Plato's Theory of Aging

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Plato's writings express a positive attitude toward elderly people. But do his writings also show a serious theoretical interest in issues of aging? We approach this question by comparing what Plato says about aging to major theoretical issues in gerontology. We argue that many of Plato's subtler observations of the behavior of elderly people and many of his ideas about aging anticipate specific research and theoretical advances in contemporary gerontology. We compare passages in Plato's works to the debate between activity and disengagement theories, the concepts of continuity and gerotranscendence, Robert Butler's discovery of "the life review," and recent theories of old age wisdom. Plato's anticipation of these ideas and issues related to them suggests that his writings may contain still other major insights into aging which are not yet articulated in gerontology. We suggest three possibilities.

KEY WORDS: Plato; theories of aging; life review; wisdom.

INTRODUCTION

Few students of Plato's writings would deny his respect for old age. The ideal state he proposes in The Republic, for example, is distinctly gerontocratic (Plato, 1956a). Yet Plato's observations of aging, and his theoretical ideas about it, have not been examined in the light of contemporary gerontological theory. Plato's observations of elderly people, and specific theoretical issues of aging he engages, anticipate several major developments in contemporary gerontology. Passages primarily in Republic I and the Apology anticipate three major issues in contemporary gerontology (1) the debate between theories of aging, (2) life review, and (3) the nature of old age wisdom.

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ACTIVITY, CONTINUITY, DISENGAGEMENT, AND GEROTRANSCENDENCE

Gerontological theories exist to explain the behavior of elderly people. In this effort, two contending theoretical perspectives have developed. One of these is represented in early gerontology by the “activity theory” (Havighurst, Neugarten & Tobin, 1968), and, more recently, by the “continuity theory” (Atchley, 1994, 1999). The view of this perspective is that in late life the inner desire is still intense to continue with the activities, relationships and values of middle age life. If an aging person withdraws from former relationships and activities to a degree that is discontinuous with previous lifestyle, the explanation will lie in “external causes” such as, architectural barriers, social rejection, and declining health (Moody, 2000) which place limitations on the aging person’s ability to maintain earlier activities and relationships.

The other major perspective represented in early gerontology is the “dissengagement theory” (Cumming & Henry, 1961), and more recently the theory of “gerotranscendence” (Tornstam, 1989). This view asserts that withdrawal behavior in the elderly reflects a number of inner developmental changes exemplified by diminished interest in the agendas of middle life, and the awakening of a hitherto dormant need for metaphysical contemplation and reflective examination of self. In one version of this general view, the characteristic psychological development of elderly men is said to move from an inner orientation which is “causal” (in which they strive to achieve their goals in the world through control of efficient cause and effect) to a regressive “magical” orientation in which they seek control through such means as observance of sacred ritual, manipulation of tribal symbols, and invocation of the gods (Guttman, 1976, 1987).

The contemporary tension between these perspectives is foreshadowed in Plato’s representations of elderly people as seen in the opening pages of the Republic, where Plato describes a memorable encounter between Socrates and the elderly Cephalus. Cephalus’ withdrawal from earlier activities and interests is pointed out. Cephalus does not go to the city as often as before and no longer pursues many of his former pleasures. His explanation that he would like to go to the city more often but is no longer strong enough is consistent with the activity-continuity perspective. Plato quickly goes beyond this explanation, describing Cephalus not only as an elderly person who is physically withdrawn, but also as one whose goals and preoccupations have undergone a qualitative change. For example, Cephalus is clearly a man who has accumulated much wealth through his own efforts. However, in his conversation with Socrates he expresses no continuing interest in business or moneymaking. When asked to explain the secret of a happy old age, Cephalus attributes it not to a life of worldly achievement, but to cultivating the right inner dispositions of temperance and tranquility of mind, which allow him to transcend the many painful aspects of age of which others
complain. This would be unexpected from the point of view of the activity-continuity perspective. So, if we are to believe this part of his account, Cephalus has not only experienced a decline in physical strength, but also is inwardly detached from and has transcended many of the values which have priority among younger people.

It is not easy to see how the activity-continuity and the disengagement-gerotranscendence perspectives can be reconciled. They differ, for example, on the factual question of whether the process of growing old does or does not include a metamorphic shift in interest and perspective postulated by the disengagement theory, or gerotranscendence postulated by Tornstam.

Although it seems clear that Plato recognizes these opposite perspectives on late life behavior, he does not present arguments to confirm one and exclude the other. But he does take an explicit normative position related to the factual issues. The issue is this: if it is true that aging people experience a desire to withdraw from the toil of active social engagement and retire to a purely contemplative life, are they morally free to do so? In Republic VII Plato speaks of the citizens who have escaped from the cave and sojourned successfully among the Forms. (According to the scheme Plato lays out, they will be at least fifty years old.) In an exchange between Socrates and Glaucon, the question arises what these blessed, intellectually and morally mature former prisoners should do next:

"and when they have ascended and properly seen, we must never allow what is allowed now."

"What is that?" he asked.

"To stay there," I said, and not descend again to those prisoners and share their troubles and their honors, whether they are worth having or not."

"What!" said he. Are you to wrong them and to make them live badly when they might live better?" (519D)

Plato acknowledges the likelihood that citizens who have become sages may prefer a life of disengagement in their later years, but does not consider it a morally acceptable path.

By forgoing a resolution of the facts in favor of a normative position, Plato suggests that seeking a settlement of the factual questions is futile, and that the issue is ultimately a normative one, or at least that in this matter the factual and the normative cannot be disentangled. This is an issue that contemporary gerontology should take seriously. The possibility that key factual claims at issue between the two dominant gerontological theories cannot be addressed in isolation from related normative issues has not been sufficiently considered in contemporary gerontology.

The important theoretical concept of continuity has recently been defended in Robert Atchley’s continuity theory (Atchley, 1999). The theory calls attention to and attempts to explain the sometimes surprising degree of consistency of behavior
that older adults maintain in the face of significant changes in health, work roles, living arrangements and social relationships. It postulates a fundamental adaptive drive toward meeting basic needs, and, beyond basic needs, toward experiencing positive meaning and personal satisfaction with life. According to Atchley, in elderly people this drive takes as its main strategy adherence to established, proven patterns of thinking and behaving, including persistence in pursuit of long standing personal goals. Such established behaviors are tried and true paths to meeting one’s needs and to personal satisfactions.

This concept, or something close to it, is anticipated in an important passage in Plato’s *Apology*. After being convicted, but before sentencing, Socrates considers the possibility that the jury may spare his life if he will cease his long-acquainted practice of philosophically examining fellow Athenians. Remarkably, Socrates declares that he would continue with his philosophical quest even if it were to mean forfeiting his life. This passage imputes to Socrates a powerful motivation to maintain consistency with his past life, even under a dire change of circumstance. It is true that Plato, concerned with a philosophical exposition of Socrates’ position, represents his remarkable persistence in moral and religious terms (by continuing his quest he would be continuing the work commanded by the god). But this is compatible with the survival drive postulated by the continuity theory, because survival and meeting basic needs can reasonably be conceived in a way that allows such moral and spiritual requirements to have priority.

Plato’s use of something like the concept of continuity can also help illuminate another otherwise anomalous theme in the *Apology*. This is the remarkable, almost unbelievable, account Socrates gives of why the death sentence does not augur harm to him. He has earlier explained to the jury that, since boyhood, an inner voice, “something divine and spiritual,” has always spoken to him if he is about to do evil. Yet this inner voice gave no opposition to his coming to court, nor did it oppose any of his speeches in court. From this he concludes that what has transpired there, including his (presumably unjust) death sentence is “a wonderful thing.” This passage primarily describes the behavior of an aged man (Socrates) facing a traumatic change of circumstance. It makes a claim about how such a person will behave. Facing the drastically threatening future implied by his trial, Socrates has relied, rightly or wrongly, on a pattern of understanding which, he believes, has served him well in the past. He has responded to an extremely adverse personal development by maintaining continuity of belief and personal goals, much as Atchley’s theory would predict.

Plato’s representations of aging anticipate several key elements of the theory of gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1996). That theory postulates that elders may experience a kind of interested detachment from such midlife agendas as economic and social advancement. One aspect of the aging person’s shift to gerotranscendence is that a new metaperspective on life and the world emerges, characterized by a shift from a materialistic to a more metaphysical view of reality. Just such a shift from a materialistic, empiricist perspective to a more metaphysical outlook
concerned with underlying realities is what Plato sees as the outcome of the life-long struggle to escape from the darkness of the cave into the luminous realm of metaphysical ideas.

A second feature of the gerotranscendent elder, according to Tornstam, is an increased sense of identification with prior generations. Plato attributes a remarkable degree of that trait to Socrates in the Crito. Critio and Socrates' other friends have arranged an escape, giving Socrates a chance to save his life. Astoundingly, Socrates declines. This raises a problem for Socrates: how to explain to Critio and the others why he refuses to violate the ruling of the court. Plato accomplishes this through the literary personification of the traditional laws and their engagement in an imagined conversation with Socrates. Socrates states that the Laws have protected, raised and nurtured him, much as a parent does a child. It would be wrong to harm them by weakening their authority through disobedience, just as it would be wrong for a child to disobey or harm a parent. Throughout the passage Socrates expresses a profound regard for the value of the Laws. This is not an expression of regard for the technical letter of the law, but for the institutions and customs essential to any civil society. In short, the Laws represent the cultural infrastructure which prior generations have toiled to create.

Tornstam's theory also imputes to the aging person an increased sense of responsibility for future generations. This too, is a characteristic Plato attributes to aging people. The return of the aging sage to the cave as leader and mentor (described in Republic VII) expresses a concern for the coming generation consistent with that increased generational concern postulated by the theory. We have seen that Plato recognizes the possibility that the aging sage will have a desire to disengage, rather than return to civic service in the cave. Such disengagement, he says, is "what is allowed now." But we have to assume that the same elders who "now" disengage have within them the motivation to serve oncoming generations.

Another trait of the transcending elder, in Tornstam's view, is a diminished fear of death. This is a conspicuous feature of the elderly Socrates as Plato represents him in the dialogues, and is repeatedly expressed in the Apology. His relative equanimity in the face of death expressed there is even more pointedly attached to Socrates' age in the Crito, in which he implies that there is a special dishonor in clinging to life at his advanced age:

And will no one comment on the fact that an old man of (my) age, probably with only a short time left to live, should dare to cling so greedily to life, at the price of violating the most stringent laws? (53E)

THE LIFE REVIEW

In a classic essay Robert Butler introduced the theoretical concept of "the life review" to explain the increasing reminiscent behavior of elderly people (Butler, 1963; Merriam, 1980). It postulates a psychological developmental phenomenon
virtually universal in aging human beings, in which the aging person experiences an imperative to review and evaluate his or her life, working toward a settled judgment of the meaning and value of major decisions, relationships, failures and achievements. As a geriatric psychiatrist, Butler stressed the role of life review in “resolving unresolved conflicts” from the past; but it seems self evident that, if the process exists, it must also lead the aging individual to philosophical reflection. The “life review” theory is widely respected as one of the most original and influential contributions in contemporary gerontology.

Several characteristics Butler attributed to the process of life review are worth noting. First, he postulated that what precipitates the process of life review in an individual person is the recognition that death is near. Second, life review can sometimes lead to significant reversal of earlier judgment. In what follows we shall refer to this as life review reversal (not Butler’s words). Third, the life review imperative expresses itself in different ways in different people, and in the same person in different ways on different occasions, giving rise to great variety of manifestations. The life review of old age will be different than earlier ones to the extent that it addresses the meaning of a nearly completed human life, as seen from the retrospect of old age.

Plato anticipated many aspects of the contemporary discussion of life review. In his conversation with Cephalus, Socrates, after noting that Cephalus does not seem to attach much importance to money, asks whether Cephalus inherited his wealth, or acquired it through his own efforts. In response, Cephalus launches into an energetic autobiographical account of his past. He makes subtle distinctions between his own life and that of both his grandfather (who loved money too much) and his father (a spendthrift who dissipated his inheritance), judging himself to have lived according to the mean between those undesirable extremes. Although he looks back over his life, he explicitly disavows a kind of reminiscence consisting in mere nostalgia about lost youth. His backward look leads to thoughtful analysis of the worth of his past dispositions, actions, and life. Socrates wants to know what Cephalus considers to be the greatest good that he has derived from his wealth. To this Cephalus answers that it is something that one “could not make most people believe,” for it comes into view only in old age:

“Know well, Socrates,” said he, “that when a man faces the thought that he must die, he feels fear and anxiety about what did not trouble him before. Think of the tales they tell of the next world, how one who has done wrong here must have justice done him there. You may have laughed at them before, but then they begin to wrack your soul. ... And the man himself, whether from the weakness of old age, or because he is nearer, has a better view of them. Suspicion and fear fill him then, and he runs up his account, and looks to see if he has wronged anyone. If he finds many wrongs in his life, he often starts up out of his sleep, like a child, in terror, and lives with evil expectations; but one who has no wrong on his conscience has always hope beside him. ... I put down possession of wealth as worth a great deal, not to every man, but to the decent man. Never to deceive anyone ... never to be dishonest, not to be debtor to any god or any man for money, and so go to that world in fear. To possess money contributes a great share in avoiding all this ... I would put this as the chief thing for which wealth is most useful to a sensible man.” (Republic I, 330 D)
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This passage records the kind of urgent retrospective evaluation the concept of life review is meant to explain. It also alludes to Cephalus' theory that this special retrospective evaluation of life is triggered by a recognition of the reality of death, anticipating one of Butler's conjectures. Cephalus describes the memories that can occur in life review in much the same way Butler and many other gerontologists do, citing sudden, unbidden and disturbing memories of past actions, as well as the power of the process to unsettle one's entire outlook. The passage also alludes to not one but two life review reversals of judgment. First, there is the suggestion that to a "sensible" person, the meaning of money may change radically from youth to old age, so much so that "most people would not believe" Cephalus' late-life non-utilitarian valuation. More important is the possibility of reversing judgment of past behavior. One acts with abandon in youth, because tales of reward and punishment in the afterlife seem laughable. But when one "faces the thought that he must die," a very different perspective opens. Earlier conduct takes on a new importance, and offenses that before stayed in the background come disturbingly to light.

Is Plato presenting Cephalus' remarks as pointing to serious ideas about old age life review, or merely as rhetorical icebreaker for the impending discussion of justice? That he was aware of old age life review and of life review reversals of judgment, and attached importance to these things, is indicated not only by Cephalus but also by Plato's description, in Republic VII, of the guardian who has successfully achieved dialectical wisdom through long study of the Forms:

Let him be reminded of his first habitation, and what was wisdom in that place, and of his fellow prisoners there; don't you think he would bless himself for the change, and pity them?... Do you believe he would... envy those who were honored men or potentates among them? Would he not feel as Homer says, and heartily desire rather to be a serf of some landless man, and to endure anything in the world, rather than to opine as they did and to live in that way? (516C)

Plato's description of Socrates' behavior in the Apology also suggests that he was aware of the phenomenon of life review and attached importance to it. During his trial, which he knew could result in his death, Socrates is confronting charges of impiety when he suddenly waxes autobiographical, earnestly relating to the jury major decisions and turning points in his life. He learned of a divine Delphic pronouncement that no one is wiser than he. He sets out on a long effort to prove that what the god said was false, only to discover, much later, the true meaning of the god's words "No one is wiser than Socrates." This is accomplished over a long period of his life during which he carries out a succession of projects to prove that one or another person or group with a reputation for wisdom truly has wisdom. We should not picture these efforts as casual or perfunctory. Socrates represents them as keys to understanding his life, as "wanderings" that took a long time, and as having a Herculean nature. "You see I must show you my wanderings, as one who had my own Labors to prove the oracle was unimpeachable (22B)."
Each such project makes him new enemies as he exposes false pretensions to wisdom, and each ends in disillusionment as he discovers that his hopeful expectations for his most recent mentor-hero were misplaced. But over much time these failures lead to important discoveries which redeem the otherwise wasted effort. One of these is an understanding, in retrospect, of the true meaning of the oracle's words; namely, that Socrates did not assume, as all the others had, that the wisdom embodied in their narrow technical expertise extended to other areas. Thus, according to the familiar interpretation, he was wiser than others in "knowing he didn't know." This insight at last achieved, Socrates accepted the truth of the oracle's words and realized that all along he had been laboring under a divine mandate to live a life of philosophical inquiry.

What is of interest to us is that Plato represents Socrates in this crucial moment of his defense as offering to the jury the insight of an old man that is possible only in retrospect. The core of this part of his legal case is that this kind of knowledge, achieved through the process of an old man's life review, be accepted as true account of, and justification for, a way of living that can only seem offensive if taken apart from the context of retrospective insight. This, along with passages cited previously from Republic I 330D and Republic VII 516C, suggests that Plato was indeed aware of the process of life review in elderly people, and that he regarded it not only as an important psychological phenomenon, but as an important source of knowledge and understanding.

THE NATURE OF WISDOM

While most gerontological studies of wisdom are, or at least aim to be, empirical studies, they invariably involve philosophical issues about the correct definition or nature of wisdom (McKee & Barber, 1999). Several examples include overviews and extensive bibliographies, such as Sternberg (1990a), Taranto (1989), and Baltes and Staudinger (1993, 2000). We shall argue that several key ideas in such studies are anticipated in Plato's representations of old age wisdom.

That Plato associated the possibility (not certainty) of wisdom with age would hardly be questioned by readers of Republic VII, where the age-specific chronology for education guarantees that philosophical maturity is not achieved before age fifty, nor by those familiar with his depictions of Socrates as wise elder.

A consistent theme in recent gerontological studies of wisdom is that it is multidimensional, having cognitive, affective and volitional aspects (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Birren & Fischer, 1990; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Kramer, 2000; Sternberg, 1998, 1990 b; Labovsivie-Vief, 1990). It is clear from his characterization of wisdom in the passage from Republic VII (516B–517A) previously cited, and in Apology 19A–22A, that Plato also attributes these dimensions to wisdom. In Republic VII he states that the wise guardian would “feel sorry for” prisoners still living in the cave, anticipating not only the gerontological view that wisdom has
an affective component, but also one of the specific forms of affect most often associated with wisdom in gerontological literature, empathy (Clayton & Birren, 1980). The passage also imputes a life-changing conative state to the wise guardian, namely an unwillingness to live in the old way, and a corollary settled commitment to live according to the insights of dialectic. Additional conative issues are raised by the requirement that the mature philosopher affirm a life of public service by returning to the cave.

The description of Socrates’ achievement of wisdom in the Apology also represents wisdom as multidimensional and specifically as having cognitive, affective and conative aspects. Socrates also points to an affective component of his current (old age) perspective by relating to the jury that he is “ashamed” to reveal his earlier naivety in believing that the poets had wisdom. Both affective and conative states are implied by the following:

So I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, not wise with their wisdom nor ignorant with their ignorance, or to have what they have, both. I answered myself and the oracle, that it was best for me to be as I am. (23A)

This is the same outlook attributed to the philosopher king who is reminded of his former habitation, that wise elder who does not envy the potentates of the world, who deems himself “blessed” by a life of insight and is resolved to maintain it. Affective and conative states are also included in wisdom in the following passage specifically focusing on the wisdom of knowing what you don’t know: “For to fear death, gentlemen, is only to think you are wise when you are not; for it is to think you know what you don’t know” (27C). Rather than fear death, the wise person will have that equanimity of mind stressed by Cephalus.

In a prominent gerontological study of old age wisdom, Baltes and Smith identify the domain of wisdom as “problems of life” and “problems of the human condition.” Wisdom is knowing how to negotiate the distinctively human problems of life (Baltes & Smith, 1990). This is not meant to exclude theoretical understanding because achieving a measure of theoretical understanding is itself one of life’s major goals and because solutions to life’s practical problems often depend on it. This view of wisdom’s domain as problems of living appears repeatedly in Plato’s characterizations of wisdom. For example, his account of the struggle toward wisdom in the allegory of the cave begins by postulating a universal and fundamental aspect of the human condition: we begin in a state of slavery to unreal shadows and illusions. The haunting metaphor of chained prisoners and their pathetic belief in flickering shadows does not read plausibly as expressing everyman’s failure to solve abstract or merely academic problems. Surely it also represents our confusions and mistakes about life issues, such as accepting guidance from the right people, choosing a life partner, understanding what money and possessions can and cannot contribute to happiness, and so on. Similarly, the story of Socrates’ achievement of wisdom in the Apology is not a story of engagement with technical problems of masonry but with a human problem; that of struggling to understand
the limitations of human knowledge and the real meaning of a divine utterance. In their study, Baltes and Smith argue that wisdom is knowledge that "goes beyond the conventional knowledge core," and sometimes defies what seems like common sense within the framework of conventional knowledge. Plato repeatedly emphasizes the same idea. Cephalus, for example, has come to understand the main value of money in his life as something "most people would not believe." Then, later, in Republic VII, there is the uncomprehending, hostile reception given wise elder guardians upon their return to the cave. The theme is recapitulated in the Apology by the verdict at Socrates' trial.

CONCLUSION

The studies and theories in contemporary gerontology we have referred to in this article are complex and far-reaching. We cannot do justice to all their claims and findings in this essay. But what we have said so far should establish a number of striking similarities between Plato's observations and interpretations of elderly people and those of modern gerontology. Benefits of this article's study should be an increased appreciation for the quality of Plato's thought about old age and for the possibility that Plato's writings on age may contain other, potentially valuable observations and/or theoretical ideas about aging which have not yet appeared in scientific study of aging. We noted above that Plato's normative conclusion concerning the issues surrounding activity and disengagement perspectives suggests the need for a theory that incorporates normative as well as factual elements. Two additional examples follow. First, in Laws (665–666) Plato (1961b), Plato argues that society should have a "Chorus of Dionysus," by permitting the very old to have greater access to wine than will be permitted for younger people. The purpose of this dispensation is to induce that age group "which, by reason of age and intelligence, has the greatest influence," but which is also the most sensitive to embarrassment and thus the most taciturn, to sing and recite without inhibition, and thus share their inspired knowledge with younger people. This passage is reminiscent of Guttmann's finding of a return to orality in aging men (1976). But nothing in contemporary gerontology explores the further idea that a return to pleasure in late life can have a socially redeeming outcome in the form of greater access to useful opinions of the aged.

Second, gerontological theory might benefit from a closer study of the characteristics Plato ascribes to those mature philosophers who, through long study of the Forms, have achieved wisdom. It is clear that these sages represent Plato's ideal of human excellence. They represent the kind of ideal currently being developed as part of Baltes' and Staudinger's theory of wisdom (2000). Given the difficulty of framing a concept of human excellence, Plato's extensive descriptions of elderly sages may be a useful source. Described in the terms of contemporary gerontological theory, these individuals may be seen as "gerotranscendent" but
nevertheless required by Plato to dedicate themselves to public service. Beyond this, the elderly sages may have traits not contemplated in gerontological theory, because they have undergone a transformation through the study of the Forms, including the Form of the Good and its relation to all things. This experience gives them a higher, qualitatively different level of understanding than the prisoners they will be serving. A detailed study of their alleged higher understanding, and the nature of their call to public service, might suggest forms of personal development in old age beyond those countenanced by existing theories.

REFERENCES


