Practical Wisdom and Overall Life Satisfaction in Aging

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Too instrumental an approach to wellbeing ….has an unfortunate side-effect: it nurtures self-centeredness. For when people organize their lives to increase their happiness, they also, perhaps unwittingly, practice becoming self-absorbed[i]

Introduction

Is aging the time of our lives that is particularly conducive to the acquisition of wisdom? What are the characteristics of wise people, and who is to say what these characteristics are? Is wisdom to be equated with a more positive experience of aging or are other factors more important? In this paper I shall compare the findings of a series of studies in the field of Positive Psychology with certain philosophical reflections emanating from a phenomenological perspective and the perspective of virtue theory. Insights found in several psychological studies show that having a rich array of values, having the capacity to integrate cognition and emotion, being open to possibilities and being tolerant of uncertainty are qualities that lead to satisfying experiences of aging. There has been a 'moral-emotional correction' in the field of psychology that now finds moral emotions such as elevation and awe to be essential to functioning well. Yet what I have found in reflecting on these different approaches to the study of wisdom is that there is a need to find a way to express the experience that many people have of a quality of attention to, and appreciation of the world, that transcends the psychological focus on the satisfaction of needs and the search for happiness, what might be called a 'moral-emotional-'spiritual' correction' that takes the subject to another level.

1. Life Review Study: emergent values and measures of life satisfaction

I begin with the findings of an intensive qualitative life review study at Concordia University based on extensive interviews of 117 elderly retired middle class people, with a mean age of 74.[ii] The study examined the relation between expressed values found in the participants' life histories and reflections and the quality of their experience of aging as measured by the quality of emotional life, constancy of identity, sense of choice in life and their own views about whether they were happier or sadder than they had been in the past. Participants completed a detailed life history review in which they described themselves on major life dimensions such as education, occupation, finances, marital status, relationships, health, and level of present functioning. Within these dimensions participants were asked to discuss their history, their satisfactions, regrets, lessons learned, and possible alternative paths they might have taken as well as personal qualities they had. In detailed analyses of the interview transcripts and the findings of several questionnaires it was found that people varied in the number of values they expressed. Values were defined by the researchers as principles or qualities that were deemed important or desirable to put into practice.

To our surprise the main finding was that the total number of values predicted a better experience of aging. The classification of values along the lines of the major

ethical theories, the deontological, utilitarian, virtue based ethics and ethic of care did not distinguish individuals as we had expected. Additional contributors to the quality of aging were indicated by high scores on the capacity to tolerate uncertainty and the respondents' interest in engaging in difficult reflections on complex issues rather than avoiding complexity through simplification or other avoidance strategies.

We concluded that a positive experience of aging is associated both with having a wide range of values and with various cognitive and emotional capacities. It seems that in dealing with the ever changing complexity of people and life-situations having a wide range of values enables people to better adapt to the ongoing changes of aging, with loss of work and family roles and the loss of close friends, all occurring within the larger context of changing social and world contexts.

2. Further interpretations of relation between values and life satisfaction.

Three further studies at Concordia University pursued the question concerning the relation between values and aging. The first study, a doctoral dissertation by Tracy Lyster[iii] built on the findings of the Berlin Wisdom Project of Paul Baltes, who defined wisdom as "expertise in the meaning and conduct of life".[iv] Baltes identified five criteria of wisdom that combine cognitive and affective understanding: rich factual knowledge, rich procedural knowledge in dealing with life-problems, such as decision-making strategies, conflict-management skills, and the creation of alternative back-up plans. The remaining criteria included 'life-span contextualism', the awareness of the salience of different values at different points in life, 'value relativism', the understanding that the common good is composed of different, often conflicting, perspectives and, finally, the recognition and management of uncertainty.

Lyster made use of the nominator method to see whether people who had been nominated as wise by their peers, in this case a sample of 76 people, with a mean age of 72, did in fact display these components of wisdom. She found that,

> the development of wisdom consists of a process that encourages both a broadening and deepening of one's understanding of life and of human nature. Openness, by virtue of preventing premature closure (i.e., closed mindedness) broadens one's perspective and encourages development throughout life in multiple areas including cognitive, emotional, and perhaps spiritual domains.[v]

In addition to good scores on these five criteria of wisdom, other factors emerged: wise people showed a strong ability to integrate cognition and emotion in ways that indicate exceptional understanding of people and the capacity for empathy. They also showed greater involvement with people and interest in contributing to their wellbeing, and it was found that people with higher wisdom scores had a higher degree of satisfaction with their lives. [vi]

The complexity of the concept of wisdom was further demonstrated in a third study at Concordia University, the Concordia Longitudinal Retirement Study, of Andrew

Burr,[vii] a three-year study of 133 retirees based on Schwartz' value theory, a widely used model that consists in ten universal values extracted from extensive revues of the literature on values. [viii] The ten values that Schwartz found repeatedly emphasized in most cultures are: benevolence, universalism (concern for the well being of all), self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, tradition and conformity. These values are thought of as responses to three types of need, biological needs, needs for coordinated social interaction and needs for group survival. In the Concordia study the aim was to determine which of Schwartz' ten values would be correlated with higher levels of emotional well-being as determined by a questionnaire that assessed the number of positive and negative emotions that people had experienced in the weeks prior to each yearly review of their experience of retirement. The results of the study indicate that in addition to factors such as gender, health and financial status, there was a significant correlation between certain values and the experience of positive emotion. Openness to change, flexibility and creativity in thought, as well as capacity for independent thinking as well as the capacity for pleasure augured well in comparison to values such as concern for status, power and the admiration of others.[ix] As in the studies cited above certain values are found to be useful tools, or means, to the achievement of a more positive experience of aging. One benefit of these studies is the development of an empirical method for measuring wisdom that makes possible statistically significant correlations with other dimensions of human experience such as wellbeing and the positive experience of aging that are also measured empirically.

3. Flow theory and the role of values and life satisfaction in aging.

It is interesting to compare these findings with earlier extensive studies by Csikszentmihalyi who developed the Experience Sampling Method[x] to measure the quality of experience, and who found, with the use of this method, that the highest quality of experience is characterized by what he called the state of 'flow'.[xi] Csikszentmihalyi coined the term 'flow' to describe the quality of consciousness that individuals experience when they are engaged in activities that challenge their skills to a level that keeps them 'beyond boredom and anxiety'. The activities which produce this state of flow are called 'autotelic' activities which are engaged in for their own sake primarily, with the emphasis on the specific challenges to specific skills, rather than on extrinsic rewards of the activity such as money, fame, or other aims such as to please others, and so on. When people are in a state of flow they "concentrate on a limited stimulus field, forget personal problems, lose their sense of time and of themselves, feel competent and in control, and have a sense of harmony and union with their surroundings". [xii] Flow theory is useful for identifying strategies to improve the quality of experience, and Csikszentmihalyi has claimed that any situation can be turned into a flow situation by identifying some of the many skills that can be used and challenged in it. In order to transform boring or anxiety producing situations into occasions to experience flow it is necessary either to restructure the situation itself, introducing activities or equipment that can be used at increasingly difficult levels, chess boards, computers, and so on, or to restructure one's interpretation of the situation so as to find creative ways to challenge skills. The paradigm case of such a frame shift is found in Csikszentmihalyi's of a prisoner of war in solitary confinement who managed to pretend that they were walking to America by counting out the paces in

their cell and calculating how many steps it would take to walk from Europe, across the ocean, to freedom in America.[xiii]

Flow theory provides remarkably clear answers to questions such as 'how ought we to live?', 'what should we do?' and 'how can we alter our attitudes and behavior so as to achieve more satisfaction in life?' The emphasis in all these studies is on how to satisfy our needs and how to achieve a positive experience of aging. These studies show that positive emotions and a positive experience of aging can be achieved with the cultivation of cognitive and emotional skills. In this respect they contribute to the view of the importance of emotions for a positive experience of aging. Emotions are no longer construed as passive responses or, worse, irrational incursions into the life reason, but rather, as active structures of experience that deserve attention and cultivation.

4. The 'moral-emotional correction'

So far, however, little has been shown about the moral dimension of wisdom. The positive experience of aging in these studies is associated with certain skills and aptitudes whose value is primarily prudential: it is in one's interest to cultivate values of openness and creativity vis à vis uncertainty, and to manage one's emotions reframing situations, and, in addition, it probably benefits others. It is for this reason that Jonathan Haidt's comprehensive study of the moral emotions is of interest in filling out the picture of wisdom.[xiv] Haidt has argued that one of the positive emotions that clearly qualifies as a moral emotion is the emotion of elevation.[xv] Elevation is an important moral emotion, as we shall see further on, insofar as it elicits a desire to become a better person and 'seems to open one's heart not only to the person who triggered the feeling but to other people as well." "Many people report being deeply moved simply by hearing stories about acts of kindness and charity.[xvi] The idea that emotion forms the basis of the moral response represents an important shift in the psychology of morality which had been dominated for many years by overemphasis on the cognitive models of Piaget and Kohlberg and overemphasis on the role of needs in human motivation. Gradually the 'moral-emotional correction' took place in psychology with the work of Jerome Kagan who had found, in his work on children, that emotional states form the basis for moral judgment, with reason operating as a post-hoc rationalization.[xvii] In Haidt's view moral judgments are based on 'quick gut feelings, or affectively laden intuitions." Hence his use of the term 'the moral-emotional correction' in psychology.

Philosophers writing in the tradition of Aristotelian virtue theory such as Martha Nussbaum[xviii], Rosalind Hursthouse[xix], Nancy Sherman[xx] and others, have a different view of the relation between cognition and affect in moral life. In their view emotions are intentional states that are 'constituted' by beliefs. Emotions are thus both cognitive and affective states of mind. On this view emotions are not irrational accompaniments, or worse, usurpers of reason, but are, rather, states of mind focused on certain objects, or physical and mental experiences, that are identifiable by the beliefs that compose them. Thus our motivation to act can be characterized as 'deliberative desire' or 'desiderative deliberation' since cognition forms a part of every emotion.[xxi] Moral development consists not in formulating certain abstract moral principles to be applied by reason to

particular situations and carried out by the will, so much as in the cultivation of appropriate emotions and desires through critical reflection on the beliefs that constitute the emotions. Despite these differences in the understanding of emotion both the psychological and the ethical view of moral emotions represent an important shift away from a view of moral life based on abstract reason alone. In both approaches moral emotions can, and should be, cultivated. Haidt's claim that emotions 'do a tremendous amount of work in the creation and daily functioning of human morality'[xxii] enriches our understanding of moral life and complements the shift in ethical theory toward an 'emotional-moral correction' found to be necessary in that field as well.

5. The moral-emotional-'spiritual' correction

We have seen, so far, that psychological studies focused on the positive experience of aging need to be complemented with accounts of the importance of the moral emotions since we know that excellent human lives are not entirely focused on the satisfaction of needs, and we are coming to understand that moral life is not merely a matter of applying rational principles to situations. Moral emotions such as 'elevation' enable us to grasp, and be moved by, moral values as they are expressed in the actions of people we admire and as we come to enact them in our own lives. From the moral point of view something is good, not because we desire it, rather we desire it because it is good. The shift away from need and desire to appreciation of what has value independent of our needs is the key difference between psychological studies aimed as finding out what people need and what fulfills their desires. The moral question is whether something is worth desiring. The moral frame of mind enables us to select the ends worth pursuing and the desires worth cultivating.

But we can go one step further in our discussion of the moral emotions and add what I call a 'moral-emotional-'spiritual' correction' to our understanding of the possibilities of living well. The psychologist George Vaillant, noted for his extensive studies of Alcoholism, has argued in his recent book, Spiritual Evolution,[xxiii] for the importance and scientific credibility of having faith in some 'higher dimension' as a source of genuine insight which can be neurologically, distinguished from mere madness.[xxiv] One of the bases for this ambitious claim is that we can clearly distinguish people who experience 'genuine spiritual' insights from those who are delusional, on the basis of the kinds of lives they lead. When supposedly 'spiritual insights' 'show persistent positive aftereffects' such as continued experiences of the emotions of awe, love and joy, this can be construed as a sign of something that is not pathological, but something that we should take seriously and pay closer attention to. [xxv] In making this claim Vaillant cites the work of Andrew Newburg who studied the brains of advanced Tibetan meditators. Newburg claims that:

> The altered states of consciousness described by mystics and saints are not the involuntary results of the delusional fanatic or the chemical misfiring of a neurologically damaged brain. Instead, the psychic alterations of the Buddhist meditator are brought about when the meditator voluntarily focuses his attention on a sacred image or mantra or on the mood of loving-kindness; thereby the

> meditator liberates his limbic brain from the constraining effects of attention to external reality by the 'orientation association area.'"[xxvi]

The worry about the 'irrationality' of the emotions, and worse, the delusional 'madness' of those with a sense of the transcendent should be put to rest by these, and numerous other studies, in psychology, neurology and ethical theory, even if it means being willing to entertain the possibility that there are dimensions of the world, independent of our making, that legitimately call forth a sense of awe and appreciation quite apart from anything related to the fulfillment of human needs. I recommend metaphysical agnosticism, or, in psychological terms, openness to experience and tolerance of uncertainty, the values of our wise older people, about the status of these awe-inspiring aspects of reality. One need not be absolutely certain about the grounding of these sources of meaning to benefit from them. And while this is a 'new' view in relation to modern developments in psychology and philosophy, it is an 'old' view in relation to pre-modern thought.

> [Nearly all the older philosophical traditions and religious traditions] argue, in one way or another that wellbeing happens at two levels. The first might be called 'lower flourishing', borrowing an expression from the philosopher Charles Taylor (2007). Lower flourishing is thriving in the everyday. It is having friends, a happy family, fulfilling employment, pleasurable leisure. … Working on these separate parts with the aim of building a steady portfolio of satisfactions, is what contemporary happiness movements encourage us to do. … These things are all good. But lower flourishing used to be only half the story. The second level is what Taylor calls 'higher flourishing'. It is concerned with the larger perspective on life…. It provides a sense of intrinsic meaning or overall direction or deeper purpose…. It is not just a concern with the piecemeal constituents of a good life, but a love of the good itself and a search for that good in life.[xxvii]

The theme of attentiveness to higher or deeper meaning, what I have called the 'emotional-moral-spiritual' correction' has been developed in a very interesting way by the philosopher David Cooper whose recent book A Philosophy of Gardens is devoted to the task of explaining the meaning of gardens.[xxviii] What could it mean to say that gardens have meaning? And how might this be relevant to the question of wisdom in aging? Cooper provides an insightful account of what it is for something to have meaning in the 'deeper' sense. Following Wittgenstein's remark in the Philosophical Investigations, §560,[xxix] that to understand meaning you need to look for what counts, in our uses and practices, as an explanation of the meaning of something, Cooper claims that "to explain the meaning of any item is always to relate it to what is either larger than, or outside, itself - to what is, in one or other of these respects, 'beyond itself' in relation to some appropriate context.[xxx] The significance of a musical phrase is given by showing "how it contributes to the effect of the whole piece".[xxxi] Now the notion of an appropriate reference to a larger context is a normative notion. It takes experience and judgment to know which context supplies the meaning of something. "To explain the meaning of an item is to show how the item is suited to, or legitimate, or apt for, communicating, expressing, or standing for something, or contributing to something, for being employed

in a certain way, and so on."[xxxii] Just how large a context is necessary to grasp deeper meaning is also a matter of judgment. "Explanations of meaning refer us to what philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Wittgenstein have called the human 'life-world', human 'forms of life', or simply human 'Life'"[xxxiii]. Wittgenstein has shown that human beings live their lives within the context of innumerable, continuously evolving, specialized 'forms of life', which form the tacit backdrop of most meaning. Some forms of life are only intelligible to experienced practitioners engaged in these forms of life.[xxxiv] We can begin to see that there might be larger dimensions of meaning that are overlooked when people focus on the satisfaction of needs. The practices of law, medicine, teaching, parenting, sports and entertainment depend upon specific meanings embedded within them that cannot be reduced to the fulfillment of human needs without an important loss of meaning. When we engage in these practices with an understanding of their 'point' or their deeper meaning we do not see them merely as means for meeting our biological, social, financial and other needs.[xxxv]

To return to Cooper's meaning of gardens, Cooper claims that in addition to the ordinary meanings that people attach to gardens, the expressive, or instrumental or associative meanings there is also the meaning of The Garden, something not reducible to these more prosaic meanings. To explain this unusual idea Cooper relies on Nelson's Goodman's notion of exemplification. An item exemplifies a property when it both refers to a property and at the same time it possesses the property it refers to. A person's attitude might exemplify humility, or honesty in this way. This is an elusive idea that Plato described as the 'participation' of individual qualities in the ideals Forms. Kant expressed it as the way in which something 'bodies forth' a property such as beauty. The Romantics attempted to express something similar with the notion of a 'symbol' by which what is symbolized is 'fused with' what symbolizes it. Everything that is precious has such a quality. All of these versions of the explication of this kind of meaning imply that certain experiences and attitudes put us in emotional 'contact' with sources of meaning that transcend our own creations. [xxxvi] Symbolic meaning, or epiphanic meaning, …"is indispensable to enabling a sense for, an attunement to, what it symbolizes."[xxxvii] Yet a universe viewed as a bundle of neutral, or meaningless events will not 'body forth' anything exempt emptiness. To be open to the experience of epiphany is to be open to the notion that something 'spiritual' or 'intrinsically valuable' shows itself.[xxxviii]

Since we are on fragile epistemological ground here, it is important to note that Cooper sees the job of the phenomenologist, not as mounting metaphysical arguments about the nature of the universe so much as interpreting experience and of providing concepts with which to elucidate what inspires people. [xxxix] These concepts take us beyond the usual list of motivations related to the satisfaction of physical and psychological needs. Charles Taylor has argued that in order to sustain the motivation to pursue the very high ideals of our society for the eradication of injustice, poverty and the defense of human rights we must have such 'contact' with these 'epiphanic' meanings, otherwise we fall back, inevitably, on concern with our needs and satisfactions, and we fail to go the distance. [xl] A fascinating account of a woman learning to open up to such epiphanic meaning is given by Heather Menzies, in her moving description of the time she gave to the care of her Alzheimer sick mother.[xli]

So what is the meaning of The Garden? And why is this relevant to the study of aging? The Garden, for many, is an epiphanic experience of working with our hands in relation to something that responds to our ministrations but which we cannot fully control, nor fully understand. We can marvel at the 'mystery' of life that emerges as a result of our work. This is not, of course, a recommendation that to age well one must work in The Garden, or even in 'a' garden for that matter. Cooper's careful explication of the epiphanic experience of 'The Garden' depends on no grand metaphysical claims, but confines itself to what many human beings experience with great frequency in countless areas of experience. The clue to wisdom in aging, if clue there is, is to be found in the idea that it is not only the satisfaction of individual biological, emotional and social needs that we have to consider to get a sense of wisdom, but an openness to a dimension of life that is not focused on self at all, but on something entirely other, having life, vitality and meaning of its own. With appropriate attention to otherness, in all its infinite manifestations and variations, we return to the smaller world of our biological and social needs without the claustrophobia attendant on the usual concerns with whether or not we are happy or satisfied with life. That question assumes diminished importance.[xlii]

Conclusion

I have presented Cooper's phenomenological interpretation of the meaning of 'The Garden' to illustrate what I have called 'the emotional-moral-'spiritual' correction', in the studies of aging. We have seen in the psychological studies cited above that those who are more flexible and open to experience, and who display are large range of values, seem to have a more positive experience of aging. However the satisfaction of need, while clearly a part of wisdom, does not count as the most important part. To understand the potential we have for wisdom we have to allow ourselves to be open to larger possibilities of meaning that can be explicated without metaphysics by staying within the domain of phenomenology. The merits of this kind of explication of experience are best assessed by those whose experience 'resonates' with the explication, providing they have not been too daunted by 'scientism' in psychology and philosophy. The skeptical foundation of much social science and much modern philosophy has created a serious barrier to investigations of the meaning certain moral emotions such as awe, elevation and appreciation.

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