

REVIEW

The ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch and Galen on the elderly

A. Diamandopoulos

EKPA, Louros Foundation, Greece

For the sake of brevity, we will deal here with a very small fraction of the texts of ancient Greek writers on Old Age, in a period of roughly 600 years between the 5th century BC and the 2nd century AD. And geographically also, the area covered is but a negligent fraction of the globe.

Aim. To comment on a very small fraction of the texts of ancient Greek writers on Old Age, in a period of roughly 600 years between the 5th century BC and the 2nd century AD.

Materials and methods. We used extracts from the writings of Plato (*The Republic*), Aristotle (*De Anima*), Plutarch (*Vitae Parallelae, Moralia*) and Galen (*De Marcore Liber*).

Results. Plato presents two sides of the stance of elderly, i.e. continuity (to continue to do what they were doing in their active years), and disengagement (describes the tendency after some age to go away from your previous straggles and to contemplate on the eternal values of spirituality). Aristotle explains why in old age death is painless, like the shutting out of a tiny feeble flame. Plutarch elaborates extensively on the need to accumulate physical and mental qualifications when we are young so that we can be able to consume them later, in our old age. He declares that “*although old age has much to be shameful of, at least let us not to add the disgrace of wickedness*”. Finally, the social role of each person shall not mutate with age. Even bees do not become drones when they age. Galen supports the view that ageing is inevitable, although this is only confirmed by experience and not by science.

Conclusions. According to the cited authors it could be said that it is the cordial acceptance by elders of the limitations of age the term that will ensure their cordial acceptance by individuals of all ages living in society.

Key words: Elderly, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Galen

INTRODUCTION

Let's start with two Greek poems, one modern and one ancient to give the stigma of my contribution which embodies the aphorism “*It is not how old you are, it is how you are old*”¹. These two poems in juxtaposition parallel the two Janus' like faces of Old Age.

The first poem is:

The Souls of Old Men

Inside their worn, tattered bodies

dwell the souls of old men.

How unhappy the poor things are

and how bored by the pathetic life they live.

How they tremble for fear of losing that life, and how much they love it, those befuddled and contradictory souls, sitting – half comic and half tragic –

inside their old, threadbare skins

written by Constantinos Kavafys at the first half of the 20th century².

And the second one is the final comments by Chorus in the tragedy “*Antigone*”³: “*The most important thing in*

■ Received: December 29, 2016 - Accepted: November 14, 2017

■ Correspondence: Athanasios Diamandopoulos, EKPA, Louros Foundation, St. Andrew Street, Romanou vilage, Patras, Greece 26 500 - E-mail: 1453295@gmail.com

man's happiness is good judgement and he must not treat with disdain the works of the gods. The arrogant pay for their big proud words with great downfalls and it is only then, in their old age that they gain wisdom!", written by Sophocles in the 5th century AD.

Having used manifolds the term Old Age, let us define when does it start? Again, the boundaries are unclear. The results of limited research shows that the average lifespan in Classical Greece was about 25 years, if assuming the date of birth as a benchmark, but increased to up to about 42 years after adulthood, due to high infant mortality⁴. In the Roman period, it was calculated at 72 years⁵. It follows therefore that, in the society during the period under review, the old were younger and fewer than in our own era, and there were many young people to care for them. To document my thesis, I have chosen extracts from the writings of three famous philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch) and a famous doctor (Galen) as representatives of how this society was viewing the elderly. The choice of the extracts tried to compromise the twin impulses of the historian, to archive and to narrate, which are often in tension. The archivist wants to collect and preserve, indiscriminately and exhaustively, the artifacts of history. The narrator, by contrast, seeks to tell a story by emphasizing certain of those artifacts at the expense of others, judging, at least implicitly, which of them are significant and which are not⁶. Let us start with the ideas of Plato, presenting some small excerpts of his work *Politeia (The Republic)*, related to old age. In brief, Plato hints on the two different stances of aging. The continuity and the disengagement. With continuity he recalls the strife of some elders to continue to do what they were doing in their active years both as a means for staying robust and also for insisting that their previous efforts were not spent in vain. With disengagement he describes the tendency after some age to go away from your previous struggles, goals, achievements and to contemplate on the eternal values of spirituality⁷. He tries to compromise both stances in his famous description of The Escape and the Return of the Wise Old Man to the Cave^{8,9}. There, in an imaginary prison, were kept captured the minds of the many chain-bound from the superstitions and the conformities of the society. After ages of struggling the Old Man manages to escape in the pure light of the Wisdom. He is free from all conventions and ambitions. Just as the Emeriti Professors should be. And then Plato wonders if it is permitted to leave them there to contemplate. He decides that even against their inner will, as a public duty they should return back to the Cave as mentors to liberate the *hoi polloi* from the conventions and the social lies. Exactly as the Association of the Emeriti promises to do.

The role of the elderly as advisers was an accepted duty

in the Greek World as far as the Far East as documented an inscription on a Herôon in Afghanistan (<https://vi.scribd.com/.../Ai-Khanoum>). But let us be aware. We should not over-advise the younger provoking their anger. This was successfully expressed in a prayer by an unknown abbess in the 17th century "*Lord, thou knowest better than myself that I am growing older and will soon be old. [...] Keep me from becoming too talkative, and especially from the unfortunate habit of thinking that I must say something on every subject and at every opportunity. Release me from the idea that I must straighten out other peoples' affairs. With my immense treasure of experience and wisdom, it seems a pity not to let everybody partake of it. But thou knowest, Lord, that in the end I will need a few friends. Keep me reasonably gentle. I do not have the ambition to become a saint – it is so hard to live with some of them – but a harsh old person is one of the devil's masterpieces*"¹⁰. Plato then recalls Socrates view that wisdom is really is the "Knowing you do not know" and not gained before the age of 50. Similarly, Aeschines tells us that in the early democracy (before the 5th century) citizens over 50 years of age could speak first, and only after those had their say could younger men speak¹¹. However, according to a humane instruction by Plato the elderly should not be restricted in a life of everlasting sobriety. Because "*as iron became softer by fire old men become softer by wine – which they are allowed to drink more than the youths – and are not ashamed to sing in the company of friends, thus regaining their youth. Also they can speak about their experience while when somber they were embarrassed to do so. The young will also gain having the opportunity to listen to all*"¹². This merry old age cannot last for ever. In another passage, he makes an original parallelism: "*And old age gradually comes. And then we should quickly surrender, as in debt to life. Because if we delay this, Nature, like a debt collector, will pledge our vision, or hearing, or even both. And if he persists in delaying the payment of his debt and to continue living, she sends paralysis and senility. Until the gods take pity on him and relieve him with death*"¹³. Finally, he backs my initial statement by a discussion with his teacher: "*But I tell you Socrates; here there are gathered many who have about the same age as us. And they begin to complaining and feeling resentment because their old age has deprived them of women, drinking and fun. And they have aches and those around them laugh at them. And for all this, they blame old age. But I think they found the wrong reasons. Because if ageing was the cause, you and I should suffer from the same, given that we are now old. But yet we are happy. And I found Sophocles and asked him how he was getting on with women. He told me he is happy, as he is now relieved of the venerial*

passions that tormented him during his youth. Thus, I believe it is not old age, but character that is responsible. If you were a good and meek youth, you will have a good old age; if you were shrewish you will be an unhappy old man"¹⁴.

The second philosopher is his disciple, Aristotle. He makes a very clear distinction between the two modes of death similar to the two modes a fire is extinguished. Either from an external cause, and he calls it by extinction, or by just old age, the latter called by exhaustion. He elaborates further his parallelism explaining why in old age death is painless, like the shutting out of a tiny feeble flame. In an excerpt, he presages contemporary corneal transplants: *"If an old man received the eyes of a youth, he would see well. Because his soul and spirit are not damaged but only his sensory organs, as in disease and drunkenness, but the cause of this inability to sense is internal, while the spirit and soul remain unaffected"*¹⁵. More succinctly, he notes *"Illnesses are the companions of old age"*.

Proceeding to the commentary on the second historical unit, the 1st century AD, I have chosen to present some relevant excerpts from the oeuvre of a profound author of Late Antiquity, Plutarch. Repeating Plato's writings more eloquently, he tells us that the essential element for ensuring a good old age is a good youth. Apart from this common-sense remark, Plutarch notes that we should accumulate physical and mental qualifications when we are young so that we can be able to consume them later, in our old age. From the same viewpoint, he expresses the view that a happy, joyful and soulful character radiates so much inner pleasure that it will protect us against the self-pity of old age. A virtuoso on similes, he parallels this internal radiation with internal body heat. He correctly observes that it is this internal radiation that keeps people warm and not their various garments, which by their nature are thermally neutral, and contrary to what many people think, not heat them, but simply prevent the loss of their internal heat. Just like a lovely perfume will make even the poorest rags smell fragrant, while a septic stink will make even the most luxurious garments stink, our innate hilarity will allow us to avoid the sorrows of old age¹⁶. He comments on the malice that nests in the soul of man, like a wicked wife who poisons the soul of even socially successful people when they return to their home. Innate malice is actually even worse, as you can get a divorce from your wife, but not from the evil in your nature. In the end, his cry that *"although old age has much to be shameful of, at least let us not to add the disgrace of wickedness to be expected"*¹⁷. He concludes this series of reflections by saying that if you follow his advice and reach such an old age, then, without scorning any of the joys of life, you will not be their slave. You will rejoice in wealth as it

will give you the opportunity to be beneficent but also in poverty, since you will live a carefree life, without having to care for property. You will enjoy state offices, but will feel equally happy leading a private life. Plutarch begins with the main argument that the human mind is an organ that not only does not become useless over time, but improves, thanks to the wisdom of experience that is continuously added. The only thing that even war, which sweeps over everything like a torrent, cannot destroy is education. On the contrary, we ought to even amend the saying of Pericles, in his great oration over the Athenians who fell in war, that *"The love of honour alone never grows old, and in the useless time of old age the greatest pleasure is not, as some say, in gaining money, but in being honoured"* because that the same is even truer of the spirit of service to the community and the State, which persists to the end. He recalls that Simonides in his old age won prizes with his choruses, as the inscription in its last lines declares: *"but for his skill with the chorus great glory Simonides followed, Octogenarian child sprung from Leoprepes [his father's] seed"*¹⁸.

Finally, the social role of each person shall not mutate with age. Even bees do not become drones when they age¹⁹. Unlike some elderly politicians, who demand to sit at home inactive while taken care of by the state. There is no worse sin, he says, according to Cato, from a prominent politician withdrawing due to age and staying at home having fun with women's work or playing the farmer. Withdrawal from every sector of active participation is the worst attitude for the mental health of patients, one of the factors leading to depression, which is a predisposing factor for malignancies, and a safe way for those around you and society to get bored with you and avoid spending money, time and effort to treat you. This decline is paralleled with the fate of Paleros, the sacred vessel of the Athenians, which, after a brilliant career, ended up with its wood being used for kindling and small tools by anyone who came by. Let it not be thought that the crown of old glory is like the wreath of dried flowers on the head of old athletes. It needs some care to always stay fresh. Thus, former glories need some new activity to be renewed. Like the small wooden parts that maintainers use to replace rotten parts in the Delian ship so that it can always remain in good condition. Likewise, the elderly will always retain their glory, even if they offer just a few useful things to society. Since an old friend does not constantly need great gifts, but maintains his friendship through little reminders, like a smouldering fire that just needs some prodding to be kept alive¹⁹.

Having finished the presentation of a few excerpts from the works of Plutarch, I proceed to the most prolific medical writer of antiquity (and all time), Galen. In line

with these previous authors, he supports the view that ageing is inevitable, although this is only confirmed by experience and not by science²⁰, and mocks those who propose elixirs to combat it, saying “*It is said that ageing is inevitable. But a philosopher wrote a book when he was 40 years old, in which he provided advice on how to never get old. He lived until 80 years old, shriveled, with a pointed nose, twisted ears and sunken eyes. Everybody taunted with about how he used to tell others not to grow old, but he himself became very old. He later published a second edition of the book, which he called the “miraculous agelessness”. In this, he supported that, to avoid getting old, humans need a certain physique, as well as a certain diet. And he undertook to raise children from infancy onwards with these diets, so that they would never grow old. However, he died before the children grew up so no one could check the accuracy of his statements*”. Copying Plato and Plutarch, Galen noted “*Solon too took the view that ageing requires much care. Not only food and clothing, but also a warm home and amenities. It is like a harsh winter. Like a good governor, who supplies the city with goods for the winter in good time, man should accumulate all that is necessary from his youth, for when he gets old*”.

I will try to summarize now how these teachings of the ancient philosophers and physicians are useful for the behavior of the younger towards the elderly. Apart from the respect that is somehow required by the younger, it should be understood that the continued inclusion of elders in social affairs is also actually to their advantage. Their experience and the lack of overenthusiastic reactions will prove equally beneficial with their own courage. But they also benefit selfishly, since they will inevitably reach the position of these elders at some point and a society that has learned to respect the elderly will treat them well too. However, the greatest value of the ancients' thoughts lies in the acceptance of ageing as a normal progression of life without the current frenzy about its abolishment at all costs. And also in the analysis of the responsibility of the elderly themselves. They cannot demand respect and acceptance simply because they have grown old. Only a pension is awarded *ipso facto*, although even this is disputed today! They cannot argue that the greatest achievement of their lives is that they did not die earlier and are therefore entitled to primacy. A proper life, from youth onwards, endows the individual with the necessary reserves for old age. And only if the years gone by have provided the expected wisdom does the demand for participation of the elderly in their excessive healthcare costs justified. In conclusion, it could be said that it is

the cordial acceptance by elders of the limitations of age the term that will ensure their cordial acceptance by individuals of all ages living in society.

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