underlying intelligibility that is not the result of a projected ideology (reductive explanation, methodological dictum, religious epiphany) remains to be seen. For now, let us celebrate the multiple meanings of ageing and ask Mr Chuffy to please serve the tea.

### References

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