

## **ETHICAL POINT OF VIEW OF AGEING. FROM VULNERABILITY TO LIBERTY**

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**Abstract:** Our society does not want to grow up: we are afraid of becoming older and closer to death. The reason for that is our society's tendency to associate ageing and elderly with vulnerability, and youth with full physical and psychical development. That is why it takes its scientific and technological possibilities at the furthest extent in order to make people live longer and better. And up to a point it is true that the elderly are worried about those issues related to vulnerability (physical decrepitude, memory and cognitive skill loss and solitude). But this is neither the only nor the same way in which all elderly live their age. There are other perceptions of ageing, such as that of the students of the Barcelona University's Experience University. Knowing their point of view on the matter will lead to the conclusion that our society's fear of age should be put into perspective and that consequently the age-division in human life that was made in classical times and from which our society's fear of age emerges, should be abandoned in favor of a global conception of 'person', which implies a new conception of 'vulnerability'.

**Key words:** Ageing, Peter Pan syndrome, age-division, vulnerability, ability and age, old people

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### **Introduction**

How do elderly live the ageing process? How do elderly live its negative elements? Do they think it involves any positive aspects? Probably the answer to all those questions differs according to whether they are answered by the elderly themselves or by the society as a whole. And there may also be relevant differences between the elderly themselves: not every aged-person may live the ageing process in the same way. The question now is which are these differences and why do they occur.

## **The perspective of society: the Peter Pan syndrome**

Our society's verbal tense is future: one of the main ideas that structure today's society is progress. From time immemorial it has been believed that mankind had to progress indefinitely and that each stage had to be better than the previous one (Nisbet, 1991). Therefore, society has always focused its efforts on improving its scientific and technical skill and in using them to help this process. Such mentality has positive consequences in the medical field, for instance, as it helps to eradicate illnesses, to increase longevity and to improve the quality of life.

But over the last few years the society's confidence in the possibilities of the technique has led to the technification and medicalization of every problem (Engel, 1977; Quaderns Fundació Víctor Grífols i Lucas, 11). It has followed the society's hyper-technification and, as both consequence and cause of it, the society has become also hyper-demanding: why should we change our lifestyle and do more exercise and eat healthier, if we can keep fit only by taking a pill? One of the main reasons for having taken our scientific and technological skill to this extreme is, probably, one certain problem our society has a great fear of, maybe because it is one of the few human being's insoluble problems: the ageing.

In ancient times, the elderly were beloved, as they were the tradition's bounders and transmitters. In the words of Norberto Bobbio (1997), the elderly were bounders of the community's cultural heritage. They were considered to be experienced and wise and, actually, later they became heads of state. But in Greece a change in this conception took place and what was beloved was not the old age any more, but the middle age. The Greek divided the human life in three phases: the generation and maturing, the full expression of the potentialities and the corruption and disintegration, so that certain characteristics were associated with each age according to the grade of perfection acquired. Childhood was associated with immaturity; adolescence and middle age were associated with full expression of capacities; and old age was associated with decrepitude. Also in Rome, Cicero (2002) characterized the childhood as weak, the adolescence as eager and the old age as expiring. It follows that in classical times adults were considered to be perfect, whereas children and elderly were considered to be pathological: both of them were thought to be in some way ill and dependent and thus defective.

Focusing on elderly and ageing, it can be said that as pathological ageing has been traditionally associated to four main problems (Facal, Guàrdia & Juncos, 2014): loss of

physical skill (difficulty in developing activities which require physical abilities, dependency or physical decrepitude), loss of cognitive skill (difficulty in developing activities which require mental skill such as memorizing, playing games which imply reasoning or keeping a conversation), memory and identity loss (due to neurodegenerative illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease) and solitude. All four problems have an idea in common: the vulnerability.

Today's society is supposed to progress and does not accept vulnerability (McIntyre, 1999)<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, it tries to hide any sign of it. We do not want to have wrinkles, we do not want to lose memory, we do not want to be ill and to depend on others for the basic things and, ultimately, we do not want to die<sup>2</sup>. We want to be healthy and beautiful for as long as possible. In other words, today's society has the so-called Peter Pan syndrome (Elzo, 2008; Marina, *El Mundo*), that is to say, people wants to be young forever, they doesn't want to grow up.

Many examples illustrate this point. One of them is the actual debate on genetic manipulation (Habermas, 2002). Although the therapeutic gene manipulation is generally accepted as it prevents illnesses and deficiencies, the ethical issues arise with the possibility of having a designer baby, that is to say, the possibility to choose our children's eye color, height and even abilities or personality. This idea of the *made person*, to which Habermas opposes that of the *born person*, expresses our society's wish of eradicating all illnesses and disabilities in order to reach perfection. And it shows our society's fear of imperfection.

Another example is the plastic surgery. Although in some cases it may be justified (should it be due to accidents or to serious psychological traumas associated with the physical appearance), too many times the ultimate reason people have to undergo surgery one or more times putting their health at risk is that they do not accept their body as it is (which means that they don't accept themselves as they are). This non-acceptance of one's physical appearance is mainly caused by the idea of beauty that today's society promotes and that once again is based on perfection. That brings us to

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<sup>1</sup> McIntyre claims that Western thought and modern anthropology forgot vulnerability and frailty, because they focused on the autonomy paradigm. We claim that nowadays people has therefore assumed this paradigm and become afraid of vulnerability, frailty and weakness in general.

<sup>2</sup> That is a general view, although the so-called "*frail elders*", can not be forgotten. They are old people who despite not having any particular illness, are going through the aging process and thus their autonomy is limited, among other symptoms. Some say that this elders are not afraid of dying any more and thus they don't do much in order to protect themselves. So, according to those, this elders may not agree to the fact that nobody wants to die. But generally speaking, we can say that people doesn't want to die and that they may even be afraid of dying.

the next example of our society's Peter Pan syndrome: the publicity.

We are bombed each day, mostly in TV, by a great amount of advertisements which show a certain stereotype of beauty, both through the products advertised and the actors appearing in them. From products to rejuvenate the skin and make us look like as if we were ten years younger, which are announced by a young, slim and beautiful girl, to special cereal that help losing weight and which is announced by a young, tall and sporty man. People too often believe that this idea of beauty is the only and the best one and thus they want to look like it.

Last but not least, there is still another example worth mentioning of our society's mentality regarding ageing: the ageism or discrimination due to the age. This type of discrimination generally occurs in job seeking and in the resource distribution (especially the medical resources) (Canto-Sperber, 2001). The elderly suffer discrimination when seeking a job, because they are thought to be unable to work, not to be productive, so many applications are often refused without being attended because of the candidate's age. On the other hand, the elderly are also discriminated in the resource distribution, because they are costly and it is sometimes thought that they "have already had their life", which adds an economical stigmatization and a cultural refusal of the elderly.

So, today's society fears ageing because of associating it to imperfection, defects and ultimately to vulnerability, all of which are obstacles to its ideal of perfection. Míriam Le Sommer-Péré (Canto-Sperber, 2001) revives the classic mentality when she says that nowadays ageing is seen as an illness which has to be treated and prevented and that so intend science and technique by pursuing the ideal of an everlasting youth. The question now is: living the ageing as a stage of vulnerability and imperfection is really the only possible way of living it?

### **The perspective of elderly: past and present**

Elderly's verbal tense is past: they want to reach their life's last phase with all their matters in order (Broggi, 2011). They want to leave this world with the satisfaction of having done what they wanted to do, of having been what they wanted to be, of having appropriate their own life. Ultimately they want to have the feeling that they have sought and found the life good (which is the ethics' finality), because it can't be sought any more as they do not have much time left. In other words, they spend their life's last phase reviewing and trying to give a meaning to their lives.

The reason why elderly tend to look at their past is the awareness of the fact that they not only may not have time, but neither physical condition to do what they have not done nor memory to remember what they have been. Physical problems carry solitude. The solitude of the forgotten in an old people's home, because their families are too busy to care about them. Miriam Le Sommer-Péré claims that the "ethics of individual happiness" widespread in today's society make elderly to be an obstacle to their relatives' seek of happiness.

But are not only physical problems what carries solitude. Memory loss, the oblivion, also does. The solitude of the one who does not recognize himself in a mirror and of the one who lives a life he does not recognize as his own. Cicero said that memory is one of the old age's fruits. Bobbio said that "the elderly's world is that of memory: you are what you remember, the thought you have thought, the actions you have made, the memories you remember and you have not let vanish". The philosopher characterized elderly by the expression "until memories abandon us". And when memories abandon us, we lose our identity. Paul Ricoeur (1995) said that one is the narration he makes of his own life. One gets to know himself through his own narration. That is what elderly do at the end of his life in order to give a meaning to it: narrating their lives to themselves. And narrating implies having memories. That is why Ricoeur adds that our narration, our memory, shows our identity as long as it is critical with the past, that is to say, as long as the narration is aimed at assessing what one has done and who one has been.

That is what is usually thought regarding elderly. So it can be thought that the elderly are generally worried for the same four problems traditionally associated with ageing. But this is not the only possible view of ageing. Indeed, there are also aged-people who do not look at the past, but at the present: those people are also worried about these problems, but instead of worrying about not being able to remedy their past because of them, they try to cope with them so as to be able to keep enjoying and giving a meaning to their life until the end. Because, according to these people, what matters are not the years of life, but the life of the years. What matters is not how many years of life one has left, but how one wants to live them: better to live doing a countdown is living with quality of life and happiness. Cicero said that "anyone who doesn't have the happiness' principle inside himself will find any age uncomfortable".

## **The study**

A case study was carried out by means of surveying a group of students from the University of Barcelona's Experience University (year 2013-2014). The Experience University is one example of aged people living the ageing in this second way. It offers university programs to elderly over 55, without previous requirements or exams, with the aim of providing elderly with university education, integrating them at the university, promoting intergenerational communication and setting a meeting-place where to share a new cultural experience.

The aim of the study was to show a new perspective on ageing and the way to live it. Not as a perspective shared by a representative part of society, but as an example of an existing perspective, which is different as de common one and therefore can not be left out. The smallness of the sample is due to this fact. The size of the chosen group was n=50, from which we could obtain data of n=32. There were 59% men and 41% women, mainly between 60 and 69 years old (only 20% were over 69 and 6% under 60) and except for one acting worker, all the others were retired. The survey was divided into three sections: student's profile, student's own perception of aging and social perception of aging according to the students, respectively.

### **First section: the profile**

The survey's first section was aimed to draw the respondents' profile. The results show that they try to fight the four main issues traditionally associated with ageing (cognitive skill loss, memory and identity loss, physical skill loss and solitude) and to keep themselves active. Almost all of them (93.5%) do other activities, apart from attending the Experience University, and more than a half (65.62%) speak foreign languages. When asked how they feel, none of them reported to feel neither elder nor old (just as their age) and 26% recounted to feel young.

As for cognitive skill loss (here we did not take into account the identity loss due to neurodegenerative illnesses), all respondents said that they usually do mental activities in order to maintain their mental skill. They were given three options: reading, doing crosswords or similar exercises and other. Their answers show that 96.87% of respondents reads. Of those, 43.75% also do crosswords or similar exercises and, of those, 12.5% also do other things such as reading in foreign languages, attending to lectures, swimming -it is said to be beneficial for the mind-, Photoshop and photo editing, meditation, learning, listening to others, playing bridge, attending to a memory workshop, writing, doing yoga,

going to the theater and practicing social gathering. The respondents who do not read (3.12%) do crosswords or similar exercises.

As for physical decline, all respondents also told that they usually do physical activities in order to keep fit. They were given six options: going to the gym, doing physical exercise at home, hiking or doing long walks, running, swimming and other. 77.41% of respondents hike or do long walks. Of those, 35.48% also go to the gym and, of those, 19.35% do the two previous activities and also swims. The respondents who do not hike or walk (22.85%) either swim, run or do physical exercises at home (one or more than one of these things). Finally, 12.9% of respondents do some of these things and also others, such as yoga or cycling.

As for fighting solitude, they were asked whether they do any leisure activity with other people. 90% of them reported they do so. Of those, 72% belong to a cultural association, 65.99% go out with friends or old mates, 11.99% go to a chess club or dominoes club, 9% belong to a (trekking club), 5% take part in their neighborhood or village's traditional festivals organization, 2% practice traditional activities (i.e., human towers or traditional dance), and 2% belong to a supporters' club. On the other hand, 18% of respondents do other things such as going to concerts, to the cinema, to museum exhibitions, to lectures, to the theater, doing yoga, doing meditation or learning. None of them attend to a community center, senior citizens home or retirement home.

As it can be seen, some respondents said that they learn in order to both maintain their mental skill and to fight solitude. Actually, when asked, 75% of them told us they had enrolled the Experience University so as to learn new things. But what other reasons did they have? Again, the answers show that their reasons are related to keeping active. The next most common reason (71.87%) was to maintain themselves intellectually active (together with pleasure). The less common reason (18.75%) was wanting to fulfil their free time.

### **Second section: own perception of aging**

The second section of the survey was aimed to know their own perception, as elderly, about ageing and the treatment elderly receive. To this end they were asked which negative aspects they associate to ageing and whether they considered it to have positive ones.

As for the negative aspects, the answers reflect that the students surveyed also

associate ageing to the main traditional aspects. Indeed, of the ten negative aspects they were given, the aspect most of them associate with ageing is cognitive skill loss (75%, with a concern of 6.42 out of 10). Physical skill loss and memory and identity loss are also negative aspects most of them associate with ageing, but they come after another issue: the death of loved aged-people (partner, friends) (65.62% and with a concern of 6.76 out of 10). However, solitude appears in the eighth place, after societal discrimination and the feeling that one belongs to another time, because of the new technologies. In addition, there are other aspects that worry them as much as solitude such as the nearness of death and the awareness of not having achieved their life objectives, which now can't be achieved anymore. The aspect less respondents chose (18.75%, with a concern of 3.37 out of 10) is paternalism and infantilism from society. It is relevant to notice that one respondent told not to find any negative aspect about ageing and that 9.37% of them added other negative aspects related to the lack of activity and of a positive attitude, such as tendency to laziness or lack of hopes.

As for positive aspects, all respondents reported they find some. The aspect most chosen as positive (87.50%) is the fact that elderly change their mind about what is really important (they give importance to things they did not care about when they were young and diminish the importance of other things of which they had cared a lot in their teens). The second aspect most chosen as positive is more tolerance, the third is more wisdom and common sense, the fourth is the feeling of serenity because of having closed all the other life stages satisfactorily or because of having rationalized the events not so satisfying, the fifth is retirement and the sixth and last one is the fact of having acquired experience.

The students were asked more deeply about their appraising on retirement and it turned out to be lived as a chance to keep active, rather than to relax. The option most chosen of the list they were provided (96.87%) was the fact of being able to do activities they could not do while working (going to museums or to the theatre or travelling), and the option less chosen (25%) was the fact of being able to rest. On the other hand, most of them (12.50%) told they did not want to retire as they liked their jobs and only 6.25% said they did not want to retire as they wouldn't know how to fulfil their free time. 9.37% of respondents said they did not want to think about retirement as retired are seen as unable to work, useless and bored people.



### **Third section: social perception of aging**

The third and last section of the survey focuses on their feelings of the social perception about ageing and elderly. This third section was also divided in three parts: which aspects they think society associates with ageing and elderly, how they feel treated by society and which and how much resources they think society invests in elderly.

As for the aspects they think society associates with ageing and elderly, again coincide with the main issues associated with them, but they think there are other aspects to which society gives as much importance as to those. The most chosen aspects (71.87%) as the ones that society associates with ageing and elderly are memory and identity loss, dependency (physical autonomy loss), and the feeling they belong to another time, because of the new technologies. The most chosen aspects in the second place (43.75%) are solitude, uselessness to work and the fact that the elderly have experience, wisdom and common sense, which can be useful for the future generations. The less chosen aspects (31.25%) are pessimism or melancholy and more tolerance.

The importance of this question made interesting to analyze the answers according to sex. The more meaningful difference was the following. Men chose (92,30%) the feeling of belonging to another time because of the new technologies as the aspect society associate the most with elderly and ageing, whereas for women this aspect comes to the third place (57,89%). Memory and identity loss is what the female respondents considered to be the main aspect society associates with old age (84,21%), which men put also in the third position (53,84).

As for the treatment they receive from society the results show it is positive. 6 out of every 10 stated not to be annoyed when treated in a formal language or to be indifferent to that, and also 6 out of every 10 stated not to be annoyed by any expression used to refer to elderly (i.e. “the grandpas”, “senior citizens” or “the elder”). Only 9.68% of them reported to have experienced or witnessed a disrespectful attitude, mainly on the street, and almost a half of them (45.16%) reported to have experienced or witnessed a positive attitude, mainly on public transport. Finally, most than a half of the respondents (56.25%) reported to have received a positive reaction from people around them when explaining that they had enrolled the Experience University. Indeed, 51.94% of the respondents who have either children or both children and grandchildren told to have perceived that their enrollment in the Experience University has produced a positive change in their relationship (the other did not perceive any change), in terms of a chance to talk more between them or to talk about other

themes, a chance of getting to know each other better, a chance of doing things together and a chance to help each other.

In the last part of the third section, the students were asked in which area they think society invest resources the most and the least (either economical resources or specific initiatives to support elderly). They said they think society invest the most (47.36%) both in intellectual development and physical development (dependency) and the least (47.36%) in solitude. On the whole they told they think that the economic resources and initiatives to support the elderly are insufficient (53.33%) and that there is a lack of information about what is being done for elderly (53.33%).

### **Conclusion of the study**

From these elder students' opinions the conclusion that can be drawn is that the four main issues traditionally associated with elderly and ageing are some of the most that both they and today's society associate with them. However, it can also be said that there are other aspects, also positive ones, that both of them also associates with ageing and elderly as much strongly as the traditional ones. As for the negative aspects, the elderly are also worried about the death of loved aged-ones (partner, friends) and about societal discrimination. On the contrary, society associates elderly to anachronism due to new technologies, which was not something about which the elderly were worried. And as for the positive aspects, society describes elderly as experienced and wise, which was the most important positive aspect traditionally associated with the elderly, but paradoxically they do not describe themselves as so. By contrast, elderly describe themselves as tolerant, with what society disagrees. Finally, according to these students, elderly receive a positive treatment from society in their daily-life and regarding people around them, but -as it has been said- they state they feel discriminated because of their age (ageism) and they experience both a lack of resources and of information about resources intended to support them as elderly. And, anyway, it has been shown that all respondents fight the main issues traditionally associated with ageing and that they do it in many ways (from reading, to hiking or belonging to cultural associations), as they want to live their life's last stage in an active and happy way.

### **Looking in a new way at the concepts of 'vulnerability' and 'person'**

Now it is time to answer the question posed above: living the ageing as a stage of vulnerability and imperfection is really the only possible way of living it? According to the data provided by the students from the Experience University, it can be said that the answer is no, because although the traditional problems associated with ageing are

always there, one's perception of ageing depend on how one decides to live these problems and whether one is capable or not to find its positive aspects. Ultimately, one's perception of ageing depend on whether one gives more importance to the years of life or to the life of the years, to the past or to the present.

That leads to the conclusion that the traditional perception of ageing has to be abandoned in favor of a more polyhedral one. But it is not only the old age what has negative aspects: nowadays the paternalism children often suffer reveals that childhood is associated with immaturity. And even the adolescence, which in classical times was thought to be the age of perfection, nowadays also has negative aspects as it is characterized by the rebellion against adults and rules and as adolescents are thought to be aimless. So, in some sense, we all are imperfect and thus vulnerable.

Therefore, what has to be abandoned is not only the traditional perception of ageing, but the whole classical age-division of human life. And it has to be abandoned in favor of a new concept of vulnerability, which emerges from a new conception of the person. As it has been shown, the person is not an individual who goes through predetermined life stages abandoning characteristics from the past stages and acquiring new characteristics in the coming stages. The person is not an individual who is a spectator of his own life, but a subject who is the actor of his own life and who freely chooses how he wants to live his life.

It follows that the vulnerability does not have to be inevitably associated with imperfection. Vulnerability can be understood, capturing what one of the respondents said in the last question of the survey (an open one), as an opportunity to build oneself up. Vulnerability can be understood as being the starting point for the person to freely make herself a person, or even better, to make herself the kind of person she freely chooses to be.

And also society has to allow the individuals to freely build themselves up, which implies that society has to treat them as persons. According to Simone de Beauvoir (1979) a society in which persons in old-age are still persons has to be a society that had always treated them as persons, that is to say, a society that do not belittle children, that allows individuals to participate in the collective life, a society whose culture was practical and living so that individuals can take control of their environment. In such society, says de Beauvoir, the old age would not exist. One can say in such society would not exist an old age characterized as an age of passive,

defective, vulnerability, but an old age characterized as an age of active, self-upbuilding vulnerability. Actually, de Beauvoir herself seems to agree with the necessity to choose the person one wants to become when she says that “our life’s meaning is questioned in the future awaiting us; we don’t know who we are if we ignore what we will become: this old man, this old woman; let us recognize ourselves in them.” So, it is not your life, what gives an identity to the old man or woman you will someday become, but it is this old man or woman you will someday become what gives a meaning to your life, as long as your life’s meaning is building yourself up according to this old man or woman you will and want someday become. Therefore, no matter how many years of life one has left, the life good can always be sought (and found), one can keep being loyal to his project of life and to oneself until the end. The self can still be built up.

Or, if nothing more can be built up, one can always teach others how to build themselves up. Cicero stressed that what defines the old age is the strength of instructing and guiding the young and to teach them their obligations. He said that the young like to hear the elderly’s precepts, which inspire in them the love to the virtue, and that this is what makes the old age to be always occupied and active.

And thus, as building oneself up and choosing how to build oneself up implies liberty, if any age-division of human life had to be made, one more appropriate would be to say that childhood is the time to desire and seek liberty, that the adolescence is the time to learn liberty -in J. A. Marina’s words (Marina, *El Mundo*)- and that old age is the time to be free and to teach liberty.

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