

## Wisdom and old age

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### Abstract

The link that connects wisdom and old age presents significant historical and cultural variations; in general terms, only if wisdom is thought as an end which requires *time* to be acquired, old age appears as the best moment to obtain it. The greek man represented in Sophocles and Euripides' tragedies doesn't aspire to a long life which will inevitably be full of pain; on the contrary, Plato tells us that it takes a lot of training in *good life* to become a philosopher, so governors in the platonic *Republic* will be necessarily old aged men. Aristotle doesn't consider old people as good examples of wisdom and excludes them from the government of the *polis*; at the very end of the republican Rome, Cicero celebrates old age as a state in which man is freed from the mastery of passions, and some years later Seneca writes to Lucilius that old age is the best moment to take care of oneself. In Old and in New Testament, old people are frequently good examples of wisdom, but here the concept of wisdom has a new meaning, which refers more to a spiritual knowledge than to a practical one.

The *topos* that connects wisdom and old age has surely very ancient roots, but it needs to be investigated in order to clarify its deep sense and to avoid misunderstandings. Probably, this *topos* becomes completely structured only when and where a strong conception of life after death affirms itself: only in this case old age acquires a special value, because old man is seen as a sort of intermediary between two states of being and as the depositary of a special knowledge, which only one who is very near to the threshold of life can have.

Simone de Beauvoir<sup>1</sup> says that in some primitive societies old people were object of veneration because of their proximity to death, or greatly respected because of their vast practical

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knowledge. Of course, their conditions of life could vary significantly among different primitive societies, ranging from umiliation and expulsion to respect and veneration: the local standard of values defined the meaning of old age. If wisdom, as a system of practical knowledge, memories and experiences, was seen as something valuable, at least as a means useful to the individual and to the community, his value spread over the subjects to which it most probably belonged, that is old people; naturally, much depended on the economic conditions of the society itself, that is on scarcity of food and primary goods: the more a group was poor and near to the threshold of survival, the more probable it was for old people to be treated badly, because of their improductivity.

More generally, wisdom is a mental, not a physical resource, so its value in a primitive society depended on how much importance that culture attributed to qualities other than physical strenght, such as practical knowledge and experience, memory of traditions, facts and events, good judgment and so on; in a word, the way old people were treated depended on the level of cultural development reached by the society itself, but there were many variables which could interfere. One of these variables was surely richness (an old, rich man was more respected by his community than a poor one), but another very important one was parental affection: in many primitive societies, though very poor, young people attributed great respect to their old parents because of the loving care with which they had been growt.<sup>2</sup>

To connect firmly wisdom with old age we must think of the second as something that can be, at least, endowed with value; surely, in an epic-heroic conception of life such as the one we find attested in the greek literature of classic age, physical strenght is the ideal, and consequently old aged people have only a marginal role. So, when Homerus writes *Iliad* he is thinking nostalgically of a past age, therefore he speaks of the old orator Nestor as a wise counselor, giving him the importance of a

character that motivates the plot; on the other side, *Odyssey* reflects a more modern sensibility, one in which old people have only a secondary role. Here Homer insists on particulars of physical decadence typical of old age, showing the same pessimism and realism on human condition that we find in Hesiod.

Some ancient greek poets, as Mimnermus,<sup>3</sup> give us an execrable image of old age because it would deprive man of the pleasures of love, but also in some greek tragedies we find a desolate vision of ageing: in Euripides' *Heracle*, for example, the chorus pronounces terrible words against old age, defining it «a burden» charged «on men's head [...], heavier than Etna cliffs».<sup>4</sup> Old age means here essentially loss of physical vigour, and it is said not to be desirable at all, neither by rich nor by poor people.<sup>5</sup>

This pessimistic vision of old age is coherent, I think, with an extremely pessimistic vision of life, strictly connected with a circular conception of time: as a famous old greek proverb said, the best thing for human beings would be not to have been born at all, and the second would be to die young. This is the terrible truth that Silenus reveals to Midas in an episode that both Aristotle<sup>6</sup> and Teopompus refer, though not exactly in the same way; actually, the proverb is more ancient, being attested by many sources since the sixth century b.C. . We find an echo of the same proverb also in some greek tragedies of the classic period, for example in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*:

Not to have been born, this is the best thing, and if one was born, early to go back there where one came from. When youth with its slight follies has gone, what pain lacks? Envy, fights, battles, quarrels, blood and finally, despised and hateful to everyone, comes old age.<sup>7</sup>

On this topic we can mention also a different tradition, attested for the first time by Herodotus in his *Histories*. Here we

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meet the episode of the rich king of Lydia Cresus who asks Solon, the famous Athenian philosopher, who is the happiest man in the world; Cresus hopes that Solon, having seen his richness, will recognize that the king himself is the one, but Solon answers that the happiest man he has ever known is a very common man that died in a honourable way fighting for his country, without surviving to his sons.

To sum up, the image of old age we receive from different greek ancient sources is one in which it appears as a completely undesirable period of human life, irremediably full of pain and sorrow; if the best thing for man is not to be born at all, it will be of course completely indifferent whether old age is wise or not; the best thing will be not to become old. Moreover, Silenus tells Midas that it would be better for man to ignore what is the best for him: this means that *mathémata* and *pathémata* are strictly connected, and that the more you know, the more you will suffer. Of course, we can deduce from this that necessarily old age is the worst period in human life, because it is the one in which we learn more clearly how miserable is the condition reserved to human beings.

Things seem to change when a strong belief in the immortality of soul appears; Pythagora taught that

it behoved men to honour their elders, thinking that which was precedent in point of time more honourable; just as in the world, the rising of the sun was more so than the setting; in life, the beginning more so than the end; and in animals, production more so than destruction.<sup>8</sup>

Pythagora described old age as the fourth season of life, that is winter; each season (childness-spring, adolescence-summer, youth- autumn) was for the philosopher of twenty years, so old age went from sixty years up to eighty. This is of course a less pessimistic way of conceiving old age, which rejoins it to the natural course of events.

A radically new conception of old age appears more clearly in Plato's works, especially in the *Republic*, where government of the ideal town is assigned to old, wise people. We find here the famous episode of the meeting between Socrates and the old Cefalus<sup>9</sup>, the father of Polemarcus. Cefalus is very happy to speak with Socrates because, as he explains, the more body pleasures decrease, the more desire and pleasure of conversations increase. Socrates answers that he is very pleased to speak with very old people, because they have already gone the long way that maybe he too will have to go. So old people are for Socrates the depositaries of an important *knowledge* concerning how difficult the travel to death can be and how it is possible to manage these difficulties. Cefalus now says something very interesting: many old people he knows complain and regret the pleasures of youth, wrongly spending their time in memories that prevent them from recognizing the great gains typical of old age, that are peace and freedom deriving from having been rescued from the foolish mastery of instincts. And Cefalus adds that, from his point of view, it is not because of the heaviness of old age that some people complain about it, but because of their bad character. Socrates answers that many wouldn't agree on this point with Cefalus, and would attribute his ease to bear old age to his money more than to his good character, but Cefalus replies that richness can help man in the feebleness typical of old age only if he is moderate, good, honest and just, one that wouldn't use money to damage others.

Contrary to Plato, that thought only wise old men had to govern his *Republic*, Epicurus criticized old men's activism: epicureism teaches that physical decadence typical of ageing can involve also the mind, so that, as Lucretius says, *claudicat ingenium* («intelligence limps»)<sup>10</sup>.

Aristotle too rules out old people from government of the *polis* and assigns political power to rich middle aged soldiers, excluding also poor people because easy to be corrupted.

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Now, let me say a word about the important distinction that Aristotle traces between wisdom (*phrónesis*) and *sophìa* (that is knowledge of necessary things, that can't be otherwise). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle gives an important definition of the wise man<sup>11</sup>: we call wise, he says, someone who knows how to deliberate well about things which are good and helpful for him, not in particular but in general, in order to conduct a good life. In other terms, Aristotle's definition of wisdom links it to action: wisdom is a virtue, a practical disposition that is accompanied by a truthful reason able to discern human goods. So, a wise man will be virtuous, that is moderate in everything he does; nonetheless, Aristotle doesn't connect old age with wisdom and assigns to the first a bad vice, avarice, one that could not be cured because deeply rooted in human nature.<sup>12</sup> Avarice is for the philosopher a bad practical disposition that is easy to find wherever there is a feebleness of any sort, and old age is, of course, deeply characterized by feebleness. Moreover, Aristotle assigns to old age the lower kind of friendship, that based on utility: old people would be incapable of disinterested friendly relations because of their need of assistance.<sup>13</sup>

Actually, old people didn't have an easy life in Athens also before Aristotle: during Pericles' government, for example, public assistency helped orphans, disabled ex-servicemen, persons disabled at work and poor people, but not old people. Athens' aesthetic culture considered unacceptable the decadence typical of old age, and tended to remove it from collective memory; the situation was radically different in Sparta, where old men were those who had survived to many battles and so they were greatly honoured. An old virtuous man in Sparta was usually bestowed of public honours; he was called to exert judicial power in *Gerousia*, following Lycurgus laws. As the supreme power in Sparta, *Gerousia* had very important tasks: it proposed laws, controlled the education of the collectivity, judged crimes against family and state, and so on. Both Thucydides and Xenophon refer that old men were greatly respected in Sparta,

and that it was considered a duty to give one's place up to them in theatres or in assemblies.

In the republican Rome old men, if rich, were very influential both in their families (where *pater familias* had an absolute power)<sup>14</sup> and in politics (old senators had many privileges); only during the period of the Gracchi reforms this situation began to change and old senators' privileges diminished, together with the authority of *pater familias*.

Something very important seems to happen now, at the very end of the republican age: a new way of conceiving old age affirms itself, supported by stoicism. The ciceronian Cato the elder, in *De senectute*, speaks of old age in a way that directly connects it to wisdom. In answering to Scipius and Lelius, Cato says:

The best arms in old age are knowledge and practice of virtue, that if cultivated in every age, after a long and intense life produce marvellous fruits, not only because they do not vanish at the very end of life- a very important thing- but also because awareness of a well spent life and memories of many good actions are very great satisfactions.<sup>15</sup>

In *De senectute*, Cicero recovers some expressions that belonged to the old Cefalus, the character of the platonic *Republic*, but he also recalls some words pronounced by the chorus in Euripides' *Heracles*, just to deny what they affirm: *senectus* is not too heavy, although *plerisque senibus sic odiosa est ut onus se Aetna gravius dicant sustinere* («many old men find it so hateful that say it is heavier than Etna»)<sup>16</sup> Cato adds that it is as typical of young men to be temerarious, as it is of old men to be wise; in other terms,

Old man doesn't do the same things young men do, but more ones and better: great actions are not the product of strength, speed or physical agility, but of intelligence,

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authority and good judgment, qualities of which usually old age not only is not deprived, but richer.<sup>17</sup>

Cato examines accurately the four arguments that were traditionally used to denigrate old age, with the aim to confute them. First of all, old age was usually associated with the loss of memory (it is the *epicureian argument*): Cato answers that it would be true only if this faculty had not been kept in exercise, or if someone was by his very constitution of little *ingenium*. A great number of famous examples (Themistocles, Sophocles, but also Homer, Hesiodus, Isocrates, Gorgias and the ancient philosophers Pythagora, Democritus, Plato, and so on) would demonstrate for Cato that intellectual capacities can prolongue themselves along all life, if only old people «preserve interests and dynamism».<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, says Cato, old age wouldn't be by its very nature slack and inert, but it could be very active if engaged in studying and meditating; so, referring to the topic that stresses the loss of physical strenght in old age (it's the *heroic-conception argument*), Cato answers that each age has enough virtues and strenghts to go on in the activities that suit it; loss of physical strenght would depend often on vices of youth, not on a feebleness typical of old age.

Then, considering the argument that points on the absence of sensual pleasures in old age (it's the *poets argument*), Cato answers that not only it is a very good thing to be freed from them, because the more they are intense and prolonged, the more the light of reason is switched off, but that old age too has its moderate pleasures.

Finally, Cato tackles the question of the proximity between old age and death (it is the *tragic argument*), insisting on soul immortality and on the importance of a virile acceptance of death.

Clearly, the influence of a long tradition emerges in Cicero's work, a tradition which was probably already flourishing at Plato's time and that gained more credit thereafter. But we must

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remember the underlying ideological reasons that inspired Cicero, a member of the conservative senatorial class: Cato incarnates the model of the old wise moderate man that guarantees the continuity of tradition and the sacrality of the state against the rashness of young self made men. So, Cicero's intent was to write an *apologia* of an aristocratic *senectus*, instrumental to the defence of the senatorial class.

The ciceronian teaching about a wise *senectus* influences particularly Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius*; here we find also the platonic theme of the pleasure that old people take from conversation, a topic present in Cicero's *De senectute*. Seneca's writing to Lucilius is a sort of conversation: the philosopher is now a *senex* who doesn't deny, especially at the very beginning of his letters, the physical diseases characteristic of old age, but at the same time he depicts them with a little bit of self-irony; moreover, he affirms that *senectus* has strengthened him against adversities.<sup>19</sup>

On the other side, Seneca is sometimes ambiguous: in one place,<sup>20</sup> for example, he follows Epicurus criticizing old people's activism, but in another he theorizes an independent and positive *senectus*, not based upon teachings and judgments of other philosophers but able to find by itself the way to truth.<sup>21</sup> And while in some places Seneca celebrates old age as a *flos animi*<sup>22</sup>, in others he considers it as an *adiaphoron*<sup>23</sup> that requires of everyone, because of its inescapability, to prepare by meditation.

In any case, when we approach the first two centuries of the roman empire, we have a clear evidence that something is changing in the way men conceive themselves, and consequently in their conception of old age; if we compare, for example, the role of the *pater familias* during the Republic and during the Empire, we note that in this second period a completely new, intimate tie between a wife and her husband emerges, a tie well attested, for example, by Pliny's letters to his wife.<sup>24</sup> And we have to make attention also to another, related important change:

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political engagement now appears more as a choice than as a duty directly connected to the belonging to the upper class: Seneca says to Lucilius that it's better to retire early from political life, to have enough time for practicing philosophy. This change is strictly connected to the new political situation created by the transition to the imperial system of government: now a bureaucracy of officials deprives the old aristocracy of his political power. Consequently, old age becomes for the roman *senior* a period of forced political inactivity to which it is necessary to give a new sense; more generally, the roman man that lives in this period of crisis has to reconsider entirely his public and private role, and philosophy helps him to reshape it.<sup>25</sup>

Stoicism is a sort of answer to the crisis which accompanies the transition to a new political and social situation; its austere moral anticipates on some aspects the rigour of Christian ethic, but of course there are many important differences; one of these concerns precisely the conception of old age, because in Christian ethic ageing acquires a new positive sense in virtue of a linear conception of time. Surely, the connection between wisdom and old age is well attested in the Old Testament ( *Leviticus*, 19,32, *The Book of Job* 32,33; *Psalmus* 92, and so on), though we find here also places in which it is not so strong (see the *Book of Wisdom* 4,8-9, where it is said that «a venerable old age is not measured by the number of years... true longevity is a life without stain»), and we meet also one place in which old age is associated with vice (it is the episode of Susan and the old Judges in the *Book of Daniel*).

More generally, ageing is considered in the Old Testament as a proof of divine benevolence (*Genesis* 11, 10-32) and as a privilege granted to the right man (*ibid*, 12, 2-3), but also as a time in which man can more probably arrive to the «wisdom of the heart», learning that his days are limited in number (*Psalmus* 90,12).

In the New Testament, we meet frequently wise old people, for example the parents of John the Baptist (*Luke* 1), or the old

Simeon and the old widow Hanna (ibid, 2), the phariseus Nicodemus (*Johannes*, 3 and 19), the apostle Peter and so on. Old age appears here, as it was for the stoic Senecas, a favourable time, but the reasons are different: ageing is now the moment in which men can better understand the deep, ultimate sense of life and the infinite mercy and benevolence of God.

To sum up, the connection between wisdom and old age seems to be the product of different factors, among which maybe the most ancient are the importance of practical, magical-religious knowledges (and, of course, of their transmission) for the survival and identification of a community; Stoicism and Christian ethic will give a new sense to this connection, replacing the practical–social meaning of old age with a more individualistic, existential one.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *La vieillesse*, Gallimard, Paris, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> On this topic S. de Beauvoir gives many examples, among which that of Aleutian people (the inhabitants of Aleutian Islands, part of Alaska): although their conditions of life are really precarious, a strong affection links together parents to their children, and old parents are object of great care by the children themselves.

<sup>3</sup>A. Archibald, *The Fragments of Minnermus. Text and Commentary*, Verlag, Stuttgart, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Euripides, *Heracle*, 637 ss.

<sup>5</sup>In the context of the tragedy, the criticism of old age pronounced by the chorus is functional to the exaltation of Heracles, the hero who has gained immortality winning Ade, the personification of *Geras*.

<sup>6</sup>We have only fragments of the text (*De anima*) in which Aristotle refers to this episode; it is Plutarch that attests, in *Consolation to Apollonius*, 27, the presence of the episode in Aristotle.

<sup>7</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1224-1237.

<sup>8</sup>Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Pythagora*, in *Vitae philosophorum*, Book VIII, 19.

<sup>9</sup>Plato, *Republic*, Book I, 328ss.

<sup>10</sup>Titus Lucretius Caro, *De rerum natura*, Book 3, 453- 454.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Z, 4-5, 1140a-b.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, Book IV, Δ, 1, 1121b.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, Book VIII, Θ, 3, 1156a.

<sup>14</sup>Of course, young people lived this situation of complete dependence with great anxiety and looked for spaces of evasion; this is why in Plauto's comedies we find sometimes old men ridiculized.

<sup>15</sup>Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Senectute*, Book IV, 9.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, Book II, 4.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, Book VI, 17.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, Book VII, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Lucius Anneus Seneca, *Epistles*, ep.104, 2-4.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, ep. 13, 17.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, ep. 30, 7

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, ep. 26,2.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, ep. 58,32; see also Seneca, *De vita beata*, Book 2,1.

<sup>24</sup>Pliny the Younger, *Epistles*, Book VI, letters 4 and 7, both addressed to his wife Calpurnia.

<sup>25</sup>On this argument, see M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol.3, *The care of the self*, Vintage Book, New York, 1988.

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