

THE EXPERIENCE OF AGING: A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE MEANING
OF TIME'S PASSING WITHIN THE CLASSICAL
AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

The provocation for this dissertation is a brief contention: aging is not synonymous with disease. This contention is a corrective reaction to the pervasive sensibility that aging *is* a disease, and which therefore casts the character of time's passing as a process of destruction. The upshot of this corrosive sensibility is that we are not aging well. Guided both by the belief that we can reconstruct the meaning of time's passing and an ameliorative sensibility to heal human suffering, the dissertation offers an alternative, more fruitful understanding of aging in which the character of time changes from a process of destruction into one of creative individual genesis. This is how we *should* experience time as time passes. Living in this way is an achievement: It is the activity of ferreting out the best possible ways in which to live so that life is deep and robust with concatenated meaning.

This philosophical diagnosis of aging is situated within two philosophical traditions—first, existentialism and, second and primarily, the pragmatism of classical American philosophers. The deceptively simple insights from existentialism at work in the dissertation are this: that we are ontologically free to choose our own persons and that our freedom resides in the ever-present possible. The next philosophical move that is made is the pragmatic turn: that, with a sense that there is always something better, we attend to *how* it is that we press into our possibilities by listening to and heeding experience so that we adapt and grow as individuals.

For
my father
Richard W. Stadelmann
and my teacher
John J. McDermott

With, near, next, like, from, towards, against, because, for, through
my sister
Greta

Whatever way my days decline,
I felt and feel, tho' left alone,
His being working in mine own,
The footsteps of his life in mine.
Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the
eyes of the dead, nor feed on the specters in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" part 2.32-41

The provocation for this dissertation is a brief contention: aging is not synonymous with disease. This contention is a corrective reaction to the pervasive sensibility that aging *is* a disease, and which therefore casts the character of time's passing as a process of destruction. The upshot of this corrosive sensibility is that we are not aging well; we waste time, we squander time, we lose time decaying and dying when all the while we could be living. This dissertation thus aims to reconstruct the meaning of time so that its passing means creative genesis, not destruction. Its aim is to show how we might use the time that we have so that time itself is pedagogical, so that the way in which we age speaks and provides nourishment for continuous human growth.

HISTORICALLY SITUATING THE WORK: CLASSICAL AMERICAN THOUGHT AND TRYING AS AN ONTOLOGY

This philosophical diagnosis of aging is situated within two philosophical traditions—first, existentialism and, second and primarily, the pragmatism of classical American philosophers. The deceptively simple insights from existentialism at work in the dissertation are this: that we are ontologically free to choose our own persons and that our freedom resides in the ever-present possible. The next philosophical move that is made is the pragmatic turn: that, with a sense that there is always something better, we attend to *how* it is that we press into our possibilities by listening to and heeding experience so that we adapt and grow as individuals.

According to classical American thought, intelligibility comes from inside individual experience: it is context that shapes philosophical inquiry. Novel experiences are generated by novel circumstances—by the “push and press of the cosmos,” as William James writes (“Present Dilemma” 362). Classical American philosophy emphasizes the need for a continuing dialectic between experience and reflection so that the meaning of our experiences is continually transformed. Thus, classical American thought is best understood as a pedagogy of *how* to take the world into our lives.

Like classical American philosophy itself, the dissertation takes for its point of departure the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant reframed the epistemological debate between the rationalists and the empiricists by asking not, as the proponents of these approaches asked, how we can bring ourselves to know the world, but by asking how it is that the world comes to be known by us. Contra Locke, says Kant, we are not passive

tabula rasas on which the world writes, and, contra Descartes, we cannot comprehend with reason a reality outside of our own experience. According to Kant, human beings interpret the world: we are the arbiters of meaning. Crucially, then, for this dissertation, time depends on the human being: time is a human construct.

Where both classical American philosophy and the dissertation depart from Kant, however, is that, according to Kant, there is only one way in which we interpret the world. In contrast, according to classical American philosophers such as William James and John Dewey, experience does not have—and nor does it need—the certainty of a universal structure. Instead, the world is fundamentally *uncertain*. There is more than one way to conceptualize the world: We unceasingly interpret superabundant phenomena in the context of the practical concreteness of our own experience. Crucially—and this is key—our continuous interpretation means that we are bound in an ontology of trying, of trying to make things “work,” where “work” means that we live in the world in such a way that the flow of time is at its best is a process of adjustment, of ontological amelioration, a process of spiritual growth.

AGING AND OUR EXPERIENCE OF TIME’S PASSING

If, following Kant, time is a human construct, then one of the questions at the heart of the dissertation is how *does* time go by for us? This, indeed, is what aging means. The character of aging is of our own construction. The work thus explores both how we experience time as time passes and how we *should* experience time as time passes.

Historical discussions of aging have traditionally centered on two major themes, including, first, the increased wisdom of the elderly, and, second, the physical and

mental decline of the elderly. To wit, we are fundamentally ambivalent about time's passing: It is in time that we learn and grow, but it is also in time that we forget and decay. However, what becomes salient in this project is the idea that aging can cut much deeper than the more obvious manifestations of decay: Aging can be an *ontological* disease that eliminates novelty and possibility—spiritual nutrition—from our lives. Thus, following a review in Chapter II of the two major historical themes of aging, aging that brings wisdom and aging that brings decrepitude, in philosophical exposition and in other forms of literature, Chapter III articulates the deadly ontological implications of aging when it is experienced as a withdrawal from time.

Guided both by the belief that we can reconstruct the meaning of time's passing and an ameliorative sensibility to heal human suffering, the dissertation offers an alternative, more fruitful understanding of aging in which the character of time changes from a process of destruction into one of creative individual genesis. This is how we *should* experience time as time passes. Living in this way is an achievement: It is the activity of ferreting out the best possible ways in which to live so that life is deep and robust with concatenated meaning.

While ontological inanition may pose a problem for everyone, young and old, there is, however, a danger particular to those in advanced age. As we enter advanced age, time becomes obstreperous, and death, aging's embodied finale, is palpable. This prospect of a soon-approaching death, which culminates in either oblivion or some form of immortality, profoundly affects our living, especially in later years. Chapter IV thus

explores in depth the ways in which this prospect of death affects our living; the chapter then ventures recommendations for the way it *should* and should *not* affect our living.

The grave, potential pragmatic problem with death's effect on living is this: As we grow older, many experience their lives as a preparation for death and, in religious traditions, rebirth into an eternal afterlife. However, valuing our experiences only insofar as they are part of an end, as part of an eschatology, constitutes a withdrawal from experience. That is, if we experience life as if it consists of bits and pieces of a determinate trajectory, the meaning of our experiences is circumscribed. Death, whatever it amounts to, becomes a sterile metaphor of explanation of the events in our lives. Death is not the only event that gives our lives meaning! This is the optimistic message; for, even if death does mean oblivion and the end of embodied experience, there is reason enough to nurture a deep and abiding hope that each day of a life in time can be part of a textured journey worth having, no matter the final outcome.

Finally, after examining and reflecting on our experience of aging, Chapter V applies that work to policies that concern the aged. It is argued that the sensibility that guides the programs that take care of older adults in the community should be one of *hospitality*. Hospitality is the core characteristic of the hospice program, meant to provide spiritual care for the dying. It is argued that hospitality in other settings may also nourish an aging experienced as growth and thus supplement the kind of care for the aged already in place, too narrowly conceived as simply a matter of retarding mental and physical degeneration and forestalling death.

The work itself fills a tremendous gap in philosophical literature: Only one work explicitly addresses aging within the discipline of philosophy—Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (1970). Beauvoir maintains that aging is a process of degeneration, and her tome is dark and lachrymose. The attitude of the message here, in great contrast, is, in the tradition of classical American philosophy and pragmatism, *melioristic*, which, in the words of John J. McDermott, “acknowledges both sin and possibility” (*Drama* 157); and the message is that, while many aspects of old age may indeed merit lamentation, some aspects should merit celebration. Every moment that time passes, even in old age, is an opportunity to live deeply.

CHAPTER II
OLD AGE: PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY
METAPHORS OF EXPERIENCE

Warnings to avoid generalizing attitudes toward old age are numerous. Generalizations are fraught with caveats, and indeed much historical scholarship suggests that opinions about older people throughout history cover a wide range. However, what is striking about the portrayal of aging in philosophical exposition and in other forms of literature are the broad continuities. Cultural and structural forces, including the recent gains in life expectancy, have shaped our understandings of senescence, and, to be sure, the experience of aging is intensely singular—the experience of *my* aging is quite poignantly like no one else’s. However, there are common metaphors of the manifestations of aging that transcend space and time. Aging, like birth and death, like illness and disease, like beauty and love, like so many perplexing events we struggle throughout our lives to understand through study, reflection, and through dialogue with others, participates in both the universal and the unique. The fact is that, from the moment of conception, we all age. There is a feeling of radical singleness in individual experience, but we come together when the fringes of our experience overlap, and it is in this overlap that we gather the universal. The universals of shared experience soften the existential shock and portentous meaning of singular experience. Friend, you say, tell me what it is like to grow older. So, too, Socrates asks Cephalus on the banks of the Piraeus, friend, tell me what it is like to be older. Socrates queries,

I enjoy talking with the very aged. For to my thinking we have to learn of them as it were from wayfarers who have preceded us on a road which we too, it may be, must sometimes fare—what it is like. Is it rough and hard-going or easy and pleasant to travel? And so now I would fain learn of you what you think of this thing, now that your time has come to it, the thing that poets call ‘the threshold of old age.’ Is it a hard part of life to bear or what report have you to make of it? (*Republic* line 328e)

Cephalus’ response is indeed one of the most studied philosophical descriptions of aging of our time. Moreover, his response is characteristic of one of the two main and quite contrary portrayals of the elderly in the Western philosophical tradition, each of which has paradoxically existed alongside each other. Interestingly, the most notable proponents of the two portrayals—Plato and Aristotle—are famous arch-rivals. The deep and abiding concern of philosophers is wisdom; it is thus not surprising that Plato and Aristotle, along with other philosophers, have traditionally occupied themselves with aging’s effects on mental capability, character, and the body insofar as it affects mental capability. Their two portrayals are diametrical: quite simply, Plato asserts that age ushers in wisdom, Aristotle, mental and physical decrepitude. Indeed, Plato’s picture of aging is in places so rosy that commentators often cast Plato as the sentimental idealist whose utopian vision for the elderly is either, they suspect, a socio-political comment on or a retreat from reality. Aristotle’s picture of aging, at the other extreme, is so shockingly callous and pessimistic that we all at the very least hope he did not get it right either.

Perhaps, however, the relevant concern is not who got it right, Plato or Aristotle; the relevant concern is rather how these vertebral stands of thought interweave to form the cacophonous texture of our experience of what it means to grow older. Plato and Aristotle's contrasting portrayals of aging, far from being burlesque caricatures, are both deeply rooted in the real indeed. As Ronald Blythe writes in his acclaimed series of memoirs recorded in his *The View in Winter: Reflections on Old Age*,

It is the nature of old men and women to become their own confessors, poets, philosophers, apologists and story-tellers. My method, if method it can be called, in listening to a few of them, some friends, some strangers, was to hear what they had to say with an ear which had been mostly informed by what someone called the "low-lying literature of old age." No single conclusion can be deduced for them or it. Old age is full of death and full of life. It is a tolerable achievement and it is a disaster. It transcends desire and it taunts it. It is long enough and it is far from being long enough (29)

It is in this spirit of rich contrariety, too, that Ralph Waldo Emerson composed the following two diary entries:

June 1864

Old age brings along with its uglinesses the comfort that you will soon be out of it,—which ought to be a substantial relief to such discontented pendulums as we are. To be out of the war, out of debt, out of the drouth, out of the blues, out of the dentist's hands, out of the second thoughts, mortifications, and remorsees that inflict such twinges and shooting pains,—out

of the next winter, and the high prices, and company below your ambition,—
surely these are soothing hints. And, harbinger of this, what an alleviator is
sleep, which muzzles all these dogs for me every day? (404)

Alas! But—in the same month of the same year, he shares the revelation that,

June 1864

Within, I do not find wrinkles and used heart, but unspent youth. (404)

Thus, as we grow older from minute to minute, month to month, from decade to decade,
the sensibility that captures the contours of our experience is deep ambivalence. Is aging
the life-affirming process of cultivating wisdom, or is it a death march to “out of it”?
Emerson and Blythe answer that it is both of these.

We now briefly trace both of themes of aging—aging as wisdom and aging as
decrepitude—separately through history, from their beginnings in the prehistoric world,
as they reach their most explicit thematic philosophical formulations in the canons of
Plato and Aristotle, and then as these themes are taken up by other philosophical and
literary figures. This chapter sides with neither theme and draws no conclusions other
than, as suggested above, that *both* themes are based in truth and that aging is *both* a
“blessing and a curse,” as the hackneyed phrase goes. What follows thus is a
nonpartisan literature review of the two predominant historical attitudes toward the
elderly: the elderly as sagacious and the elderly as decrepit, senile, and ill-tempered.

THE ELDERLY SAGE

Old age teaches all things along with the wearing of time.

Sophocles, *Fragments* Fragment 664

The theme of the elderly sage came into being very early, in fact, as soon as human beings began to reach advanced ages. In preliterate societies, the elderly tribe members filled vital roles: they were the group's story-tellers, living archives, educators, counselors, judges, and often the village chiefs.¹ The kind of wisdom that these elders had was first-hand knowledge—the wisdom of experience. Knud Rasmussen, explorer of North Greenland and Polar Eskimo historian, relates the following remark made by an elderly native: “Our tales are the narratives of human experience The word of the new-born is not to be trusted, but the experience of the ancients contains truth.”

Therefore, when we tell our myths we do not speak for ourselves; it is the wisdom of the fathers which speaks through us” (27); this echoes an old African proverb that “when an old man dies, a library burns down.” The crucial point here is that, in these very early societies, the aged individual was viewed as embodied wisdom. As noted sociologist and author Leo W. Simmons observes, “Few generalizations concerning the aged in primitive societies can be made with greater confidence than that they have almost universally been regarded as the custodians of knowledge *par excellence* and the chief instructors of the people” (140). Because of their wisdom wrought by long experience, the aged were an important part of the community and, for the most part, were treated with deference.

¹ Leo W. Simmons' work *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society*, cited in the affixed Works Cited, is a helpful sociological study of the status and the treatment of the aged within primitive societies. See, in particular, his chapter “The Use of Knowledge, Magic and Religion” for primitive people's attitudes toward the elderly with respect to knowledge, wisdom, and experience. For a summary of the treatment and the role of the elderly in primitive societies, see Simone de Beauvoir's chapter “The Ethnological Data,” as well as Georges Minois' chapter “The Middle East of Antiquity: The Experience of Old Age between Myth and History,” both of which are cited in the affixed Works Cited.

It is, however, imperative to note that, despite their importance, it was not uncommon to sacrifice the elderly or for them to sacrifice themselves in order to conserve the resources necessary for tribal survival. Primitive societies were made vulnerable by decrepitude, and they dealt with the feeble swiftly. The life of the elderly sage, then, was quite precarious and ultimately depended on the community's ability to support those who could not support themselves. The ambiguity of old age is thus here stark, even in prehistoric times: the old possessed life-sustaining knowledge; yet they were also ultimately the most expendable when it came to tribe continuity.

When the elderly and sagacious Homer of classical Greece began to codify tribal tales, notably in his great epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, he exercised a formative force on not only ancient Greek culture but on the entire history of Western culture as well.² Greek art of the classical period portrays Homer as the ideal venerable figure, dignified and wise, and Homer remains today the archetype of the elderly sage. Homer's character Nestor, who plays an important role in *The Iliad*, is, like Homer, greatly respected for his wisdom, and, although he lacks physical strength, Homer tells us that Nestor excels all the Achaians in counsel (XI.592-631). The importance of the aged Nestor derives from his presumed superior judgment cultivated from years of

² The number of historical surveys of the history of the elderly in Greece and Rome are few in number but are excellent. For example, see Simone de Beauvoir's chapter "Old Age in Historical Societies" and Georges Minois' chapters "The Greek World: Sad Old Age" and "The Roman World: The Old Man's Grandeur and Decadence" in his *History of Old Age*, all cited in the affixed Works Cited. See also Tim G. Parkin's entry in *A History of Old Age* and his excellent *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History*, both cited in the affixed Works Cited. See Karen Cokayne's *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome*, cited in the affixed Works Cited. Also see Bessie E. Richardson's *Old Age Among the Ancient Greeks: The Greek Portrayal of Old Age in Literature, Art, and Inscriptions*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1933.

experience. He is introduced in *The Iliad* as the “sweet-spoken, the clear-voiced speaker of Pylos” from whose “tongue the words flowed sweeter than honey” (I.230-67). The young warrior Agamemnon lauds Nestor: “Once again, old man, you are master of the sons of the Achaians in assembly. Oh father Zeus and Athene and Apollo—if only I had ten such advisors among the Achaians! Then lord Priam’s city would soon topple, captured and sacked at our hands” (II.361-401). Nestor is a model retired warrior and orator, and his counsel is noble and valued.

The wisdom of tribal elders and Homer and Nestor takes on hefty metaphysical weight in the work of eminent ancient Greek philosopher Plato. Plato defended a metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical theory that proposes and then locates universals in the particulars of our experience in the realm of the Forms. The conversation between Socrates and the aged Cephalus in the opening scene of one of Plato’s most influential middle Socratic dialogues, the *Republic*, constitutes Plato’s longest and most direct commentary on the subject of aging. Cephalus is a retired, affluent member of a merchant class who, due to his age, is no longer physically able to journey to visit Socrates. The dialogue opens with Cephalus chastising Socrates for not visiting him often enough, for, Cephalus states, “as the satisfactions of the body decay, in the same measure my desire for the pleasures of good talk and my delight in them increase” (line 328d). This line conveys much, for Plato, the consummate philosophical rationalist, believed that the body’s deterioration in senescence helped liberate and enhance one’s intellectual capacities.

Socrates then asks Cephalus a simple question: what is old age like? Cephalus has a ready answer: despite the burdens of old age, Cephalus has found happiness due to his exceptional moral character. He relates that, although many men “long for the lost joys of youth,” Cephalus, on the other hand, has been soothed by tranquility and has found a “blessed release” from his passions and desires. Cephalus avows, “When the fierce tensions of the passions and desires relax, then is the word of Sophocles approved, and we are rid of many and mad masters” (329c-d). Importantly, Cephalus assures Socrates that those who lament the lost pleasures of youth, such as wine, women, and feasts, suffer not from old age but suffer rather from an intemperate character (329d). Moreover, for Cephalus, who has lived a life of justice and piety, a “sweet hope” of a pleasant afterlife attends his old age, in great contrast to those who have not lived such a life of justice and piety (330e-331a).

Cephalus, unfortunately it turns out, identifies justice in relationship to wealth: Cephalus’ wealth, although it is not sufficient for justice, provides him with the means to be just—that is, he says, to pay his debts immediately, keep his word, and make sacrifices to the demanding gods, which protect him from the fear of divine retribution (331b). Socrates, however, soon summarily rejects Cephalus’ definition of justice, and we are left to question Cephalus’ character; we suspect that he may be motivated by the simple and base desire to avoid punishment, a desire which Plato later famously criticizes in the tale of the Ring of Gyges (359c-360d).

The question of the true worth of Cephalus’ character notwithstanding, Plato in this passage lays the groundwork for his dovetailed ethics and epistemology, and Plato’s

attitude toward aging follows quite logically. Cephalus, unlike many of his elderly friends, claims to lead a flourishing or *eudaimonistic* life because he cultivates virtue or *arête*, not because he is elderly *per se*. Crucially, according to Plato, one cannot be virtuous without first knowing what virtue *is*; similarly, once one knows a virtue, one will then exhibit that virtue. Plato thus grounds his ethics in his epistemology: Virtue consists in knowledge. Moreover—and this is the key—knowledge consists in the activity of reason. Plato, along with others in the rationalist tradition, draws a sharp distinction between reason and the senses, and he believes that it is the ascetic epistemological journey that reveals universal truths. Reason is superior to the senses, which always deceive us. For Plato, it is the archetypes of the objects of experience, the Forms and ultimately the Form of the Good, discoverable only through reason, that make meaningful the events and objects in our lives.³ The aged Cephalus has thus divested himself of certain bodily states that hamper his reason and would prevent him from cultivating good character. Although Cephalus is certainly not as laudable as the philosopher who steadfastly pursues truth with an intellect unaided by the senses and who is hence able grasp the true meaning of justice, Plato nevertheless treats Cephalus with respect.

The idea that aging frees one from corporeal concerns was not a new one in Plato's time, and it was and remains still a very powerful idea indeed. This idea was given a

³ The proof for the existence of the Forms, which is embedded in the discussion of the immortality of the soul, appears in the *Phaedo* (lines 74a-75b). In the *Republic*, Plato uses three helpful images to explain the Forms, including the Analogy of the Divided Line (509d-513e), the Metaphor of the Sun (507b-509c), and, perhaps most notably, the Allegory of the Cave (514a-520a).

biological basis when the early Greek physician Hippocrates theorized that the cause of senescence was a gradual loss of innate heat and moisture. It is indeed quite remarkable that the core of Hippocrates' theory remains preserved in modern scientific correlations between basal metabolic rates and aging (Minois 70-71). Sexual passions, also, were thought to depend on innate heat and moisture. Therefore, it biologically followed that the elderly had diminished sexual desire (Cokayne 115). Moreover, traditional rational philosophical and religious sensibility elevates mind over matter: from monistic and dualistic metaphysical doctrines of the supremacy of mind over matter to religious and secular normative theories that the passions *should* diminish with age, the passions have had little place in the philosophical and religious canons. Cato, Marcus Tullius Cicero's mouthpiece in his well-known treatise on aging, *De Senectute* (On Old Age), remarks, "O admirable service of old age, if indeed it takes from us what in youth is more harmful than all things else!" (29); for "pleasure thwarts good counsel, is the enemy of reason, and, if I so may speak, blindfolds the eyes of the mind, nor has it anything in common with virtue" (31). Both Cicero's Cato and Plato's Cephalus observe that old age is not entirely without pleasures; however, the pleasures they list are the ones associated with intellectual pursuits, such as good conversation, not sensual enjoyments. Religious traditions, too—both Western and Eastern—have seen the degradation of the body in old age as a metaphor for worldly transience and have emphasized life as a preparation for meeting the challenge of physical death and the liberation of the soul, leaving little place for the passions.

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's view on age and diminishing passions must be contextualized within his quite famously pessimistic *weltanschauung*. In broad strokes, we can bear the difficulties and miseries that occur in our frail human lives, according to Schopenhauer, if we develop a kind of stoic asceticism. Aging for Schopenhauer is a progression through a series of characteristic stages, in which we gradually cultivate and take comfort in a kind of ennui that shields us from the cruelties of existence. Below several portions of Schopenhauer's essay "The Ages of Life" are quoted. Although lengthy, these quotations taken together depict well Schopenhauer's view of the aging process. The idea that the aging process consists in a passage through an organic series of characteristic stages is, in fact, quite ancient and remains relevant today: it occurs time and again in historical texts, it is often implicit in our everyday experience, and it is the norm in disciplines such as the social sciences and psychology. Here Schopenhauer offers his interpretation of the stages of life.

In the bright dawn of our youthful days, the poetry of life spreads out a gorgeous vision before us, and we torture ourselves by longing to see it realized. We might as well wish to grasp the rainbow! The youth expects his career to be like an interesting romance; and there lies the germ of that disappointment which I have been describing. (99)

Schopenhauer continues,

If the chief feature of the earlier half of life is a never-satisfied longing after happiness, the later half is characterized by the dread of misfortune. For,

as we advance in years, it becomes in a greater or less degree clear that all happiness is chimærical in its nature, and that pain alone is real. (100)

Further,

The consequence of this is that, as compared with the earlier, the later half of life, like the second part of a musical period, has less of passionate longing and more restfulness about it. And why is this the case? Simply because, in youth, a man fancies that there is a prodigious amount of happiness and pleasure to be had in the world, only that it is difficult to come by it; whereas, when he becomes old, he knows that there is nothing of the kind; he makes his mind completely at ease on the matter, enjoys the present hour as well as he can, and even takes pleasure in its trifles.

The chief result gained by experience of life is *clearness of view*. This is what distinguishes the man of mature age, and makes the world wear such a different aspect from that which it presented in his youth or boyhood. It is only then that he sees things quite plain, and he takes them for that which they really are: while in earlier years he saw a phantom-world, put together out of the whims and crotchets of his own mind, inherited prejudice and strange delusion: the real world was hidden from him, or the vision of it distorted. The first thing that experience finds to do is to free us from the phantoms of the brain—those false notions that have been put into us in youth. (100-01)

Despite their radically different versions of reality—at the foundation of Plato's universe is reason and at Schopenhauer's a non-rational, instinctual urge he calls "Will"—both of

them hold the Stoic view that the passions of youth occlude reality itself. As we age, we divest ourselves of these passions, and we see the way the world really is.

However, it is worthwhile to note in passing that the idea that passion, particularly sexual passion, ebbs with the passage of time is not uncontested—there is, in fact, strong evidence to the contrary. Literature is replete with examples. Geoffrey Chaucer is well-known for his satire of those who fall far short from the particularly religious ideal of chasteness in their old age. The Reeve in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* sorrowfully confesses,

Desire sticks in our nature like a nail
To have, if hoary head, a verdant tail,
As has the leek; for though our strength be gone,
Our wish is yet for folly till life's done.
For when we may not act, then will we speak;
Yet in our ashes is there fire to reek.

Four embers have we, which I shall confess:
Boasting and lying, anger, covetousness;
These four remaining sparks belong to eld.
Our ancient limbs may well be hard to wield,
But lust will never fail us, that is the truth.
And even now I have a colt's tooth (lines 24-34)

The Reeve lacks not physical desire, but only ability. Indeed, Chaucer's legendary tales are imbued with lecherous desire. The old individual's sexuality in this didactic text is

the object of ridicule, improper and absurd. For the nineteenth-century Russian poet Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev, on the other hand, the approaching end of life quickens and deepens the eros of his elderly subject, evident as he strikes a more poignantly lovely chord in his “Last Love.”

How much more superstitiously
And fondly we love in declining years.
Shine on, shine on, farewell light
Of this last love, this light of sunset!

The shadows have spread across the sky

And only westward does the radiance wander.

Linger, linger, evening-day,
Lengthen, lengthen, O enchantment.

Let blood run thin in veins, our fondness

Does not run thin within our hearts.

O you, O you, O my last love!

You are my bliss and my despair.

Tyutchev’s passage resonates with passionate longing. Victims of transience are we, and it is the sense of tragic loss that makes love ever the more bitter, and, crucially, ever the more sweet. How different than Schopenhauer’s pronouncement that only pain is real!

Cicero expresses neither Tyutchev’s melancholia nor Chaucer’s salacious impiety in

his *De Senectute*. Cicero models the first several pages of his optimistic work on Socrates and Cephalus' aforementioned discussion of aging in Plato's *Republic*. These first pages are in the form of a dialogue, which is set in the household of Cato the Elder. The character Scipio expresses his admiration for Cato for, unlike other old men, Cato bears his age well. Cato then—like Plato's Cephalus—marks a distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous individuals: Cato claims that he bears age well because he is virtuous. He explains, "For those who have in themselves no resources for a good and happy life, every period of life is burdensome; but to those who seek all goods from within, nothing which comes in the course of nature can seem evil" (4). Further, Cato advises his companions that the "best-fitting defensive armor of old age, Scipio and Laelius, consists in the knowledge and practice of the virtues . . ." (7). Thus, according to Cato—like Cephalus—the faults that men attribute to their age are truly faults of character and not of old age *per se*. Cicero's passage comes straight out of the *Republic*, and, indeed, the virtues were very important in Roman philosophy.

Post-Aristotelian Roman moralistic philosophy centered on a character-based ethics in which individuals cultivated virtue in order to live a happy or flourishing life, or "the good life." Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca writes, "Virtue alone affords to joy that's unbroken and tranquil" ("Letter XXVII" 92). Following Aristotle, virtue is the disposition to act in the right manner, at the means of the extremes of excess and deficiency, which are vices. Virtue is practical wisdom: it consists of learning through experience the mean path in a variety of circumstances. Romans believed that virtuous behavior could be learned over time and practiced. Acquiring good judgment required

years of training and experience, which Romans strived to implement with rigorous pedagogical programs beginning in youth. Practical wisdom, then, was truly only demonstrated by the aged—by those who had time to cultivate a judicious experience which could direct proper conduct in certain circumstances.

In Cicero's *De Senectute*, the aged Cato shares his acquired wisdom with his interlocutors: Following the brief dialogue, the remainder of the piece is a monologue, in which Cato, in the longstanding philosophical method of rational argumentation, loquaciously and often originally refutes four reasons why old age is wretched. The four reasons he refutes are the following: old age prevents one from managing affairs, it impairs bodily vigor, it deprives one of sensual gratifications, discussed above, and, finally, it is a prelude to death. Cato's response to the first reason, that old age prevents one from managing affairs, echoes Plato's position: Cato argues that the passage of time tends to bring wisdom. He likens the old man to the pilot of a ship, who sits in the stern and holds the helm, while the others "go to and fro in the gangways" (14). As Cato proclaims: "Great things are accomplished, not by strength, or swiftness, or suppleness of body, but by counsel, influence, deliberate opinion, of which old age is not wont to be bereft, but, on the other hand, to possess them more abundantly" (14). Cato—the Roman Nestor—wields great power in war due to his accomplished and venerated counsel. In Cicero's words, the "crowning glory of old age is authority" (47), and, of course, Cicero himself achieved outstanding political prominence and authority. Cato next dismisses the challenge that old age impairs bodily vigor by responding that those who did not take care of themselves in their youth have greater impairments to their

bodily strength, and that, moreover, bodily strength is not needed in old age anyway; strength of mind more than makes up for the loss (20-25).

Cato does admit that age may impair memory; but only for those who do not use their memories! “Old men remember everything they care about,” Cato remarks (16). Wonderfully tangible here is the upbeat vertebral strand in Cicero’s *De Senectute*, which exudes an expression that resonates today—either “use it or lose it.” Old age should be replete with endeavors and filled with a striving, not a retirement. Cicero’s words are profound: “Old age, indeed, is worthy of honor only when it defends itself, when it asserts its rights, when it comes into bondage to no one, when even to the last breath it maintains its sway over those of its own family” (27-28). Cicero anticipates Shakespeare’s utter condemnation of the doomed aged King Lear, who, in Shakespeare’s account, transfers the entirety of his authority to his evil daughters, and then suffers disastrously cruel consequences. Shakespeare, along with Cicero, heralds the idea that age is “not just a number” but, rather, relates to our capacity for independence. And, above all, Cicero expresses our contemporary faith that aging is ultimately under our own control.

Opinions have been divided, however, on just how adventurous the elderly should be. As Georges Minois observes in his comprehensive survey of various perceptions of old age from antiquity through the sixteenth-century, Seneca believed that the elderly should retire from public activity (102); further, Minois records, sixteenth-century Michel de Montaigne thought it monstrously imprudent for Cato, the voice in Cicero’s treatise on old age, to learn Greek in his old age—death is much too close to begin

adventurous projects (265). “A thing in mine opinion not very honorable in him,” says Montaigne about Cato in his *Essayes*; further, “It is properly that which we call doting or to become a child againe” (2: 428). Montaigne indeed paints a sober picture of old age: “The longest of my desseignes doth not extend to a whole yeare; now I only apply my selfe to make an end: I shake off all my new hopes and enterprises: I bid my last farewell to all the places I leave, and daily dispossesse my selfe of what I have” (2: 429). While they certainly did not advocate idleness of mind, Seneca and Montaigne believed that life in the later years should be a period of retirement, not of public activity.

Cicero’s Cato rejoins Seneca and Montaigne quite summarily: the young, Cato points out, are just as likely to die as the old, and Cato himself suffered the death of his son. Cato’s reply to Seneca and Montaigne is embedded within the discussion of the fourth and final *vituperatio* that old age is a prelude to death. Cato was partly right: scholar Tim Parkin notes that infant mortality rates in ancient Greece and Rome were appalling, much like infant mortality rates in most centuries with the exception of our own; however, survival to an older age in ancient Greece and Rome, Parkin observes, was common if one survived those first dangerous years (“Ancient” 41). And, in the time of the Black Death of the Middle Ages, it was the old who survived the scourge while the children and young adults perished.⁴

Empirical data notwithstanding, however, what we can philosophically glean from Cato’s deceptively simple remark that the young are just as likely to die as the old is the

⁴ See Georges Minois’ chapter “The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: Old People Assert Themselves” in his *History of Old Age*, cited in the affixed Works Cited.

age-old and complex philosophical problem of uncertainty. The future is by its very nature uncertain. This uncertainty, when brought to the fore of consciousness, makes palpable the utter fragility of existence—for *both* young and old. Twentieth-century American philosopher John Dewey, in arguably his most Existential work, warns “man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconsistent, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons. Although persistent, they are sporadic, episodic” (“Existence” 278). According to Dewey, the universe is, at least for us, ultimately unpredictable, chaotic, and, to many, ostensibly morally unjust. As Gloucester in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* laments,

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;

They kill us for their sport. (IV.i.37-38)

Inscrutable suffering is pervasive: Plagues and tsunamis decimate, famines strike, and children die much too young.

Is the world a scene of risk? Dewey thought so, but Cicero, despite his above comment, did not. Implicit in this monumental metaphysical question is, first, whether there is any order in the world, and second, if there is indeed order, whether we can understand it. Importantly, at the core of our heritage from ancient Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology is the idea of an intelligible order of nature, of which we are a part. The Greeks called this natural order the *cosmos*. Cicero, along with other Stoics such as Seneca, believed that a unity—ordered by the *logos*—underlay the chaotic appearance of the world. The Stoic emphasis in particular was on cultivating a certain

kind of practical wisdom—on taming excessive emotion to reach a state of *apatheia*; it was only in this state that the *logos* which ensured the natural order could be heard. It is evident, then, that the Stoic tradition, as a part of the rationalist tradition, harbored, and continues still to harbor, a deep and abiding distrust in the passions. Further, according to the Stoic view, when we discern and accept what the *logos* tells us, we find inner calm; and what the *logos* tells us is nothing less than our place in the world: according to the law of nature, we are each a small part in the considerable and lofty universal order. The quintessence of Stoicism, then, is not the singular individual; rather, it is the existential submission of the individual to a consummatory explanation of the cosmos.

Ancient Greek philosophers believed that the *logos* could be heard, that this regulating principle was intelligible to human understanding; many, however, both then and today, believe that, although there may be, indeed, an organizing principle, it is implacable, beyond human comprehension. According to this angle of vision, human beings are barred from the secrets of the universe; and, crucially, *it is not our place* to know the natural order. To believe that human beings could penetrate the recondite rational underpinnings of the cosmos beyond the bounds of personal experience, in their estimation, constitutes radical metaphysical hubris. In Goethe's *Faust: The Second Part of the Tragedy*, which Goethe himself completed during the last year of his life, an aging Faust expresses a distrust of any sort of metaphysical speculation.

Through all the world I only raced:

Whatever I might crave, I laid my hand on,

What would not do, I would abandon,

And what escaped, I would let go.
I only would desire and attain,
And wish for more, and thus with might and main
I stormed through life; first powerful and great,
But now with calmer wisdom, and sedate.
The earthly sphere I know sufficiently,
But into the beyond we cannot see;
A fool, that squints and tries to pierce those shrouds,
And would invent his like above the clouds!
Let him survey this life, be resolute,
For to the able this world is not mute.
Why fly into eternities?

What man perceives, that he can seize. (lines 11433-47)

Time has worn away the daring hubris of Faust's youth and in its place is a peaceful and serene wisdom. Note well! The wisdom age brings here is not the authoritative, sagacious counsel of Homer and Cicero; nor is it Plato's rationalist vision of the intellect unhampered by the senses. Faust's wisdom, instead, comes paradoxically from a reconciliatory awareness of his own epistemological limitations as an earthborn creature.

Christian orthodoxy, which Goethe challenges in the passage above, readily reinterpreted the Stoic emphasis on the acceptance of natural law into the acceptance of a divine will. Correct behavior—practical wisdom—is living in accord with God's will. However, the Christian tradition, like Goethe, questions the ancient Greek notion of a

wholly intelligible *logos*. Instead, it emphatically emphasizes the division of being between an omniscient and all-powerful God and his non-omniscient and fragile creations. The stress on submission to an oftentimes implacable divine plan in religious orthodoxy manifests itself with particular regard to wisdom and aging, as Richard C. Fallis writes, in “praise for the older person who accepts his or her fate; it may also take the form of satire against those who do not know ‘their places’” (36). The elderly, then, are expected to live in calm deference, devoid of youthful passions, and, in the tradition of the New Testament, to prepare to face final divine judgment with the hope of eternal salvation.

Divine judgment and eternal salvation by the Christian God were not relevant concerns for Seneca and Cicero, both Stoics. Notwithstanding, death, Cicero’s Cato assuages us in *De Senectute*, is not to be feared. Cato’s response to the fourth criticism of old age is reminiscent of Socrates’ memorable last lines in Plato’s *Apology*: “Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything, or, as we are told, it is really a change—a migration of the soul from this place to another” (line 40c). Cato, like Socrates, advises his interlocutors that if death puts an end to the soul, then it should be regarded with indifference; alternatively, if death leads to the immortality of the soul, then it should be desired (50). A true Stoic, Cato maintains that, with either alternative, death should be met with halcyon acquiescence. We should not rebel against the laws of Nature: “Each one should be content with such time as it is allotted to him to live” (52). Cato advises further that, “if you live on, you have no more reason to mourn over your advancing years, than the farmers have, when

the sweet days of spring are past, to lament the coming of summer and autumn” (53). Death, believes the Stoic, is one among the many ordering principles of Nature, and the life of the human being, as part and parcel of Nature, is thus governed by the principle of death. Cato professes that the “most desirable end of life is when—the understanding and the other faculties unimpaired—Nature, who put together, takes apart her own work” (54).

It is in the Stoic sensibility of Cato’s last line that we are to understand the much later noble life of Ernest Hemingway’s fisherman Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago, alone in the Gulf Stream, endures physical and spiritual suffering of epic proportions in order to catch an enormous and equally noble marlin. Imbued with the drama of the universal struggle to live, Santiago reveals that: “You are killing me, fish, the old man thought. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who” (92). There is a unity between Santiago and the marlin, and it is a unity between equals in the natural world, in which all creatures must live, struggle, and die as part of the natural order. And—most importantly—Hemingway and Cicero both believed that the living and struggling and dying that has to be done should be done with courageous dignity.

In this section, we have explored the theme of the elderly sage in an admittedly small sampling of philosophy and literature. The aged, with a mind unfettered by the passions and endowed with both the knowledge of ultimate reality and with the pedagogical wisdom of experience, offer counsel and inspire respect. This sensibility is

timeless and pervades our understanding of what it means to be old. In the next section, however, we explore an equally pervasive but altogether sinister sensibility—the elderly as decrepit, senile, and ill-tempered.

THE DECREPIT, THE SENILE, AND THE ILL-TEMPERED

When the age is in, the wit is out.

Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* III.v.33

While Plato and his followers lauded the virtues of the elderly, and, while esteemed ancient Greek city-state Sparta elected a gerontocracy, it is instructive to note that the Greek gods did not suffer from old age. Hesiod tells us that “accursed Old Age” is the child of Night, and its siblings are “hateful Destruction,” “black Specter,” “Death,” “Blame,” “painful Grief,” and “Retribution” (59). Minois remarks that there was a “temple to old age in Athens, in which old age was portrayed as an old woman draped in black, leaning on a stick with a goblet in her hand; near her, stood a water clock which had almost run out” (44). And, indeed, disparaging tales of the elderly abound in Greek mythology. The myth of Tithonus is well-known: Aurora,⁵ the Goddess of the Dawn, asks that Zeus give her mortal husband, Tithonus, eternal life. Zeus acquiesces; however, Aurora fails to ask for eternal youthfulness. Tithonus hence grows old, decays, but still he lives on. Aurora, weary of his decrepitude, isolates the ancient Tithonus alone in a room, where he is to remain, eternally and incessantly babbling (Evelyn-White 421-23). In another version of the story, Aurora turns Tithonus into a noisy grasshopper, likely a cicada (Hamilton 289-90). The myth is intended to both indict and explain the

⁵ Her name is “Eos” in another version of the myth.

elderly's tendencies toward loquacity. Even the eloquent Cato in Cicero's *De Senectute* confesses, "old age is naturally prolix, nor can I pretend to acquit it of all the weaknesses laid to its charge" (42-43). Old age so depicted is indeed a calamity. The elderly are grotesque nuisances and are utterly dispensable; what a contrast to the theme of the venerable Homeric sage! According to this angle of vision, age does not bring wisdom but is, instead, characterized by both physical *and* mental decline.

In Greek mythology old age is a divine punishment for human impiety: Zeus punishes the brazen Prometheus by creating Pandora, who then unwittingly unleashes countless miseries, including old age, on the theretofore blissful human race (Evelyn-White 9). Similarly, according to ancient Hebrew scripture, the original fall of Adam and Eve explains aging, suffering, laboring, and death. In Genesis God punishes Adam: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return" (3:19). Augustine and Thomas Aquinas explicitly attribute aging and death to original sin, before which man was eternal. Aquinas writes, "man was incorruptible and immortal in the state of innocence. For, as Augustine says (*QQ. Vet. et Nov. Test., qu. 19*): 'God made man immortal as long as he did not sin, so that he might achieve for himself life or death.'" (I: First Part. Question XCVII. Article I. Objection IV); and, "the withdrawal of original justice has the character of punishment, even as the withdrawal of grace has. Consequently, death and all consequent bodily defects are punishments of original sin. And although these defects are not intended by the sinner, nevertheless they are ordered by the justice of God Who inflicts them as punishments" (II: Second Part. Part I.

Question LXXXV. Article V. Objection III). Compare the secular yet parallel theme in contemporary Latin-American Gabriel García Márquez's astonishing *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: José Arcadio Buendía, founder and patriarch of the Eden-like city Macondo, in which no one—at least initially—ages, suffers madness in return for his impudent pursuit of knowledge. Buendía's decline foreshadows the prolonged terrible yet fascinating demise of Macondo and all of its inhabitants. Buendía himself is tied to a tree by his wife, Ursula, where he babbles Latin incoherently, gradually grows old, and dies.

While old age is revered in Judaism, there is more than a little despair at the loss of mental and physical faculties that come with growing older. The author of Ecclesiastes laments,

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; Also *when* they shall be afraid of *that which is high* and fears *shall be* in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the

mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. Vanities of vanities, saith the preacher; all *is* vanity. (12:1)

This biblical passage is filled with bleak metaphors of decrepitude. “All is vanity” writes the author: mortal life is unsubstantial and fleeting, and the aged near its wretched end.

Indeed religious eschatological texts emphasize life as a time of spiritual and moral preparation for meeting the challenge of death and the liberation of the soul, and, in the tradition of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the process of aging is often experienced as a process of atonement for original sin. Humankind is to eschew the material world and to prepare for rebirth into an abundant, eternal spiritual life. Crucially, in one major strand of Christianity, the degradation of the body that occurs with age serves as a powerful metaphor for both sin and for worldly transience. Shulamith Sahahar, interpreting a medieval philosophical treatise by Petrarch, explains that the “degradation and increasing unloveliness of the body and the loss of physical pleasures are indicators of the fragility, impermanence and insignificance of this world. The young body is like a flower, but a flower whose fading is inherent in its blossoming” (85).

With the decay of the sinful body, the spirit is strengthened. The influential eleventh-century saint, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, asserts that the “mind is stronger than time, and even while the body is growing cold in death a holy zeal glows in the

heart, and while the limbs grow helpless, the vigor of the will remains unimpaired and the ardent spirit feels not the weakness of the wrinkled flesh” (744). Bernard recalls the last of line of this passage by the Apostle Paul in Second Corinthians (747):

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Mostly gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong. (12:9-10)

The idea that a weak body leads to spiritual strength is a very important idea. We see it in many texts across time, from religious to secular. We have already seen that many philosophers, such as Plato, associate reason with the immaterial mind, or the soul, and appetite with the material body and that aging frees one from bodily appetites. But in a major strand of Christian theology, the body takes on moral significance that it does not have in other kinds of texts: the body is evil; it is a manifestation of sin.⁶

Plato’s contemporary, Aristotle, vehemently propounds a caustic attitude toward old age. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle maintains that old age, like disability, makes “men mean” (lines 1121b10-15). Further, elderly people, much like sour people, do not make friends readily due to their ill-temper (1158a1-5); when the elderly people do make friends, it is only for the sake of utility (1156a25). Aristotle thus does not share Plato’s

⁶ Another major strand of Christianity stresses that the human body, as God’s creation and in God’s likeness, is good. This strand is based on important passages in Genesis, including the following: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (1:26); and “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, *it was very good*” (1:31).

optimism about the process of aging and attendant character development. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle records his most scathing observations of both the elderly and the young: Young individuals have strong passions, their impulses are like “sick people’s attacks of hunger and thirst,” and all of their mistakes are mistakes of excesses (lines 1389a1-1389b10). The character of the elderly, Aristotle contrasts, lies at the opposite extreme.

They have lived many years; they have often been taken in, and often made mistakes; and life on the whole is bad business. The result is that they are sure about nothing and *under-do* everything. They ‘think’, but they never ‘know’; and because of their hesitation they always add a ‘possibly’ or a ‘perhaps’, putting everything this way and nothing positively. They are cynical; that is, they tend to put the worse construction on everything. Further, their experience makes them distrustful and therefore suspicious of evil. Consequently they neither love warmly nor hate bitterly, but following the hint of Bias they love as though they will some day hate and hate as though they will some day love. They are small-minded, because they have been humbled by life: their desires are set upon nothing more exalted or unusual than what will help to keep them alive. . . . They lack confidence in the future; partly through experience—for most things go wrong, or anyhow turn out worse than one expects; and partly because of their cowardice. They live by memory rather than by hope; for what is left to them of life is but little as compared with the long past; and hope is of the future, memory of the past. (1389b10-1390a10)

Aristotle has a decidedly different interpretation of the stages of life than Schopenhauer. Life is “bad business” for Schopenhauer; so when life’s coarseness eventually extinguishes the “poetry of youth” and embitters even the most romantic of visions, what remains, Schopenhauer avers, is a “clearness of view.” However, what is a clear view of the world to Schopenhauer is, for Aristotle, quite distorted and utterly deficient. Aristotle condemns senescence for its warped landscape of experience that saps the world of its richness.

It is men who are in their prime, Aristotle continues, who possess the ideal character, which is an intermediate condition between the characters of young and old and is thus free from extremes. He writes, “To put it generally, all the valuable qualities that youth and age divide between them are united in the prime of life, while their excesses or defects are replaced by moderation and fitness” (*Rhetoric* 1390b5-10).

Aristotle appraises that the body is in its prime between the ages of thirty and thirty-five and the mind in its prime at the age of forty-nine (1390b10); interestingly, Aristotle was around fifty when he made these observations. Aristotle’s catalogue of the ills of the young and aged are, of course, meant to be commensurate with his Doctrine of the Mean and as such may be oblique.⁷ Nevertheless, Aristotle’s observations have an unsettling experiential bite. For Aristotle the moderation of the elderly is not due to a reconciliation with the cruelties of reality, per Schopenhauer; nor is it due to the Platonic

⁷ Virtue, according to Aristotle, is the disposition to act in the right manner and at the extremes of excess and deficiency, which are vices; his Doctrine of the Mean, then, is that virtue is the intermediate condition between excess and efficiency. For his discussion of virtue and his Doctrine of the Mean, see Book II in *Nicomachean Ethics*, cited in the affixed Works Cited.

and Stoic ideals of self-control, which is crucial to the attainment of wisdom. Rather, for Aristotle, the moderation of the elderly constitutes a fundamentally misguided pathology of reticence (1390a15): they are meager, deluded fools.

Simone de Beauvoir perceptively observes that what is striking about Aristotle's view is "the notion that experience is not a factor of progress but of degradation. An old man is one who has spent the whole of a long life getting things wrong, and this cannot make him superior to younger people who have not piled up as many mistakes as he has" (111). It is indeed quite striking that an empiricist such as Aristotle who is often cited as the impetus for the theory of the "association of ideas" could express such invective against the aged.⁸ The theory of the association of ideas, which marked the beginning of empirical psychology, received its first explicit thematic treatment in the work of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and David Hume. The theory describes the principles by which ideas are connected in consciousness and which then govern the order of thoughts. Hume listed three such principles: resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect (32). As Beauvoir points out, associationist empiricism actually supports the idea that, as the number of associations between ideas increases with age, older individuals have greater knowledge and wisdom (200). However, for Aristotle, the

⁸ Passages from Aristotle's *De Memoria et Reminiscentia* are often credited for inspiring associationist thinking. For example, consider the following: "Acts of recollection, as they occur in experience, are due to the fact that one movement [in consciousness] has by nature another that succeeds it in regular order" (line 451b10). Also: "Whenever, therefore, we are recollecting, we are experiencing certain of the antecedent movements until finally we experience the one after which customarily comes that which we seek. This explains why we hunt up the series [of movements], having started in thought either from a present intuition or some other, and from something either similar, or contrary, to what we seek, or else from that which is contiguous with it. Such is the empirical ground of the process of recollection . . ." (451b15-20). *Parva Naturalia*. Trans. J. I. Beare. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941. 607-17. Print.

progenitor of associationist thinking, this is ostensibly not the case: an increase in the number of connections between ideas does not produce wisdom.

Although he does not explicitly mention the connection, Aristotle's view of the soul no doubt can be brought to bear on his views about aging. Plato believed that the body's deterioration liberates the immortal soul from worldly appetites that cloud reason. In contrast, Aristotle believed that the soul is intimately linked to the body: the soul is the expression of the body; it is the body's essence, "the essential whatness' of a body" (*De Anima* line 412b10). Aristotle characterized the relationship between the body and soul as hylomorphic. "Hylomorphism" is derived from two Greek words, "*hulê*," which means "matter" and "*morphê*," which means "shape" or "form." Broadly, the form of an object is *what kind of thing* the object is, and the matter is *what it is made of*. In Aristotle's hylomorphism, the soul is the form of the body, and the body is the matter of the soul. The soul structures the body, much like the shape of a brick structures the clay from which it is made.⁹ Although it would be quite logical to next infer that Aristotle did not believe that the soul survives bodily dissolution, in his *De Anima* he reveals the surprising caveat: "From this it indubitably follows that the soul is inseparable from its body, or at any rate that certain parts of it are (if it has parts)—for the actuality of some of them is nothing but the actualities of their bodily parts. Yet some may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at all" (413a4-10). Aristotle later reveals

⁹ Aristotle develops hylomorphism in his *De Anima* and *Metaphysica*. For the discussion in *Metaphysica*, see in particular Book Z, or Book 7, which can be found in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, cited in the affixed Works Cited. Aristotle's description of the hylomorphic relationship between the soul and body, which is treated in *De Anima*, is part of a much larger project to reject Plato's dualistic division of reality into the realm of the Forms and the realm of the particulars of our experience. Aristotle sought instead to locate forms *within* the particulars of our experience.

in Book III, Chapters IV and V of *De Anima* that the part of the soul that is not an actuality of the body and thus must be immortal is its thinking capacity. Thus, what we might safely and perhaps humbly infer from Aristotle's proposed hylomorphic connection between the body and soul is that the bodily degradation that comes naturally with aging implies harm to the parts of the soul that are not involved in thinking.

It would seem that Plato at least, who believed in the immortality of the soul, would be quite sanguine about aging, and, indeed in his *Republic*, he is.¹⁰ However, in *Laws*, his last and longest dialogue, written a few years before his death at age eighty or eighty-one, Plato is not so sanguine. In this dialogue, three elderly men discuss at length the best laws to regulate those living under the rule of law. It is important that these men are elderly; Plato ostensibly continues to associate age with wisdom. In the passage preceding the passage below, the interlocutors discuss the formation of choirs, which will recite noble doctrines to "enchant" children to live just lives (II.664b-c). Agreeing that it might be difficult to convince the older men to sing, for "the older and more sober-minded he grows, the more bashful he feels about it [singing]" (II.665e), the wisest Athenian member proposes the following regimen of wine:

In the first place, we shall absolutely prohibit the taste of wine to boys under eighteen. We shall tell them they must have too much concern for the passionate temperament of youth to feed the fire of body or soul with a further current of fire before they address themselves of the labors of life. In the next, while we permit a moderate use of wine to men under thirty, we shall

¹⁰ For a discussion of Plato and aging, see the "The Elderly Sage" section of Chapter II.

absolutely forbid carousing and free potations. But when a man is verging on the forties, we shall tell him, after he has finished banqueting at the general table, to invoke the gods, and more particularly to ask the presence of Dionysus in that sacrament and pastime of advancing years—I mean the wine cup—which he had bestowed on us for comfortable medicine against the dryness of old age, that we might renew our youth, and our harsher mood be melted to softness by forgetfulness of our heaviness, as iron is melted in the furnace, and so be made more tractable. (II.666a-c)

Old age certainly does not seem like something to which to look forward: one must bear dryness, heaviness, and harsh mood. Admittedly, the purpose of the wine is to diminish inhibitions, not to help men turn toward the reality of the Forms, and, granted, the purpose of Plato's *Laws* is different from the purpose in his *Republic*—the former is intended less as an ideal program and more as an actual code. Nonetheless, the practical Plato who suggests wine to ease age's heaviness is starkly different from the ideological Plato who commends Cephalus for bearing the physical burdens of old age by cultivating his purportedly exceptional character. Plato in *Laws* even concedes that disease, age, and sullen temper may “derange a man's mind” (XI.929d). Plato thus, at least here, sides with Aristotle's negative view of old age.

Cicero, too, reveals in his personal letters that his experience of old age does not match the ideal depicted in his *De Senectute*. In his *Letters to Atticus*, he confides, “I must keep reading my *Cato Major* [*De Senectute*], which is dedicated to you: for old age is beginning to make me ill-tempered. Everything puts me in a rage” (287). Andrew

Preston Peabody notes that, at the time of this letter's composition, Cicero was grieving the loss of his beloved daughter, Tullia, and was extremely apprehensive about Mark Antony's plans (vi); of course, his apprehension was warranted as Antony ordered Cicero's murder. In the same vein, Tim Parkin advises us that Cicero's apologia for the elderly in *De Senectute* should be read in the context of his eroding powerbase ("Ancient" 43). Georges Minois agrees: He remarks that both Cicero and Plato outline an ideal old age, which they were both far from reaching in their own experience (57-60, 111). Further, Minois hypothesizes that the preferred place that Plato gives the aged, particularly in *Laws*, in which the government he devises essentially amounts to a gerontocracy,¹¹ hints at the inferior situation of the aged in Greek society (59-60). Indeed, although many in classical Greece, like Plato, associated old age with wisdom, power and wealth still laid with younger generations (Minois 62-63, Parkin, "Ancient" 44). It is not surprising that youth was esteemed and senescence derogated in a society famed for seeking perfection and for prizing strength and beauty.

In *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir provides to-date one of the most comprehensive descriptions of how social and political forces have molded perceptions of old age. Ultimately, according to Beauvoir, it is class struggle that shapes the cultural norms by which we view the elderly: "Both today and throughout history, the class-struggle governs the manner in which old age takes hold of man: there is a great gulf between the aged slave and the aged patrician, between the wretchedly pensioned ex-

¹¹ Plato writes in *Laws* that no curators of the laws shall be "elected to his office at an age earlier than fifty" (VI.755a). Additionally, in the *Republic* Plato writes that "the rulers must be the elder and the ruled the younger is obvious" (line 412c).

worker and an Onasis” (10). Further she pronounces, “We have seen the motives underlying the praise of Solon, Plato, Cicero and Seneca—eulogies of old age that the privileged have smugly repeated throughout the centuries, claiming to find truth in them. The learned man’s objective point of view is very different” (121). Old age, Beauvoir contends, is an utter and irrevocable disaster for the impoverished working class, and wealthy moralists such as those described in this chapter—Plato and Cicero—champion old age in their didactic but insincere writings in order to bolster their own power.

The interpretation offered here, on the other hand, turns on the view that metaphors of aging transcend class. There is no doubt that social and political critiques of the experience of old age, such as Beauvoir’s, among the few others mentioned here, offer interesting and clear-cut insight on how and why aging is experienced the way that it is, be the experience cut by class or generational power struggle or by other cultural factors. These kinds of critiques, however, lack existential richness. Aging is a process that is experienced with a deep individual existential ambivalence that transcends cultural norms and power struggles. Positive and negative perceptions of senescence can be and indeed are experienced by the self-same individuals. There is little evidence that Plato had any ulterior motive when he wrote the conversation between Cephalus and Socrates; the virtuous old man, says Plato, has great wisdom. So, too, Plato says that the burdens of old age can make one go mad. Cicero says that life should be lived with Stoic acceptance; so, too, Cicero says that his age brings bitterness with it. These inconsistencies are not to be understood as logical inconsistencies of the incompetent philosopher; nor are they to be understood as political slips. Instead, these

inconsistencies constitute the real cacophonous internal dialogue that is part of the struggle that goes on throughout life to articulate what the living itself means; and every day there is novel meaning to be had. Inconsistencies are to be celebrated as a sign of personal growth. It was the celebrated American poet Walt Whitman who wrote,

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.) (part 51.7-9)

Curiously, Beauvoir does indeed admit in her text that some attitudes toward old age cut across time and culture: “Although the meaning and the value attached to old age vary in different societies, old age nevertheless remains a fact that runs throughout all history, arousing a certain number of identical reactions,” (92) she writes. Moreover, she, firmly taking sides, unlike Plato and Cicero, endorses the negative attitudes toward old age. She bemoans that

For every individual age brings with it a dreaded decline. It is in complete conflict with the manly or womanly ideal cherished by the young and the fully-grown. The immediate, natural attitude is to reject it, in so far as it is summed up by the words decrepitude, ugliness and ill-health. Old age in others also causes an instant repulsion. This primitive reaction remains alive even when custom represses it; and in this we see the origin of a conflict that we shall find exemplified again and again. (40)

Advanced age, no matter one’s social status, believes Beauvoir, amounts to a horrifying, irreversible biological decline, and, ostensibly, a positive social context merely mitigates

a natural revulsion to old age. Indeed, in the well-known story of Gautama Buddha, founder of Buddhism, it is the appalling sight of an old man, along with the sights of a sick man and a corpse, which lead the young Prince Siddhārtha to reflect on the deep sufferings of humankind and inspire his renowned spiritual journey.¹²

Expressions of revulsion of old age abound both in the writings of antiquity and in the writings of modernity, to be sure. Montaigne is emphatic that age does not bring wisdom but instead brings physical and even moral decline. Disdainful of what he considered hypocritical attempts to convince otherwise, Montaigne writes in his *Essays*,

But mee thinks our soules in age are subject unto more importunate diseases and imperfections, then they are in youth. I said so being young, when my beardlesse chinne was upbraided me; and I say so againe, now that me gray beard gives me authority. We entitle wisdom, the frowardnesse of our humours, and the distaste of present things; but in truth wee abandon not vices, so much as we change them; and in mine opinion for the worse. Besides a sillie and ruinous pride, combersome tattle, wayward and unsotiable humors, superstition and ridiculous carking for wealth, when the use of it is well-nigh lost, I finde the more envie, injustice and leaudnesse in it. It sets more wrinckles in our mindes, then on our foreheads: nor are there any spirits, or very rare ones, which in growing old taste not sowrely and mustily. (3: 37)

Beauvoir notes that, paradoxically, although Montaigne thought that age had not

¹² The story of the Gautama Buddha is originally recorded in the *Jātaka*, which is a very large collection of early Indian literature.

enriched him, his essays became richer as he grew older (159-60).

Horace, Cicero's Epicurian contemporary, also expresses invective against old age in his *Ars Poetica* (*The Art of Poetry*):

An old man is surrounded by disadvantages, either because he seeks for something and refuses through miserliness to touch what he has found already; or because he conducts all his affairs with a cramped and trembling: always putting things off, reluctant in expectation, inactive, greedy for the future, difficult, complaining, given to praising the bygone days of his boyhood, ready to punish and criticize the young. The years as they come bring many advantages with them and take as many away as they withdraw. (lines 169-76)

One recalls nineteenth-century Victorian novelist Charles Dickens' iconic Ebenezer Scrooge, who is the embodiment of the mocked and bitter curmudgeon. Dickens' prose is masterful:

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas. (10-11)

Two of Horace's *Epodes*, VIII and XII, are unabashedly misogynistic and shockingly vulgar. Here is the first part of VIII:

You dare to ask me, you decrepit, stinking slut,
what makes me impotent?

And you with blackened teeth, and so advanced
in age that wrinkles plough your forehead,
your raw and filthy arsehole gaping like a cow's
between your wizened buttocks.

It's your slack breasts that rouse me (I have seen
much better udders on a mare)
your flabby paunch and scrawny thighs
stuck on your swollen ankles. (lines 1-10)

Old women indeed have often been considered piteous and even evil creatures. Countless numbers of elderly women accused of witchery have been—and are still today!—burned at the stake. The cannibalistic hag in the fairytale “Hansel and Gretel,” too, is an emblem of the horrifying evil old woman.

The Roman Juvenal's diatribe against old age in his *Satires* is unforgettable; Parkin remarks that it is “one of the most powerful and bitter attacks on *senectus* in the literature of the ancient world, if not all time” (*Old Age* 80). Here is a portion of Juvenal's *Satire*:

'Grant us a long life, Jupiter, O grant us many years!'

In health or sickness, this is your only prayer.

Yet how grisly, how unrelenting, are longevity's countless evils! Look first at your face: an ugly and shapeless caricature of itself. Your skin's now a scaly hide, you're all chapfallen, the wrinkles you've developed resemble nothing so much as those carved down the cheeks of some grandmotherly baboon in darkest Africa. Young men are all individuals: A will have better looks or brains than B, while B will beat A on muscle; but all old men look alike, with tremulous limbs and voices, bald pates, wet runny noses, like a baby's, and toothless gums with which they must mumble their bread: so repulsive to their wives, their children—indeed, themselves—that they arouse distaste even in legacy hunters. (X.188-202)

Juvenal next describes negative mental features of old age: “But worse than all bodily ills is his mental collapse, when he fails to remember the names of servants, or recognize the friend who was yesterday's host at dinner, let alone the children he begot and brought up” (X.233-36). Why desire a long life? The man with this desire did not learn his lesson from the story of the wretched Tithonus; the aged are doomed to suffer atrocious mental and physical diremption.

Eighteenth-century Jonathan Swift's immortal Struldbruggs in *Gulliver's Travels* are, like Tithonus, examples of the deplorable woes of immortality. Gulliver, when he discovers that immortal creatures exist, cries, “Happy nation where every child hath at

least a chance for being immortal! Happy people who enjoy so many living examples of ancient virtue, and have masters ready to instruct them in the wisdom of all former ages!” (209). Soon, however, he finds that the advanced age of the *Struldruggs* assuredly does not bring wisdom; rather, it brings misery, for the *Struldruggs* have, Swift explains, “not only the follies and infirmities of other old men, but many more which arose from the dreadful prospect of never dying. They were not only opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative, but incapable of friendship, and dead to all natural affection, which never descended below their grandchildren” (213). The *Struldruggs* lose power: they are unemployable and have no legal privileges, such as the ability to purchase land. Their physical condition deteriorates: They “lose their teeth and hair; they have at that age no distinction of taste, but eat and drink whatever they can get, without relish or appetite. The diseases they were subject to still continue without encreasing or diminishing” (214). They become senile: “In talking they forget the common appellation of things, and the names of persons, even those who are their nearest friends or relations” (214); and “they can never amuse themselves with reading, because their memory will not serve to carry them from the beginning of a sentence to the end” (214). Finally, worst of all, they cannot communicate with others:

The language of this country being always on the flux, the *Struldruggs* of one age do not understand those of another; neither are they able after two hundred years to hold any conversation (farther than a few general words) with their neighbours the mortals; and thus they lie under the disadvantage of living like foreigners in their own country. (214)

Strikingly, as society progresses, the Struldbruggs are left behind in their own private, bleak world. They are estranged from everyone. This is a novel and philosophically terrifying idea—old age is experienced as an entrapment in a world in which there is no meaningful connection with others.

In the above-cited passage by Juvenal there is another idea of particular interest. Juvenal writes, “but all old men look alike, with tremulous limbs and voices, bald pates, wet runny noses, like a baby’s, and toothless gums with which they must mumble their bread” (X.198-200). Juvenal alludes here to a longstanding and powerful theme—old age as second childhood. The physical and mental decline that many experience in their old age can lead to a deficient state seemingly comparable to the early developmental stages of a child. Crucially, this decline can lead to great dependence on others. Children, in particular, are often expected to care for their aged parents; this is true across time, and it is true across cultures.

In his most famous work, the satire *The Praise of Folly*, sixteenth-century humanist Erasmus rehearses the ancient words of Juvenal:

For what difference between them, but that the one has more wrinkles and years upon his head than the other? Otherwise, the brightness of their hair, toothless mouth, weakness of body, love of mild, broken speech, chatting, toying, forgetfulness, inadvertency, and briefly, all their other their actions agree in everything. Any by how much the nearer they approach to this old age, by so much they grow backward into the likeness of children, until they pass from life to death, without any weariness of the one, or sense of the other. (18)

Life comes around in a vicious and deadly circle: life ends as innocently and as senseless as it begins.

Satirists such as Juvenal and Erasmus, among countless others, depict old age as a second childhood quite cruelly; others depict the same theme quite sympathetically; either way it is depicted, however, the aged are cast as powerless and inferior. The recent, extraordinarily popular *Tuesdays with Morrie*, which was adapted into a television movie, recounts the touching relationship between a former student, Mitch, and his aging Professor, Morrie, who is dying from Lou Gehrig's disease. The two converse here about Morrie's decline. Interestingly, the conversation is a benevolent recasting of Erasmus' satiric observation that, as old age is so unpleasant, the gods assist with a "pleasant metamorphosis," which essentially amounts to senile dementia (17).

"Do you remember when I told Ted Koppel that pretty soon someone was gonna have to wipe my ass?" he said.

I laughed. You don't forget a moment like that.

"Well, I think that day is coming. That one bothers me."

Why?

"Because it's the ultimate sign of dependency. Someone wiping your bottom. But I'm working on it. I'm trying to enjoy the process."

Enjoy it?

"Yes. After all, I get to be a baby one more time." (49)

And, the poem "The Little Boy and the Old Man" by beloved contemporary children's author, Shel Silverstein, is strikingly poignant:

Said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon."

Said the little old man, "I do that too."

The little boy whispered, "I wet my pants."

"I do that too," laughed the little old man.

Said the little boy, "I often cry."

The old man nodded, "So do I."

"But the worst of all," said the boy, "it seems

Grown-ups don't pay attention to me."

And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand.

"I know what you mean," said the little old man. (95)

Although Silverstein paints a touching picture, full of love and empathy, we bemoan the insult of advanced age, which reduces the old man's grievous experiences to the level of those of a child. Moreover, and crucially, the obvious breakdown in the old age as a second childhood theme is a stark disanalogy between the old man and the child: the child's future possibilities are many and the old man's few.

In addition to physical and mental decline, the elderly suffer much more grievous losses: the loss of loved ones. The older one grows, the more likely one is to experience the pain of bereavement; and there is no greater pain than this. Death thus looms large and pervasive: old age means the approach of our own implacable death, and it means the utterly devastating experience of the death of precious loved ones. Cicero addresses the former *vituperatio* of old age in his *De Senectute*, but, despite the loss of his own daughter, he does not address the latter; Juvenal, however, does. In his *Satires*, Juvenal

relates,

If he [the old man] keeps his wits intact, though, he still must endure
the burial of his sons, the death of his dearly-beloved
wife and brother, urns filled with his sisters' ashes.
Such are longevity's penalties—perpetual grief,
black mourning, a world of sorrow, ever-recurrent
family bereavements to haunt one's declining years. (X.240-45)

Old age, it seems, is a lonely, desolate landscape, populated with loss and grief. One must endure mental and physical decline, loss of power and prestige, and nauseating, aching emptiness where life incandescent once existed.

CONCLUSION

Aging is an irreducible and ineluctable dimension of experience that embraces all human beings. This chapter has endeavored to canvass prominent conceptions of the elderly within the history of philosophy and in literature. In the next chapter, we shift from these overarching conceptions of the elderly, which are too much like pigeon holes, to individual experience. The leading questions are these: How is it with me as I age? How do I experience my time as time goes by? The topic of the next chapter is, hence, the phenomenological upshot of the common grievance "*I feel old.*"

CHAPTER III

KILLING TIME: AGING AS A PATHOLOGY OF BEING

I never wake up in the morning without finding life a little more devoid of interest than it was the day before. But what saddens me most is remembering my life as it was twenty years ago and then suddenly coming back into the present.

Jonathan Swift, April 5, 1729, at the age of sixty-two, “Swift to Viscount Bolingbroke and Pope”

In this chapter, we turn from our understandings of the aged to the *process* of aging. This process of aging, of course, begins at conception with the commencement of the mortal clock. If, following Kant, time and space are human constructs, then the weighty, nascent question that our existence in time raises is this: *How* does time go by for us? In radical constructivism, which has its roots in Kant’s work, reality may be independent of human experience, but *meaning* is not. We are the arbiters of meaning. We interpret the world. Thus the aim of this chapter is to understand how we experience time as time passes. The answer to this question constitutes the vertebral strand of any phenomenology of aging. Moreover, it is contended here that there are both salubrious and destructive ways of experiencing time. At its most salubrious, aging is a way of *participating* in time such that we are continuously transformed by our experience. At its most destructive, aging is a *withdrawal* from time: If, following process philosophers, we hold a relational ontology—that is, if the self is a bundle of relations—

then we stagnate and ultimately die an *ontological* death when we no longer build those relations and hence withdraw from time. An ontological death is the diagnosis for the absence of novelty and possibility in our lives. Thus it is clear that it is not only at the end of our physical lives that we die: Indeed, we can undergo a *living* death when we no longer are willing to be transformed by the flux of experience. Offered below are just three prongs of this baleful diagnosis: aging experienced as ontological lassitude, aging experienced as a vicious nostalgia, and, finally, aging experienced as obsolescence.

Note well: What becomes salient is the idea that the phenomenology of aging can cut much deeper than the imputed characteristic of increased wisdom or the more obvious manifestations of physical decay, both the subject matter of the previous chapter. Indeed, if we follow the existentialists and the classical American philosophers, particularly William James and John Dewey, the way in which we understand our experience of aging is transformed into an ontology that bespeaks an existential commitment. The working assumptions here are first, as Jean Paul Sartre's famous line goes, that "existence precedes essence" (348), and, second, the particularly American philosophical angle of vision, that of the supremacy of experience in shaping ontology. William James expresses this ontological sensibility incisively: In one of his diary entries, he writes, "Life shall [be built in]¹³ doing and suffering and creating" (*Letters* 148). To exist, thus, is to direct the cacophonous stimuli of the everyday such that we articulate an ontological understanding of ourselves; it is to grab hold of the uncertainty that is irrevocably interwoven into the fabric of our present; put simply, it is to decide

¹³ Editor's footnote to the bracketed words: MS. doubtful

what and how we will do that day with, if we make the pragmatic turn, an eye on the consequences. And, importantly, it is the choosing, not the choice, that is ontologically significant.

The human endeavor, then, in the American philosophical tradition, *requires* that we pay attention to our experience; the upshot of our existence depends upon it. William James is so vigilant about experience that his *weltanschauung*, radical empiricism, leaves nothing out:

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, *the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system.*¹⁴

(“World” 195)

James argues that philosophy should be restricted to what is directly experienced, and he argues that, unlike the view held by both rationalists and empiricists, relations must count as experiences themselves.¹⁵ Relations are the transitive parts of experience that relate the substantive parts; they constitute an affective fringe of focal experience.

James’ radical empiricism dovetails with his knowledge-by-acquaintance, constructivist

¹⁴ The emphasis on the text is James’.

¹⁵ David Lamberth clarifies how the view James holds about relations differs from the view held by rationalists and empiricists. He writes that, according to the view held by rationalists and empiricists, “while the particular determinate qualities of objects are given in experience, all of the relations among these same qualities or percepts are supplied *ex post facto* by the mind or consciousness which is the subject of these same experiences. Depending on whether one is an empiricist or rationalist at heart, relations are either accorded lesser or greater philosophical respect than the determinate content of the experience itself” (18). For James, relations are part of experience.

epistemology. He explains, “Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is *made*; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time” (“World” 201). Intelligibility itself thus comes from inside individual experience.

The relations are crucial: the world *is* the relational manifold. The world exists for us *inside* our experience. That is, the world gains its meaning from our experience of the world: we wrest meaning from the world, hand over hand, listening to the phenomena of experience, making relations, with an eye toward the future. Philosophy is, as James in one place expresses well, “our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos” (“Present Dilemma” 362). In James’ radical empiricism, experience is the metaphysical ground that preserves the ontological and epistemological immediacy of pluralistic phenomena and is, too, the burial site for pervasive ontological dualisms, such as the long-standing dualisms between the self and the world and the mind and the body; these dualisms, according to James, are functional—they are ways in which we interpret the flux of experience. An ontology of possibility, then, is one in which the flux of experience is heeded, is, in empirical terms, allowed to dialectally mold and re-mold conceptual knowledge. Reality is always up for revision: knowledge must be faithful to the messaging of experiencing.¹⁶

¹⁶ There is vigorous debate about the metaphysical claims of radical empiricism. For example, the case has been made that “pure experience” is metaphysically monistic; this view has had to reconcile, however, James’ claim that that he holds a metaphysical pluralism. There is also vigorous debate regarding the epistemological status of concepts relative to percepts. I have side-stepped this debate by merely pointing out the consensus that there is a dialectic relationship between percepts and concepts. It is worth noting here, as does Lamberth (39), that percepts themselves have been selected from the stream of experience in virtue of the selective interests of perception itself. As James remarks, “perception involves a twofold

James' philosophical sensibility is embraced and nuanced by John Dewey, whose own vision centers on the transactions between the human as a biological organism with its environment. For Dewey, relations affectively explored form the core of individual meliorism: We sally forth and then fall back, as in a rhythm, in-step and then out-of-step with nature. The stepping can be spiritually pedagogical, an achievement, when it brings with it a deepening and grounding awareness of the teeming complexity of connections that comprise the affairs of our everyday. We must, as Dewey says, be on the *qui vive*, be vigilant; we must listen to experience, as an animal with its nostrils flared and ears alert, waiting to respond to a sign from its environment. And, with "motion merging into sense and sense into motion," Dewey writes, the "past absorbed into the present carries on; [the live creature] presses forward" ("Experience as Aesthetic" 540).

Unfortunately, however, as contemporary American philosopher John J. McDermott often points out, Heraclitus warns us that the logos speaks, but no one listens,¹⁷ which, if we are to believe William James and John Dewey, is ontologically very dangerous indeed! This is especially the problem when it comes to aging: The process of aging—particularly in the aged—too often has been funded neither by the progression of existential injunctions to do nor by the classical American sensibility of possibility, but by, rather, metaphors of ontological erosion. It is only in youth that we see aging as a

choice. Out of all present sensations, we notice mainly such as are significant of absent ones; and out of all the absent associates which these suggest, we again pick out a very few to stand for the objective reality *par excellence*" ("Stream" 71).

¹⁷ For example, see page 133 of McDermott's essay "Possibility or Else! The Philosophy of William James" in *Drama*.

“becoming.” Youth is an ontological sprint within a universe of possibility. Along with Walt Whitman, the young call out,

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains
of my gab and loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world. (part 52.1-4)

This youthful yawp outstrips the passive inertia of any “civilized,” translated, aged philosophical concept. Youth here *is* possibility: It is a translation forever in the making; it is a Jamesian affective experiential fringe that is forever overflowing and breathing novelty into conceptual knowledge; it is the raw, creative powers of the individual to always make a place in the world.

We have seen in the previous chapter that Simone de Beauvoir, along with many others, understands aging to be a process of degeneration. According to Beauvoir,

Old age is not a mere statistical fact; it is the prolongation and the last stage of a certain process. What does this process consist of? In other words, what does growing old mean? The notion is bound up with that of change. Yet the life of the foetus, of the new-born baby and of the child is one of continuous change.

Must we therefore say, as some have said, that our life is a gradual death?

Certainly not. A paradox of this kind disregards the basic truth of life—life is an unstable system in which balance is continually lost and continually recovered: it is inertia that is synonymous with death. Change is the law of life.

And it is a particular kind of change that distinguishes ageing—an irreversible,

unfavorable change; a decline. The American gerontologist Lansing suggests this definition: ‘a process of unfavourable, progressive change, usually correlated with the passage of time, becoming apparent after maturity, and terminating invariably in death of the individual’. (11)

It is true that aging is a process, as Beauvoir maintains. And, indeed, it is true in great part that aging is a process of physical decline, which Beauvoir emphasizes in her doleful tome. Pollyanna views about growing old are blithely naïve about the possible depths of physical human suffering that stretch out, boundless, just below the surface of the personscape. As natural beings, our lives undergo the perpetual intransigent press of the nitrogen cycle. The ravages of time destroy visages, bend knees, mete out senility and bring societal opprobrium, and then there is death; these are eviscerating facts that none can deny. “Old age,” as Chateaubriand says, “is a shipwreck.”¹⁸ Shakespeare, in his *As You Like It*, quite famously agrees with Chateaubriand and Beauvoir. His description of the “seven stages of life” is overwhelmingly dismal.

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.

¹⁸ There is debate on whether this line should be attributed to Chateaubriand or Charles de Gaulle. I follow Wayne Booth, who sides with Chateaubriand on page 48 in his *The Art of Growing Older*, cited in the affixed Works Cited.

Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances,
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered Pantaloon
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (II.vii.139-66)

It is instructive to note that both Shakespeare and Beauvoir link the physically diremptive process of aging to its ultimate end—old age, and then, finally, death. Beauvoir is not alone: implicit in most discussions of aging is an assumption of advanced age. A child “grows up,” while an adult, on the other hand, ages. And it is true that *old* age is the concern of the previous chapter, which is a case in point—philosophical and literary conceptions about what it *means* to age are in fact inevitably connected to perceptions about the elderly. However, significantly, one need not *be* old to *feel* old. How many chronologically young and not-quite-old have plaintively confessed, “I feel old”? It thus does not seem that we should be so quick to associate the verb, “aging,” with the noun, “aged.” At nineteen, poet Christina Rossetti laments a youth gone too soon.

Oh roses for the flush of youth,
And laurel for the perfect prime;
But pluck an ivy branch for me
Grown old before my time. (34)

Rossetti’s experience of aging is one of spiritual lassitude, and, if we are to listen to William James and John Dewey, we might suspect that there is something much more sinister involved in the process of aging than physical decay. Indeed, it *is* much more sinister: Taking cue from the radically empiricist views of James and Dewey, it is contended here that the phenomenology of aging as decline constitutes nothing less than creative disengagement from the constant yet temporal, exhausting yet life-sustaining grappling to orient ourselves in a universe that, through this grappling, sustains our

Promethean ontological signature. Beauvoir, as quoted above, is at least partially correct: inertia is synonymous with death. However, Beauvoir must be qualified: she refers to inertia of bodily processes, whereas it is contended here that it is also an inertia of creative energy that is synonymous with death—that is, ontological death. The logos speaks, says Heraclitus; yet we do not hear it, and aging becomes the diagnosis of a disease that kills novelty, the cameo of inner life. This degenerative kind of aging becomes, paradoxically, a *withdrawal* from time, a renunciation of what makes us human.¹⁹

Offered here are just three ways in which we withdraw from time as time passes: aging experienced as ontological lassitude, aging experienced as a vicious nostalgia, and, finally, aging experienced as obsolescence. These are three ways in which we halt the

¹⁹ It is important to distinguish between Sartre's ideas about being from the ones presented here. According to Sartre, there are two types of being: being-in-itself, which is the content of prereflective experience, and being-for-itself, which is Sartre's term for consciousness. Being-for-itself makes individual experience happen by "negating" being-in-itself. This occurs when being-for-itself breaks being-in-itself apart into this and not-this and that and not-that. Thus, there is a perpetual process of negation and continuous movement into a future of possibility and uncertainty.

The activity of being-for-itself does not stop as long as one is physically alive, even if one is living inauthentically, or in bad-faith. We are always choosing what we will be, and this, according to Sartre, constitutes our freedom. When we live in bad-faith, we refuse to recognize that possibility is the ontological way in which we are in the world, and/or we refuse to appropriate our possibility by not making choices for ourselves. Thus, even when in bad-faith, we are free to deny our freedom and free let others make choices for us.

For James, in contrast, the activity of consciousness is tied up with the pragmatists' ideas about growth. Consciousness, like Sartre's being-for-itself, does indeed "interpret" the raw data of experience, although James would not say it does so through a process of negation. However, while always at work, our consciousness can fail to interpret our experience such that we do not spiritually grow and adapt to the world around us. And, in Dewey's language, when the "live creature" does not adapt, it dies. This is what is meant here by "ontological living death." These ideas are explored further in the text below.

In conclusion, a living death is not possible for Sartre's being-for-itself because being-for-itself is the negating activity of consciousness, which continues until physical death. It is asserted here that, while the activity of consciousness always goes on, we are ontologically dead when consciousness fails to pay attention and adapt to the phenomena.

messaging of experience, ways in which we spend the time just to pass the time—we kill time—as if life were just a hobby, which is what we do when the doing really does not matter.

AGING EXPERIENCED AS ONTOLOGICAL LASSITUDE

Living is wearisome. The press of the cosmos is constant and unforgiving, and we are fragile creatures indeed. It is nothing short of astonishing that most of us manage to muster the personal strength and stamina to confront the barrage, long day after long day and many a long night. We live through the doldrums, the business-as-usual, and the crises: boring routines, minor annoyances that accrue to treacherous proportions, health concerns, family and relationship struggles, work, personal devastation of many kinds, and, finally, the atrocities of planetary-wide social and economic injustice. This is the exhausting topography of modern survival.

Let us now, however, raise the stakes: let us make the activities of this arduous modern survival constitutive of our person. In the classical American and existentialist traditions, the self *is* the doing and suffering—is the relational, experiential manifold—and as long as living goes on, these activities go on. It is the *doing*—the reading of experiences—that is ontologically important, not the goal. As John J. McDermott often cautions, the nectar is in the journey, not in the destination: “it is the journey which yields the nectar. To ask of our journey that it yield surety as to its meaning other than its meaning *en passant* is to court spiritual arrogance” (*Drama* 234). This mortal journey is one of immediate, pressing ontological participation.

It is utterly perplexing and ultimately vexing, then, that our “lives of quiet desperation,” in which we are as industrious as worker ants²⁰ but are yet buried alive under the drudge and dross, lacks ontological finesse. The lachrymose question that inevitably comes to the fore is “is this all that there is?” Time becomes more palpable, even obstreperous as we age. It embodies an exhausting Sisyphean struggle in which one is utterly dismayed to find that the journey is all one has—is all one *is*—that the journey is difficult, it is often banal, and there is no rest. There is always another boulder to push up the hill. Being on the *qui vive* is exhausting, and knowledge that one *should* be on the *qui vive*, that the “inmost nature of reality is,” as James illuminates “congenial to *powers* which you possess” (“Sentiment” 331) is metaphysical responsibility at its most stark and overwhelming: every second is precious.

This existential anguish, which is, as Thomas R. Flynn relates, “our experience of the possible as the locus of our freedom” (67), is a paramount concern in the existentialist tradition. It is also paramount for James, who has a deep and abiding existentialist sensibility. As John J. McDermott tells us, the vertebral strands guiding James’ work are his “personal confrontation with nihilism; his belief in a continuous, intelligible, but unfinished universe; and his attempt to develop a method of inquiry which does justice to the processive quality of both nature and man” (“Introduction” xx). It is also, however, important to mark a difference between James and traditional existentialist sensibility, to which McDermott alludes in the quotation above. James’

²⁰ It is perhaps the most quoted phrase in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (7). In a letter to a friend, Thoreau writes, “It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about?” (“To Harrison Blake” 371).

radical empiricism is a metaphysical account of how we are contextually jointed to the world; our personal identity always develops in and through shared relations. Thus, although we are free to existentially create the character of our own lives, it is *not* a capricious “anything goes”: there is a restraint that originates *inside* relationships; this is one of the great insights of James’ (and John Dewey’s) pragmatism. We dialectally respond to the “push and pressure of the cosmos” (James, “Present Dilemma” 362). Thus the despair that permeates James’ life, McDermott suggests, should be understood not in terms of an existentialist alienation, but, rather, in “the context of a classical Stoic setting, with the bond to nature accepted but the resignation and impossibility of novelty rejected” (“Introduction” xxx).

James’ radical empiricism is an ontology of temporal possibility; and, it is only in an ontology of possibility, in which the future is open, that we can have ontological uncertainty. Uncertainty, unlike possibility, highlights the utter fragility of our existence. We cannot, like Descartes, resolve uncertainty by simply meditating on what we already know: There *never* is full intelligibility. This is important for John Dewey, in particular, who urges a cessation of the “quest for certainty.”²¹ According to Dewey,

²¹ See, in particular, Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action*, which is in *The Later Works, Volume 4*, cited in the affixed Works Cited. Here Dewey maintains that knowledge of the world is experimental. That is, knowledge is a transactional affair; it comes through our interactions. Thus, thought and action are merely functional distinctions of the experimental approach to knowledge. We can also reject the distinction between the knower and the known. This distinction presumes that we can come to know the world as it exists outside of our experience of it. Knowing, thus, is *not* a state of certainty. Rather, it is a process; it is a mode of doing. The “quest for certainty” is a misguided attempt to separate both theory from practice and knowledge from action. It would be a terrible mistake, however, to infer that Dewey believed that all knowledge is cognitive. Dewey writes that “things are *had* before they are things cognized” (*Later Works* 1:28). Our experience of the world is, first and foremost, qualitative. James and Dewey are seamless on this: According to James, relations are *felt*. The world is affectively “fringed,” open and ultimately ineffable.

knowledge is a transactional affair between the individual and the world, and is, by its very nature, uncertain. Traditional philosophy, Dewey accuses, has essentially “translated into a rational form the doctrine of escape from the vicissitudes of existence by means of measures which do not demand an active coping with conditions” (“Escape” 366). For Dewey and for James, uncertainty and chaos are woven into the fabric of nature itself. It is with characteristic spirit that James reveals,

I find myself willing to take the universe to be really dangerous, and adventurous, without therefore backing out and crying ‘no play.’ I am willing to think that the prodigal-son attitude, open to us as it is in many vicissitudes, is not the right and final attitude toward the whole of life. I am willing that there should be real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is. I can believe in the ideal as an ultimate, not as an origin, and as an extract, not the whole. When the cup is poured off, the dregs are left behind for ever, but the possibility of what is poured off is sweet enough to accept. (“Pragmatism” 470)

According to James, there are no absolutes in which we are absorbed. Novelty is real: Thus, it is in the dregs of uncertainty that James finds a sustaining power that spurs and undergirds his pragmatism. The question, “why am I here,” is an experiential surd; it begs the absolute. But the question “what am I to do,” does not: life is built, answers James, and it is built in relations. And so we build until we die.

To be sure, there is no ontological uncertainty—and no possibility—in deterministic philosophical traditions such as Stoicism. There is no Whitman yawp, no Dylan Thomas' advice,

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at the close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (148)

Sophocles' Chorus, instead, chants a Stoic liturgy of ontological acceptance:

Whoever craves a longer life than his allotted span
That man
I count a fool. For what do more days add
But to his sum of grief, and not of pleasure,
If he endure beyond his appointed measure? (*Oedipus* 139)

We are not free, according to the Stoic tradition. In a spiritual solidarity between the self and the natural world, our lives pass by in appointed, increasingly difficult and tragic stages until we return to dust. The Stoic response to the irrevocable passage of mortal time is a powerful palliative sensibility of *aequanimitas*, which is, as nineteenth-century physician Sir William Osler describes, a spiritual imperturbability, a “coolness and presence of mind under all circumstances, calmness amid storm, clearness of judgement in moments of grave peril, immobility, impassiveness, or, to use an old and expressive word, *phlegm*” (4). The appropriate attitude is not, as in the existential tradition, angst, and, not, as in James' and Dewey's estimation, an “active coping.” Life,

on the Stoic view, unfolds according to a rational plan, in which there is no surprise and no novelty.

For James, on the contrary, it is the individual will that makes the existential difference. Here he marvels somewhat bemusedly that our ontological worth be decided by our own heroic will to participate in the rhythm of our surrounding environs: “If the ‘searching of our hearts and reins’ be the purpose of this human drama, then what is sought seems to be what effort we can make. He who can make none is but a shadow; he who can make much is a hero” (“Will” 425). James continues,

“*Will you or won’t you have it so?*” is the most probing question we are ever asked; we are asked it every hour of the day, and about the largest as well as the smallest, the most theoretical as well as the most practical, things. We answer by *consents or non-consents* and not by words. What wonder that these dumb responses should seem our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things! What wonder if the effort demanded by them be the measure of our worth as men! What wonder if the amount which we accord of it were the one strictly underived and original contribution we make to the world! (426)

Woe to those who are weary of the rhythm, the effort! They are but shadows, and they *feel* like shadows—dull and lost, out of breath, out of place—old. They have lost the ability to translate experience into spiritual nutrition. Aging experienced as decline amounts to a weariness of the will—an ontological lassitude—that need not be tied to the number of years one has lived.

Examples of ontological lassitude abound, such as that exhibited in Christina Rossetti's poem, quoted above; but the life of Nikolai Kuzmich, as penned by Rainer Maria Rilke in his *The Notes of Malte Laurids Brigge*, is a lassitude stemming from existential angst that has degenerated into a fatal paralysis. Rilke writes that Nikolai realizes that he has still some time to live and that it "occurred to him that these years could be changed into days, into hours, into minutes—indeed, if only one had the endurance, into seconds; and he figured and figured and attained a sum the like of which he had never seen. He felt dizzy. He had to steady himself" (138). After calculating his time left to the second, Nikolai realizes that he is squandering much of it. He thus resolves to save time. He "got up earlier, washed himself less elaborately, drank his tea standing up, ran to his office, and arrived far too early" (138). Then "something strange happened. He felt a draft past his face, past his ears, he felt it on his hands. He stood aghast. The window was shut tight. And as he was sitting there with wide open eyes in his dark room, he began to understand that what he felt now was time itself as it passed by" (140). Nikolai feels the earth moving under his feet; he reels around. "Lie down and keep quiet, he had once read somewhere. "And since then," Rilke tells us, "Nikolai Kuzmich has been lying" (140). If who I am is what I do, if experience is the heart of this human drama and is the very touchstone of inquiry, then the vital question is this: what do I *do* with the time that I have? Nikolai does nothing with his time; he has no experiences; he is but a shadow. Time goes by for him, to be sure—he *feels* it—but he does not participate in time. Unfortunately, Nikolai, like many, has died a living death.

Nikolai Kuzmich and others beset by ontological lassitude are Jamesian shadows for whom possibility has expired. They “move through the world concavically”; this is a phrase of John J. McDermott’s,²² which can ultimately be traced back to Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau’s use of the term “concave” in a letter to describe one of his acquaintances is revealing and to the point.

The former (Channing) is a concave man, and you see by his attitude and the lines of his face that he is retreating from himself and from yourself, with sad doubts. It is like a fair mask swaying from the drooping boughs of some tree whose stem is not seen. He would break with a conchoidal fracture. You feel as if you would like to see him when he has made up his mind to run all the risks. (“To R.W. Emerson” 96)

To move through the world concavically is to violate the ontologically participatory demands of a rhythm between oneself and the hearsay of experience. Old, overwhelmed, overcommitted, and so very tired, we shut down, hide, and go through the motions. To stop choosing is to stop deciding how to take the world into one’s life; it is to lose the ongoing battle to effect the transformation of the self. To choose is always to begin again—it is a rebirth—and those who do not choose stagnate and die.

AGING EXPERIENCED AS A VICIOUS NOSTALGIA

The central thesis of pragmatism, as William James writes, is that there “can *be* no

²² For example, in “A Lost Horizon” McDermott writes, “If we move through the world concavically, then that which is given to us is shrunk by the narrowing, closing of our a priori schema” (12-13). Moving through the world concavically means to shut out possibility, and, although McDermott does not use the phrase to explicitly describe ontological lassitude, the existential implication of ontological lassitude is a preclusion of possibility.

difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere . . ." ("What Pragmatism Means" 379). It is devastating then that, for most of us, there comes a time in our lives when we feel that *we* do not make a difference anymore. It is as if we speak, but we very well might *not* have spoken; we get out of bed to go to work, but we very well might *not* have gotten out of bed at all. It is, indeed, as if the time that we spend to live a meaningful life is time wasted. If who we are is what we do, and if, as in pragmatism, how we understand the consequences of our actions both funds and posits the possibilities we envision for ourselves, then not making a difference arrests possibility and is, in short, an ontological death trap. Moving through life is reduced to a struggle to subsist, to a mere continuation of breathing absent good reason to breathe. Irrelevant, discounted, and powerless, the biologically-based deterioration of memory in senescence assumes terrible ontological significance—it is a sign that we are fading away.

“Null”: this is how Congregationalist minister John Ames in Marilynne Robinson's contemporary fictional autobiography *Gilead* describes his elderly grandfather. As a boy, Ames recalls travelling with his grandfather to watch a baseball game. They were eager with anticipation because, as his grandfather says, “there was not a man on this round earth who could outrun or outthrow Bud Fowler” (46). However, the game is an immense disappointment—*nothing* happens—and, as Ames shares with his readers, it “was not long after the trip to Des Moines that we lost him, or he lost himself” (47). Ames reflects on this grievous loss of his grandfather:

I read somewhere that a thing that does not exist in relation to anything else cannot itself be said to exist. I can't quite see the meaning of a statement so

purely hypothetical as this, though I may simply lack understanding. But it does remind me of that afternoon when nothing flew though the air, no one slid or drifted or tagged, when there was no waltz at all, so to speak. It seems to me that the storm had put an end to it, as if it were a fire to be put out, an eruption into this world of an alarming kind of nullity. “There was silence in heaven for about half an hour.” It seems a little like that as I remember it, though it went on a good deal longer than half an hour. Null. That word has real power. My grandfather had nowhere to spend his courage, no way to feel it in himself.

That was a great pity. (47)

We exist, according to James and Dewey, always within a context of relationships; McDermott calls this our relational fabric. What is to be done, then, when we find ourselves in old age exiled from the relationships that give our lives such brilliance and purpose by, to take two examples, a passé vision, such as the case of John Ames’ grandfather, or by a culture that treasures “new and fresh approaches” and all the vapidness these approaches entail? Disappointment, pain, bitterness, and guilt—these are the emotions of an individual whose relational fabric is ripped apart by insidious exclusion. Over time, it can become increasingly difficult to envision a future in which we have a palpable presence. Aristotle’s inveigh against the elderly is trenchant: “They live by memory rather than by hope; for what is left to them of life is but little as compared with the long past; and hope is of the future, memory of the past” (*Rhetoric* 1390a5-8). We are lost when we lose hope that we can make a difference—that others will hear and consider us—and we become pessimistic. The soothing advice “It’s

always darkest before the dawn” is moot when there is *no* approaching dawn. In a future devoid of interest, like Jonathan Swift’s, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, we are unable to move forward, and we become like Swift’s terrifying *Struldbruggs*—cast aside; obsolete. “The *Struldbruggs* of one age do not understand those of another; neither are they able after two hundred years to hold any conversation (farther than a few general words) with their neighbours the mortals; and thus they lie under the disadvantage of living like foreigners in their own country” (*Gulliver’s* 214).

For those who do not anticipate the dawn, the past can be captivating. With a sensibility of entitlement, as in “I did my time,” we honor the past with endless reconnoiter, effectively reliving the era in which we were relevant: This is a vicious nostalgia. It is one of the ways in which we live concavically, in which we withdraw from the world. The past has powerful reach: it envelops us like a bell jar, and it is enough for us that we once were. We live with memories; we live as a memory. Even beloved heroes have “their time”—the glory days of their prime, which inevitably pass away. Here is the iconic *Beowulf*:

and we took our places at the banquet table.

There was singing and excitement: an old reciter,

a carrier of stories, recalled the early days.

At times some hero made the timbered harp

tremble with sweetness, or related true

and tragic happenings; at times the king

gave the proper turn to some fantastic tale,

or a battle-scarred veteran, bowed with age,
would begin to remember the martial deeds
of his youth and prime and be overcome
as the past welled up in his wintry heart. (Heaney lines 2104-14)

Fondly recalling the past is not in itself the problem and is, indeed, a virtue.

Philosopher George Santayana famously wrote that “Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it” (284). Santayana means, of course, that those who do not learn from their past mistakes are doomed to repeat those mistakes. Remembrance becomes pathologic when it is not creative; when there is no reach between our past and present experiences; when we do not bring the past into the present context. Instead, we are seduced by the complete intelligibility found in the repetitious rehearsal of events. When we are “alert,” in William James’ words, “to an ‘ever not quite’ to all our formulas, and novelty and possibility forever leaking in” (qtd. in Perry 386)—when old experiences are re-experienced and when the relations between experiences change such that new facets of meaning are forged—then there *is* intelligibility. *Complete* intelligibility, however, is an impossibility. Søren Kierkegaard expresses this quite strikingly in one of his diary entries. He writes that

It is quite true what Philosophy says: that Life must be understood backwards.
But that makes one forget the other saying: that it must be lived—forwards.
The more one ponders this, the more it comes to mean that life in the temporal
existence never becomes quite intelligible, precisely because at no moment can

I find complete quiet to take the backward-looking position. (“1843” pt. 5, sect. 4, no. 136)

Living forwards is an effort to ameliorate the present by a willingness to be transformed by the ever-novel circumstances of experience. It is in nostalgia that we pessimistically stop living forwards, and we permanently assume the “backward-looking position.”

Trapped in a private universe populated with memories of past figures, we sever connections with all others as we attempt to communicate with them via an experience that no longer has experiential purchase. We live then in a ghostly universe that is ours alone.

AGING EXPERIENCED AS OBSOLESCENCE

We now turn from a discussion of the possible consequences of becoming obsolete in senescence, namely, turning towards nostalgia, to a discussion of living *as* obsoleting.

Those who are not deadened by nostalgia and lassitude press on—they live forwards.

For William James and John Dewey, this living forwards means that we are open to the pedagogy of experience. The world impinges on our relational fabric, and we dialectally adapt to the world. This adaptation is transformation of the “live creature,” according to Dewey, in order to cope in its environment. This transformation is an achievement; it is the human creative effort to evaluate the affective and cognitive dimensions of life in order to live forward in a meaningful way.

It is thus in this very rich sense of living forward in a meaningful way that we can understand Dewey’s statement, “Philosophy is criticism” (“Context” 19). Dewey believes that, at its most fundamental level, philosophy is a corrective: For Dewey the

practice of philosophy is essentially the pedagogical subjection of our established concepts to the crucible of experience—this is what he means by “criticism”—in order to make a better way. In other words, we listen to the messaging of experience. The following is the above quotation by Dewey in its full context:

Philosophy is criticism; criticism of the influential beliefs that underlie culture; a criticism which traces the beliefs to their generating conditions as far as may be, which tracks them to their results, which considers the mutual compatibility of the elements of the total structure of beliefs. Such an examination terminates, whether so intended or not, in a projection of them into a new perspective which leads to new surveys of possibilities. (“Context” 19)

Philosophy as criticism is never finished: “reflection,” says Dewey “is native and constant” (“Need for a Recovery” 61). Philosophy, then, is not separate from our living; it is a description of *how* it is that we live. If we are living forward, we are in the world in a critical way, which, in turn, opens up possibilities. “Criticism,” thus, is not a disparaging term. It is, rather, the often qualitative way in which we continuously evaluate our existential situation; it is the way we pay attention to the fringe and focus of experience for new relational leads. Following these relational leads and the possibilities they entail enriches what it means to be a human being and is the sense in which human beings progress.

Crucial in the passage above is Dewey’s point that philosophical examination of an existing structure of beliefs has the capacity to transform those beliefs into a new perspective. Transformative criticism, according to Dewey, does not require that we

substitute whole-sale some beliefs for others. Instead, we *alter* beliefs such that a new perspective is gained. Progression, then, does not mean that we truncate the past experiences in which our beliefs have come to fruition, as if they are merely an embarrassing mistake. Rather, we are loyal to the existential validity and import of *all* of our experiences. We hold these experiences close so that, when the context of our lives changes, our past experiences can be reconnoitered, reflected upon, and even undergone again so that new meaning is gathered. The past therefore can have extraordinary vitality. Dewey relates that, “The live creature adopts its past; it can make friends with even its stupidities, using them as warnings which increase present wariness” (“Experience as Aesthetic” 539). For Dewey, being open to the abiding salutary capacity of our own past experience is what makes personal growth and creative advance possible.

James’ revolutionary early work on consciousness, which forms the basis of his later radical empiricism, dovetails well with Dewey’s understanding of transformative criticism. According to James, the past, present, and future are fundamentally interconnected within a stream of consciousness. Change is the flowing of one into the other; there are no discrete blocks of time between which we can jump when our loyalties change. James provides the following striking illustration:

The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this

free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it,—or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same *thing* it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood. (“Stream” 45-46)

There is no intrinsic separateness: the separations that constitute things are pragmatically cut out of the flow of consciousness. Each discrete thing is thus bathed by an inchoate, implicit dimension of relations—by, in James’ words, a “halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it.” It is thus always possible to reconstruct things by changing the flow. Counter-currents, eddies, and percolations: these are the fluid exertions of consciousness that convert old into new. Furthermore, it is always possible to reconstruct *every* experience ever had: Each experience is an event haloed by the inchoate. We can reach back and change our histories by allowing the inchoate to speak, and it is in this way that our experiences grow. We are thus not *only* our stories: we are our undergoings.

Both James and Dewey advocate a rich, processive ontological pluralism that embraces a developmental character of reality and that supports contextual value judgments. This pluralism is the backbone of Dewey’s transformative criticism.

Unfortunately, however, while it is true that we live, as the trite saying goes, in very critical times, the kind of criticism that predominates is not Dewey's understanding of progress through transformative criticism. The critical times in which we live *subvert* rather than enhance community values: Progress requires that we extirpate an antiquated past—as if it were dead weight—and criticism thus takes the form of an assault.

Progress in this insidious sense is marked by experiential obsolescence. We jettison our own experiences in the name of something more fashionable, and, equally capricious towards other's experiences, we attack to demonstrate their inadequacies. It is a rat-race to expose faults and to conquer: We tear down as soon as we build, laughing at our ineptitude, and then we tear down what others have built, boasting of our superiority.

Aging in this way is a superficial contest. To stay young *means* to maintain maximal productivity; it does *not* mean the infinitely more ambiguous and profound aspiration to maintain *vitality*. Success is assessed by trajectory measurements, not by a sense of inward depth and outward vision. The virtue of patience has been vitiated, and the deep notions of roots, origins, and biography have been obliterated because, as the saying goes, “that was *then*.” The search for the Fountain of Youth to reverse human aging is far from new;²³ what is new, however, is that the search is almost completely characterized by a refusal to reckon with the historicity of our own persons.

It is important to note that obsoleting the past is not the same as forgetting the past. We may forget events, but these events are not erased: they become quiet as they slip

²³ A wonderful resource on this topic is Gerald J. Gruman's *A History of Ideas about the Prolongation of Life*. New York: Springer Publishing Co., Inc., 2003. Print. Classics in Longevity and Aging Series.

back into the inchoate thickness of experience. These past events are hidden, perhaps not even available to retrospection; yet they are not unknown. Later, perhaps years later, there is another event—a perturbation—and this creates an aperture through which the past emerges and speaks, perhaps utterly transforming the way in which life is presently lived. The old, once ambient, experience is re-experienced, and it is in this re-experiencing that novelty is gleaned and along with it the potential for healing. To quote John Dewey again, “What the live creature retains from the past and what it expects from the future operate as directions in the present. . . . The past absorbed into the present carries on; [the live creature] presses forward” (“Experience as Aesthetic” 540). Past experience is interpolated into the present, and the live creature makes its way, sometimes tentatively, sometimes boldly, but always with ontological anticipation—that is, with a watchful eye on the consequences.

In contrast, when we obsolete the past, we spend our time fending it off. And, indeed, while this obsoleting does prevent us from facing a wreckage of a past, it also prevents us from celebrating and learning from it. Obsolescence, then, can be a capricious weapon of self-denial and deception that inures us of the ameliorative, miscible reach between experiences. In James’ terminology, it halts the flow. John J. McDermott opines,

I take obsoleting as a casting-off, a burying alive of our potentially memoried experiences, thereby snapping, scissoring the organic continuity of our person. The more I obsolete my past, the less present I am to and for myself. If we fudge, smudge, and bury our personal history, inclusive of events, smells, and

things, we find ourselves dragging around an experiential cemetery. Our commitment to present-mindedness, a contemporary euphemism for narcissism, paradoxically renders us empty. (“Lost Horizon” 9)

The self, according to James, is a processive bundle of teeming relations. In the mighty race to innovate, we repress and excoriate the personal entanglements that together constitute our very existence, thus debasing the seriousness of our mortal situation. Living by obsoleting is a living that is vacuous. Aging with a finger perpetually on the delete button eviscerates living.²⁴

CONCLUSION

Aging experienced as ontological lassitude, as vicious nostalgia, and as obsolescence are the phenomenological diagnoses of relational inanition—living death. If we experience life in these ways, one day we will turn inside, like Mary from Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, and find nothing there. Mary admits, “I’ve become such a liar. I never lied about anything once upon a time. Now I have to lie, especially to myself. But how can you understand, when I don’t myself. I’ve never understood anything about it, except that one day long ago I found I could no longer call my soul my own” (93; act 2). Lost and empty, Mary retreats into the fog of a morphine-induced nostalgia, in which, in Mary’s words, “no one can find or touch you any more” (98; act 3). Like Mary, William James’ sister, Alice James, was, at the age of forty-three, empty. She expresses her grief,

²⁴ McDermott writes that “We live at a time characterized by the delete button” (“Lost Horizon” 10).

The fact is, I have been dead so long and it has been simply such a grim shoving of the hours behind me as I faced a ceaseless possible horror, since that hideous summer of '78, when I went down to the deep sea, its dark waters closed over me and I knew neither hope nor peace; that now it's only the shriveling of an empty pea pod that has to be completed. (230)

To have a presence is to be active in time, experientially engaged in a present *and* in a past that, through this engagement, has the open-ended capacity to give life meaning; this, indeed, is the activity of possibility. To be alive is to listen to experience; aging is a dying when we stop listening. The optimistic message, however, is that our experience of aging *can* be reconstructed: Time passes to be sure, but instead of extinguishing meaning in its wake, time can be the fertile ground in which we can *create* meaning. Wayne Booth eloquently alludes to this positive capacity of time in his anthology on aging with his insight that while authors “are quite certain, at the time of writing, that the only honest statement must be negative, they are caught in the great paradox of creativity: to speak to, or about, or against the *nothingness* is to make *something* and to demonstrate that making is one of life's possibilities” (47). Importantly, this paradox of creativity signals that we can choose *how* it is that we undergo our aging. We can choose to reconstruct our experience of aging such that character of time changes from a process of destruction into one of creative genesis. “Making” is the grandest of all life's possibilities.

CHAPTER IV

DEATH: THE PRAGMATIST PERSPECTIVE

A little longer grace, and I'll pay the shot out of my own pocket: meanwhile Epicurus will oblige me. He says, 'Practise death'—or, if it's more aptly put so, how to pass over to—ourselves. The meaning here's plain: it's a splendid thing to learn thoroughly how to die. Perhaps you think it superfluous to learn an accomplishment you'll only have to use once. That's the very reason why we're bound to practise it: we must be for ever learning a thing our knowledge of which we can't test.

Seneca, "Letter XXVI"

The following Buddhist tale is ancient, and there are many variations. A traveler, fleeing a tiger that is chasing him, jumps down into a dried-up well in order to escape. Above him the beast snarls. Suddenly, below him, he hears another snarl and, behold, there is another creature—a dragon—leering up at him. He catches hold of a branch that grows from a crevice of the well, and the branch suspends him midway between the tiger and the dragon. The traveler dare not climb out; he dare not drop down. Soon his hands begin to weaken, and his body begins to tire. As he looks around, he notices two mice, one white and one black, evenly circling around the base of the branch on which he hangs, gnawing at it. He realizes that he will inevitably perish. Then, in front of him, he sees drops of honey clinging to a few leaves on the branch. He leans out, reaches the honey with his tongue, and laps it up.

We thus, as Leo Tolstoy reflects on this allegory, perilously “hang on the branch of life” as time—symbolized by the white and black mice—gnaws away at it (19). Faced with the radical and ineluctable finitude of our existence, Tolstoy wonders, “What is the point of living? What is the point of wanting anything? What is the point of doing anything?” (24). He asks further, “Is there in my life any meaning that will not be extinguished by the inevitable death that awaits me?” (24). These simple questions, Tolstoy emphasizes, “without which life is not possible,” lie “in the soul of every person, from a stupid child to an old man of great wisdom” (24). Tolstoy is right.

Finitude, of course, is a euphemism for death, and our approaching physical death becomes more palpable as we age. Time demands sacrifices and hence becomes increasingly obstreperous: the innocence of youth quickly evaporates, our children age, the body deteriorates, and our loved ones suffer and die. These events mark the approaching end of our lives: The final stage of our own senescence is death. Especially in later years, then, the process of aging is tied to its ultimate outcome. This contiguity of aging and death is fairly modern: in the centuries before medical advancement, infant mortality was extraordinarily high by modern standards, and, in general, life was uncertain. However, even now, despite our modern skill at prolonging life, death is the only thing that is certain.

What, then, especially as the end draws near in senescence, do we think about Tolstoy’s questions? What *is* death? These are venerated but personal questions, ones that we keep locked away in the recesses of our interiors, ones that emerge in many different shapes throughout our lives. Moreover, crucially, it is not only at the end of

our physical lives that we die; indeed, the main point of Chapter III is that we can undergo a *living* death. If the self is a bundle of relations—that is, if we hold a relational ontology—then we stagnate and ultimately die an *ontological* death when we no longer build those relations; when we no longer are willing to be transformed by the ongoing flux of experience. An ontological death is the diagnosis for the absence of novelty and possibility in our lives. If death, thus, is tied to our experience—if we die when our experience dies, not only with our physical bodies—then what distinguishes physical death? More specifically, does physical death terminate experience, or does experience somehow survive physical death?

In Western culture, physical death is either one of two events: oblivion or a path to immortality.²⁵ To suffer oblivion at death is to be erased from the universe; immortality, however, is not so singularly defined. In his *Self, God, and Immortality*, Eugene Fontinell catalogues six meanings. The first is personal immortality, and it is perhaps the most familiar to us. In personal immortality, the “I” survives physical death. In the relational ontology defended here, personal immortality would have to be one in which a self that interprets the flux of experience endures. Admittedly, it is not clear what an enduring self that interprets experience amounts to as experience takes place in time, and time is a feature of human existence, of which we run out at death. Perhaps, however, we could allow for the continued existence of an active self outside of time that builds

²⁵ The belief in reincarnation, so prevalent in Eastern culture, will not be addressed here. Second, this dichotomy between oblivion and immortality is admittedly too simple. Resurrection, for example, is very important to theological doctrine. Resurrection occurs *in* time, and individuals gain new bodies. The apostle Paul, however, conflates resurrection and immortality, and this chapter will follow suit.

relations of some kind.²⁶ The remaining five versions of immortality that Fontinell lists are the following: absolute spirit immortality, in which we are immortal insofar as we are absorbed with the Eternal Spirit, the Everlasting God, or the One; cosmic immortality, in which we are immortal insofar as we emerge from and return to the cosmos or nature; ideal immortality, in which we are immortal insofar as we participate in timeless values or eternal ideals; achievement immortality, in which we are immortal through our creative acts or deeds; and posterity immortality, in which we are immortal through our children, the community, or the race (20-21).

Whether death results in some mode of immortality or in oblivion is something we cannot know for certain, for death is not an event that we can experience. We can only experience our dying and the loss of others. At this point it is important to remember that pragmatism asserts that personal experience *is* the stuff of reality; it dispenses with the transcendental, which, it stresses, is an abstraction. “Knowledge of sensible realities,” as William James writes, “comes to life inside the tissue of experience” (“World” 201). Experience is thus the only suitable resource for beliefs, and the only knowledge that we can have about death and what follows it, incomplete as it may be, is rooted in our actual experiencing.

Fontinell maintains that, while pragmatism does not allow guarantees, we can speculate about what *might* happen at death by extrapolating from concrete experience.

²⁶ The reader is referred to Fontinell’s chapter “Immortality: A Pragmatic-Processive Model” for a discussion of cosmic growth tied to creative action. Fontinell claims that it “is the task of self-creativity begun in this life that must be extrapolated as continuing in any new life” (213). Fontinell then quotes John Shea: “When time and history are not viewed as terrors but as mediums of human development, heaven will not be viewed as external and static perfection. Heaven will be a time for continued growth and moral progress” (qtd. 213).

He asserts that

pragmatism does not hesitate to venture some metaphysical guesswork or construct some metaphysical myths by way of extrapolation from concrete experience as to what characterizes reality or the world. While, on the basis of what is available to human experience, there can be no absolute origin or absolute end, still we can discern and/or speculate about possible directions and opt to work for some directions and against others. Such efforts, of course, must be energized by beliefs and hopes, which, though not “provable,” are nevertheless “reasonable.” (10)

Further, it can be added, we can evaluate these reasonable beliefs about death by subjecting those beliefs to the “test” of experience: that is, we can ask ourselves whether our experience continues to support our beliefs. Pragmatism asserts that, as the world is unfinished—always in the making—we are always epistemically fallible. Thus all reflective knowledge, including our beliefs and our concepts about God and an after-life are tentative and subject to revision in light of continuing experience.²⁷

²⁷ Fontinell argues that any pragmatic extrapolation of the future must fulfill the following four conditions:

First, it must proceed from data given in experience. Second, this projected future must be plausible—that is, it must not be in fundamental conflict with the data from which it is an extrapolation. Third, the future state must be sufficiently different from the present state so that the future is not merely the present indefinitely extended. Fourth and most important, the extrapolation must render our present life—in both its individual and communal aspects—more meaningful, more significant, and more rich. (19-20)

Fontinell then develops in fascinating detail a relational “field model” of the self, in which the divine and human consciousness are continuous. This model, he contends, which is most congenial to James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, supports belief in immortality by fulfilling the first three above conditions. This chapter, however, will not endeavor to demonstrate that particular beliefs about death are reasonable given particular data of experience. Rather, it will be assumed that the self is relational, and the work in this chapter will endeavor to show that particular beliefs about death are pragmatically

Therefore, the crucial point relevant to this discussion is that any belief, including our beliefs about death, must be *lived*: We *live* what death means. In pragmatism, then, questions about the meaning of death must be rephrased more explicitly to the following: How do our beliefs about death transform our experience? Death's meaning must be located within the experiential flow of human life. In the words of William James, "There are concepts, however, the image-part of which is so faint that their whole value seems to be functional. 'God,' 'cause,' 'number,' 'substance,' 'soul,' for example suggest no definite picture; and their significance seems to consist entirely in their *tendency*, in the further turn which may give to our action or our thought" ("Percept and Concept" 1012). Oblivion and immortality are indeed concepts, vague concepts, to be sure. James continues by outlining the method that will be employed in this chapter to evaluate our beliefs about these concepts—the pragmatic method, or what he calls in the following passage the "pragmatic rule": "The pragmatic rule is that the meaning of a concept may always be found, if not in some sensible particular which it directly designates, then in some particular difference in the course of human experience which its being true will make" (1012). Death's meaning is the *difference* that its being true makes in our lives. This difference is played out every day, sometimes painfully in the forefront of consciousness, sometimes nebulously within the profound depths of joy, and sometimes in the heaviness of the day-to-day. Death, whether we believe that it leads to oblivion or to a form of immortality, or whether we deny it, is in the way we think and in

desirable or undesirable insofar as they either satisfy or fail to satisfy the most important fourth condition above—that beliefs about the future should transform our experience in a desirable way.

the way that we move.

This chapter, thus, aims to attain an understanding of physical death—the experiential difference beliefs about death make in our lives. There are two implicitly interwoven elements in this chapter. The first element is descriptive: it will delineate the ramifications for experience when death is, first, denied; second, when it is believed to amount to oblivion; and, third, when it is believed to precede a form of immortality.²⁸ The second element is prescriptive: that is, it shall suggest how our beliefs about death *should* affect our lives. John J. McDermott, echoing the existentialist sensibility of the above Buddhist tale, opines that “we should experience our own lives in the context of being permanently afflicted, that is, of being terminal” (*Drama* 286). But the next question we must ask ourselves is what should experiencing our lives as terminal mean? Should life be experienced as the short interlude between birth and dissolution, per McDermott’s meaning, or should life be experienced as the finite mortal term that precedes immortality, as Fontinell ultimately puts forth?

The prescriptive pragmatic evaluation turns on the most valuable concept of death. The most valuable concept of death, in turn, makes the most valuable difference; this is crucial, and to understand this point is to understand the central thrust of pragmatism—that of individual and societal meliorism. The pragmatist tradition understands human inquiry as an open-ended struggle to enrich the quality of human life—to make life *better*. It does not seek, as has often been accused, to increase simple individual

²⁸ Although some assert that belief in immortality is denial of death, including quite famously for example, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, this is not the position taken here. See the more detailed discussion under the section “Death as a Path to Immortality” in this chapter.

satisfaction. Human enrichment is infinitely more complex and lovely. In a pragmatic evaluation, the consequences of holding a belief should make our experience of the world more fruitful, more open to the possibility of novelty; indeed, this idea has been developed and defended throughout Chapters III and IV. Thus when it comes to philosophical analysis, Dewey weighs in, we must ask ourselves, “Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful?” (“Experience and Philosophic Method” 18). For Dewey and for James, the task of philosophical inquiry is to make our life open to the informing character of experience, to make it thick with relations and hence with abiding, concatenated meaning. Experience is, in Dewey’s words, “pregnant with connections” (“Need for a Recovery” 61).²⁹ A life of novelty and deep significance emerges from our activity of forging these connections both in ourselves and in our communities.

For the most part, James attends to the individual’s sustained efforts to purposively carve a life out of an expectant yet treacherous terrain. “The solid meaning of life,” writes James, “is always the same eternal thing,—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance with some man’s or woman’s pains.—And, whatever or wherever life may be, there will always be the chance for that marriage to take place” (“What Makes a Life Significant” 659).

James is clear: this struggle toward a novel ideal begets a vital inner significance, which

²⁹ The following is the full quotation: “An experience that is an undergoing of an environment and a striving for its control in new directions is pregnant with connections” (“Need for a Recovery” 61).

cuts across social class and occupation,³⁰ and is the crux of life's meaning. He unwaveringly affirms that

Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant. Sometimes the eagerness is more knit up with motor activities, sometimes with the imagination, sometimes with reflective thought. But, wherever it is found, there is the zest, the tingle, the excitement of reality; and there *is* 'importance' in the only real and positive sense in which importance ever anywhere can be. ("Certain Blindness" 631)

Individual progress, then, is an embodied delving into an "ideal"—a purpose that affectively moves us—and time is experienced as path to that ideal. In James' words, progress is "that strange union of reality with ideal novelty which it continues from one moment to another to present" ("What Makes a Life Significant" 657). Reality *is* an unfinished process, and progress is reality wrought by our own visionary efforts. Into these passages the strong ontological strand in James is easily read. How we comport ourselves in the present—by identifying and struggling to achieve a novel ideal—is the activity by which we create an existence.

For James, the notion of meliorism is bound up with that of the individual: progression is the therapeutic, transformative way in which the individual interprets the phenomenal flux; but for Dewey, the potentially salutary capacity of experience has an

³⁰ Throughout "What Makes a Life Significant," James explicitly rejects Tolstoy's contention that the hard-working peasant class leads a more meaningful life than the affluent class because it must struggle to survive. James maintains that the struggle to live a meaningful life, which roughly consists in energy and perseverance to achieve an ideal, transcends class.

explicit social application.³¹ Dewey's center of vision is his profound historical and social consciousness: He advocates a philosophy that can answer the pressing concrete problems facing society; modern philosophy, occupied with the tedious perennial intellectual enterprise of overcoming a self-imposed split between subject and object, according to Dewey, cannot. He expounds on the virtues of pragmatism over other forms of philosophy:

Modern philosophic thought has been so preoccupied with these puzzles of epistemology and the disputes between realist and idealist, between phenomenalist and absolutist, that many students are at a loss to know what would be left for philosophy if there were removed both the metaphysical task of distinguishing between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds and the epistemological task of telling how a separate subject can know an independent object. But would not the elimination of these traditional problems permit philosophy to devote itself to a more fruitful and more needed task? Would it not encourage philosophy to face the great social and moral defects and troubles from which humanity suffers, to concentrate its attention upon clearing up the causes and exact nature of these evils and upon developing a clear idea of better social possibilities; in short upon projecting an idea or ideal, which instead of expressing the notion of another world or some far-away unrealizable goal,

³¹ Within *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, Cornell West offers an insightful biographical sketch and philosophical study of Dewey. His evaluation of James is warm, but West lauds Dewey: "American pragmatism reaches its highest level of sophisticated articulation and engaged elaboration in the works and life of John Dewey. To put it crudely, if Emerson is the American Vico, and James and Pierce our John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant, then Dewey is the American Hegel and Marx!" (69).

would be used as a method of understanding and rectifying specific social ills?

(Reconstruction 123-24).

Pragmatism affirms that subject and object are merely functional distinctions of a more encompassing experience. Dewey firmly believed that if we were to turn our attention to experience itself, we could evolve a dynamic method to help heal the problems that plague our communities. Dewey, in short, guided by the insights of pragmatism, hoped to assuage human suffering. In particular, Dewey draws our attention to the contextual significance of problems. Problems occur in a particular context; absolute solutions, thus, simply will not suffice. As a context changes, the problem changes shape; so, too, the solution must change shape. A problem must be worked and re-worked in light of the problem's changing context. Dewey hence saw pragmatism, with its metaphysical and epistemological respect for difference and for pluralism, as the crucial philosophical ground for promoting an enduring social reform.

Following both Dewey and James, then, a pragmatic approach to death must be grounded in experienceable consequences, and these consequences should be valued in terms of their capacity to promote individual significance as well as social reform. Thus, now equipped with the pragmatic method, we turn our attention to the following pragmatic evaluations: the denial of death, the consequences of which, it will soon be evident, are ultimately harmful, death experienced as oblivion, and death experienced as a path to immortality.

THE DENIAL OF DEATH

A caveat must be addressed, and a very large one at that: Questions surrounding the

implacability of death and the concomitant ambiguity that imbues our own living—questions that essentially amount to “Why bother?”—may indeed be in the soul of every human being, as Tolstoy writes; however many live in self-deceptive denial of their own impending ends. We, in McDermott’s words, “run for cover on behalf of our escape from death” (*Drama* 290). Death is what happens to other people, and we refuse to believe that our mortal lives will end, too. There exist many pretenses of safeguard. Pharmacology, exercise programs, and dieting: more than mere measures to improve health and extend life, they compose the covert mechanics of denial—they are Fountains of Youth, ultimately futile efforts to perpetuate life indefinitely.³²

It is a deep-seated fear of death that leads to its denial. This fear is, at its most general, fear of the unknown. In perhaps the most recognized quotations of our time, Shakespeare’s Hamlet contemplates death and agonizes over what might follow it.

To be, or not to be—that is the question.
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. ’Tis a consummation

³² See, in particular, Gerald J. Gruman’s *A History of Ideas about the Prolongation of Life*. New York: Springer Publishing Co., Inc., 2003. Print. Classics in Longevity and Aging Series.

Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep,
To sleep—perchance to dream. Aye, there's the
rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause. . . . (III.i.55-68)

In this passage, Hamlet weighs the risks of suicide:³³ He wonders whether death would mean oblivion, which he compares favorably to the chaotic and melancholy struggles of his life; and suicide thus would then be an escape. Alternatively Hamlet wonders “what dreams may come”—whether he would be damned to Hell—which would be a fate worse than living.

Although Hamlet might prefer oblivion to his tragic life, many others would not: Fear of death *is* often the fear of oblivion, which is discussed in greater depth below. There is a classical argument in response to this fear, which some may find comforting: Epicurus writes, “Therefore that most frightful of evils, death, is nothing to us, seeing that when we exist death is not present, and when death is present we do not exist” (150). Epicurus’ meaning is this: We did not exist before our conceptions, and we do not now find this fact of oblivion troubling. Therefore, concludes Epicurus, we should not find the oblivion that occurs with death troubling either—there will be nothing that remains of us that will be aware of it. Epicurus’ point is similar to the one made at the

³³ It must be noted that there is no little scholarly disagreement on how this passage should be interpreted. Some question whether Hamlet is in fact contemplating suicide.

beginning of the chapter—that we cannot experience our own deaths. It was also pointed out that we *do* experience our dying, and there may be considerable pain in the process of dying. Epicurus’ position, however, is that this pain—or any pain—should not be feared.

Those not convinced by Epicurus go on fearing, and, even if they do believe in some form of immortality, they may fear that it will not be enough, that it will not be one in which personal identity is sustained. Eugene Fontinell, for example, asserts that “there are no adequate surrogates [to personal immortality] which can serve to alleviate the pain of loss” and that, further, “[a]ssuming that human persons are precious realizations of nature or the cosmic process, the failure to maintain these persons in that mode of individuality upon which their preciousness depends may be a harsh truth to be endured but surely not to be celebrated” (21).

Lastly, although we might believe in an immortality in which our personal identity is preserved, we may fear that we will miss the earthly interactions with the many important people and things that made our lives so precious. We may deeply regret, for example, that we will not live to see our children or our grandchildren grow. John Ames, the deeply pious Congregationalist minister in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* is given only months to live after he is diagnosed with a heart condition, and he is filled with love and deep longing for his young family and for his earthly life. Overwhelmed by his “admiration for existence” (56), Ames reveals,

I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its

eyes again. I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will ever forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try. (57)

In this striking passage, heaven cannot replace the magnificence of human existence. Our "fantastic condition of mortality," with its embattled days and nights, with its constancies and vicissitudes, and with its celebrations and lamentations, is indeed a journey of epic proportions. There is, as Ames so passionately and convincingly testifies, every reason to feel anxious and saddened about the prospect of our own deaths, regardless of what we think death might entail.

Self-deceptive denial offers a convenient escape from our fears of the unknown and of terrible loss. If there is a positive side to denial at all, then, it is this: relief from this paralyzing fear and pain, which, in turn, helps us get through the day. However, the adverse consequences of self-deceptive denial of death are grave; there are intolerable losses. We lose the drama of living: we lose our sense of the very temporality that makes us human, and with it we lose the spiritual depth that this final event can inspire via reflection or via vicarious experience. We also lose the capacity to empathize with

the suffering of others and thus forfeit the ability to commune with others. To deny death is to live life where people, places, and happenings are shallow, devoid of the great mystery of life—the unexperientiable end. A life into which death is not admitted eliminates pain; but it also eliminates the steadfast resoluteness to endure—to continue living a life that is pock-marked with nothingness which, paradoxically, makes the rest of the living so poignant.

Our mortality exists in the way that we touch the world and in the way the world touches back. To deny our mortality is to refuse to touch the world, and, then, the world does not touch back. If we hold a relational ontology, such as the one defended in Chapter III, it is in this pernicious condition of denial that our relating is sheared of experiential depth; and it is in this condition that great ontological loneliness abides. Let those who live in denial of death, then, heed the wise words of Seneca,

Death weighs heavy on one
who, too well known to all,
dies unknown to himself. (*Thyestes* II.401-03)

To live in courage is to accept the inevitability of death. In return for our acceptance is a life of finitude that is, at its best, a life in which we are *fully* engaged as participants in a processive reality.

Once death is intrepidly faced, however, we must choose again; this choice is the *way* we live in finitude. We can live as if death results in oblivion; or, alternatively, we can live as if death is the final event of mortal life that precedes an immortal life outside of time. Each of these ways of living is the pragmatic difference death makes in our

lives. We shall thus now turn to consider the consequences of each way.

DEATH AS OBLIVION

And, to say all in a word, everything which belongs to the body is a stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and a vapour, and life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after-fame is oblivion.

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* Book 2, 16

John J. McDermott writes that the “first, foremost, and permanent ontological fact of our human situation is that we were born to live but sure to die” (*Drama* 224). And, if, indeed, there is no life after death, then “time,” as McDermott warns, “is a prelude to disaster.”³⁴ On this view, whether young or old, whether it is announced in the form of a diagnosis—cancer, perhaps, or senility—each one of us is terminal. We are born, we live for a time, and then we die. Oblivion: we come, and then we go, and that is that; we are completely erased from the universe. Others’ feelings of love and loss and their memories of us only last so long—a generation, perhaps two; authored books are soon buried under the modern deluge of published material; and a placard on a door or even on a building are soon replaced by the name of one of the other billions of people in this world.

What is the point of human activity, then, if we are to soon join the innumerable masses already dead and forgotten? This is Tolstoy’s question posed in the beginning of the chapter, and it is one of the most important questions that can be asked. In

³⁴ See McDermott’s essay, “The Inevitability of our Own Death: The Celebration of Time as a Prelude to Disaster” pages 278-90 in his *Drama*.

answering this question, there lie two choices. These choices again are paths—that is, ways of living. The first path is to live life as if all of its activities were meaningless. If we are to die, and all is to come to naught, why *do* anything in the first place? In the most chillingly pessimistic passage from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo cries out, “one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that enough for you? They gave birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant then its night once more” (103). We merely take up space for a brief time; all the decisions over which we agonized, all the castles we built are undone, null, along with us.

This nihilistic way of living, from the pragmatist’s perspective, is destructive. In place of a commitment to ameliorate, it substitutes a despairing, even cynical detachment from the world and from ourselves: We are trapped, prisoners of an absurd world, strangers for a while, biding time until we return to nothing. Accompanying detachment is the sensibility of powerlessness—a white-flag surrender into quiescence. If living is a waste, why bother with the struggle? These sensibilities are in polar contrast to both the pragmatist and process angles of vision presented here. According to the process vision, it is we who, together *with* the world, build ourselves; far from being strangers from the world, we *emerge* through an intimate participation. There are no singles; there are only relations, and thus we are *fundamentally* ontologically connected with the world—it is woven into our doings. Moreover, the character of these relations is, at its most ideal, pedagogical, and this is the pragmatic affair: It is through our relations that we learn about ourselves and how we can continue to cultivate our own

personal growth; and it is also in virtue of our shared relations that we can help build better communities.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that when the aged ask themselves, “Why bother?” the decision is, more than any other age group, *not* to bother. Indeed, suicide is most prevalent in the United States at ages sixty-five and older. It represents sixteen to twenty-five percent of the total number of suicides, a rate purportedly attributed to a deteriorating quality of life, including ill-health, social isolation, and depression (Brody). Add to this list the ontological erosion discussed in Chapter III, which consists, in brief, in a withdrawal from making relations. More than any group, then, the elderly suffers. Life for them is plagued with loss—loss of meaning, loss of health, loss of societal value, loss of loved ones, and loss of time left to live. “Shall I live a miserable, meaningless life waiting for an inevitable death?” the elderly traveler of Tolstoy’s allegory asks. His answer is, “No, I shall not,” and, still suspended between the two beasts, he releases his grip.

A deteriorating quality of life in senescence is a problem with prehistoric roots: It was not uncommon for a tribal elder to commit suicide to help preserve tribal resources. And, indeed, life for those who reached older ages before the relatively recent dominance of modern medicine was extraordinarily treacherous. The influential ancient Roman stoic Seneca advises the foundering elderly individual to preserve his dignity by “extricating the suffering spirit.” Seneca counsels,

And that leads us to pronounce on the question whether it’s right to turn from the finale of old age in disgust, and bring about its close by our own hand

instead of waiting for it. The man who awaits his doom inertly is all but afraid, just as the man who swigs off the bottle and drains even the lees is over-given to his liquor. In this case, however, we shall try to find out whether the last part of life is really lees, or something extraordinarily bright and clear if only the mind's uninjured, the senses come unimpaired to the aid of the spirit, and the body isn't foundered and a prey to death in life. For the crucial point is whether it's life or death a man's prolonging. If, on the other hand, the body's past its duties, it may be (why not?) the right thing to extricate the suffering spirit. Indeed, you may have to do so a little before the due time, for fear that when the due time comes you may have lost the power to do so. And since in living badly there's a greater peril than in dying quickly, a man's a fool not to insure against an enormous risk at the cost of a few days. Old age, if it lasts very long, brings few to death unmarred: for many of the aged life collapses into lethargy and impotence. After that do you consider a scrap of life a more poignant loss than the freedom to end it? Don't listen to me with a frown, as if that verdict applied to you at the moment. Weigh my words. I shan't cast old age off if old age keeps me whole for myself—whole, I mean, on my better side; but if it begins to unseat my reason and pull it piecemeal, if it leaves me not life but mere animation, I shall be out of my crumbling, tumble-down tenement at a bound. ("Letter LVIII" 189-90)

Seneca himself had the courage of his convictions and calmly committed suicide at Nero's orders. Extraordinarily, Seneca's centuries-old advice is not dated: Countless

individuals and political action groups, planetary-wide, have cogently argued that palliative end-of-life services such as euthanasia should be legalized in order to preserve human rights and dignity.

Seneca's position on suicide, of course, is not shared by everyone; indeed, the philosophical history of attitudes toward suicide is rich and quite varied. For example, while Christian theology, particularly the Roman Catholic tradition, holds that suicide is morally impermissible, the existentialist tradition holds that suicide is a free and courageous act—perhaps the only free act—of an individual who is charged with the difficult task of creating meaning in what is fundamentally an absurd situation. Pragmatists, on the other hand, would judge the moral status of suicide based on the context of the particular situation.³⁵ Whatever the appropriate moral response to suicide, the act implies a struggle and then a decision of the greatest finality—the choice of death over life. This decision indeed makes starkly thematic the capacity we have to direct our embodied lives; it also makes starkly thematic the precariousness of our embodied lives. We take an existential risk when we make a life—when we formulate and pursue a possibility—in the midst of ontological uncertainty. Suicide *is* the making of a life—it is the last act—and it is the act fraught with the greatest risk: To choose to end is to make a decision from which there is no recovery.

There is, however, another way to live in which death is experienced as oblivion. This way is Albert Camus' way; it is John Dewey's way; and it is John J. McDermott's

³⁵ For a careful and thorough delineation of John Dewey's moral philosophy, see Gregory Fernando Pappas' *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008.

way. Life may be absurd, absent of a transcendent, given purpose, bound by death, and sown with the seeds of its own demise, but by no means is it futile! We take the Sisyphean path now: We intrepidly, doggedly carry on in the face of the absurd, and we build, sustain, and protect with no guaranteed future, with tychism until the end. We thus see Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill with dignity, purpose, and, as Camus tells us, with joy. Suicide, of course, is always an option, but as long as that rock exists, there is reason enough to choose to push it. While his “whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing,” Camus proclaims, “Sisyphus is the absurd hero” (376). Sisyphus becomes profoundly human in his burdens and endless toil, Camus continues; too, he becomes our inspiration.

If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. This word is not too much. Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to his memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man’s heart: this is the rock’s victory, this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are our nights of Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. Thus, Oedipus at the outset obeys his fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that the only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: “Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well.” Sophocles’

Oedipus, like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, thus gives the recipe for the absurd victory.

(377)

Oedipus and Sisyphus both acknowledge the absurd, and it is only after this acknowledgement that Oedipus can freely and victoriously remark that "all is well." The remark, avers Camus, "is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men" (378). The source of the sacred is human striving, which arises from temporal purpose within the expectant everyday affairs of the human race. The striving is not futile because it is first and foremost born out of human choice to struggle. Camus adds further, "There is no sun without the shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days" (378). Life *is* meaningful, and it is meaningful precisely because it is so precious. Oblivion may come after death, but, until then, we honor the brilliance of the transient.

Let us consider again our other story—the Buddhist tale, where we left the traveler clinging to a branch. While for many the presence of the tiger above and dragon below the branch makes the hanging inane, Camus, in contrast, sees the beasts but yet reaches out to savor the honey. And, crucially, it is the ever-threatening presence of the beasts themselves that sweetens the honey. With a sense of urgency, he savors it. How delicious!

Likewise, “Celebrate!” John J. McDermott exclaims in his essay “The Inevitability of our own Death: The Celebration of Time as a Prelude to Disaster” (*Drama* 290). Although McDermott admits that he does not have complete epistemic knowledge, the “overwhelming evidence,” he affirms, “is that we are terminal” (283). However, it is only in virtue of acknowledging our terminality that we live most meaningfully: we live as if we are terminal, as if time itself is the honey to be savored. Along with Camus, along with Sisyphus, and along with our traveler, McDermott utters, “I believe that time is sacred. It is not sacred, however, because it has been so endowed by God, the gods, nature, or any other force. I believe that time is sacred because human history has endowed it with our meaning, our suffering, our commitments, and our anticipations” (288-89). With McDermott, the travelers of this path endure and celebrate the sacred affairs of time and grow under its tutelage. With McDermott, the travelers of this path look around, they run—not walk, stop and smell the roses, dig deep, listen to even the faintest of whispers; all animated by the exigencies of temporality. In short, they pay attention, they are present, because the present is passing, and the present is all that there is. Our mortality is a painful fact to endure to be sure; but in the pain there can be healing. Says Oedipus, “all is well,” and this, as Camus points out, is the human victory—to live a life buoyed by our own strength (378).

Temporal life is fecund, and it is fecund because we are involved with it. We do not merely cling to a branch, then, reaching out for honey for solace; nay, we pull ourselves up, one hand over the other, in the face of the beast; and honey is what is wrought by our efforts. This is a crucial reworking of the ancient metaphor: *We make* the honey.

Celebrate!

Human achievement therefore takes place on ontological ground: Achievement is the fruition of a human endeavor to make life significant—to make it better—all the while caught in the teeth of radical finitude. It is this deep and abiding existential ontological sensibility that gives force to McDermott’s pragmatism. His commitment to meliorism cannot be grasped without first coming to terms with our radical finitude. McDermott warns that “starvation, interpersonal violence, and repression are not only morally evil, but metaphysically evil as well, for they offend human life within the fabric of time, knowing full well that there we have no future recourse to any salvific resolution that transcends our human lives (*Drama* 153-54). Time, indeed, marks our human capacity to help heal suffering; this is McDermott’s *weltanschauung*. We must help. On McDermott’s view, meliorism is nothing less than the activity of redemption—not the redemption of human death through eternal salvation, but, rather, the transformation of our lives and our communities to make them worthy of the journey of the transient. We build, sustain, and protect through the urgent liturgy of care, with death always as our concluding ontological lot. McDermott’s reworking of the ancient metaphor is anchored in an understanding of our lives as a journey of melioration. To Tolstoy’s question “What is the point of living? What is the point of wanting anything? What is the point of doing anything?” (24), McDermott questions in return, “If the nectar is not in the journey, where else could it possibly be?” (235).

However, perhaps paradoxically, according to McDermott, the process of our living is directed by the injunction to grow without cessation. This point is crucial. Even

though the beasts above and below await us, we do not look at them because the dying is not the point that we have to make—the living is. In other words, *we must not experience our lives as a preparation for death*, even as we age: to do so constitutes a withdrawal from living, from the messagings of experience. We live not in denial of our impending death—we know the beasts are there, and their presence pragmatically changes our living—but, as John Dewey writes, the live creature “presses forward” (“Experience as Aesthetic” 540). If we are to live with death as a *telos*, no matter what we think death consists of, the event becomes a sterile metaphor for the events in our lives. This is especially the tendency as we age: Our experiences begin to have meaning only insofar as they lead to our own deaths, the result of which is to eliminate potential novelty. Indeed, this is exactly how the ancient metaphor goes awry: the traveler waits for death, clinging to the branch, honey merely the solace. In contrast, in McDermott’s version of the metaphor, honey is instead the hard-earned prize for a life lived on the *qui vive*.

With McDermott, the great American poet Walt Whitman expresses his existential commitment to live “now.”

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of
the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.
There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,

Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Urge and urge and urge,

Always the procreant urge of the world. (part 3, lines 1-9)

The world presses in on us *now*, and, in turn, we respond *now*. While we respond by heeding the consequences of our possible decisions—this is the pragmatic maxim—the caveat is this: If we, especially in senescence, tie aging to its final outcome, death, the events in our lives are experienced in terms of preparation for our future non-being, and the meaning that we draw from our experiences is structured by our eventual demise. We thus read our experiences one way, and we are blocked from other ways of meaning; McDermott calls this one-sided reading of experience because of an end, a goal, or a destination a “canopy of ultimate explanation.” He explains this term: “If a person perches on behalf of a closed mind, a stinginess with regard to the having of experience, especially those had as novel and against the grain, then heed the advice of William James—stick out your neck and take a chance by an experimental exploration of experiences beyond your present sight” (*Drama* 135). McDermott continues his interpretation of James: “James suggests that we move through the world avoiding a canopy of ultimate explanation by which we shut out novelty and possibility” (135). Death, then, in this section understood as oblivion, is not a perch: It is not the only event that gives life meaning. To be sure, death is present in the way that we live our lives. However it is dangerous to live with death as the only operative *telos*; to do so, indeed, obfuscates the living that there is to do. It is far better to instead take flight between the many relational leads that quicken within experience: We meliorate with an eye always

on possibility—not on an end—so that time’s passing is the medium for growth. Life may be terminal, but life is still to be lived forward.

We thus now return to our original prompt: what does death as oblivion mean? That is, to put it pragmatically, if we believe that death results in oblivion, how does that belief affect our lives? It has been suggested thus far that the answer to this question is, first, two-fold: we either live as if our actions are meaningless, or, alternatively, at the other extreme, we live as if our actions are sacred. According to this pragmatically preferable latter angle of vision, if we do not harbor hope for immortality, then life can be all the richer because it is imbued with our hope that we can ameliorate ourselves and our communities *within* the confines of time; moreover, life is invested with our actions to do so.

Pessimistic existentialists might balk at this idea that we can still have hope if there is no life after physical death: that is, they might counter that hope is not tenable if the possibility of a self that interprets the flux of experience is ultimately terminal. Indeed, there exists a great tension between the melioristic push of pragmatism and this sort of pessimistic existentialism. McDermott himself perhaps offers the most eloquent rejoinder to the pessimist. He warns that “to be systematically pessimistic is to draw the curtain on possibility, on growth, on novelty, and on the most indomitable characteristic of the human spirit: the ability to begin again, afresh, with hope for a better day” (*Drama* 157). McDermott continues his warning,

Dewey is adamant in his conviction that nothing will go totally right in either the short or the long run. He is equally convinced that all problems are

malleable and functionally, although not ultimately, resolute even if they are sure to appear in another guise at another time. I refer to this as a metaphysics of transiency, in which human life is seen as a wandering, a traveling, a bemusement which rocks from side to side, comedy and tragedy, break-through and setback—yet, in all, a purposive, even progressive, trip, in which the human endeavor makes its mark, sets its goals, and occasionally scores, an event which Dewey calls a “consummatory” experience, as in “that was an experience.” (157)

If we take the pessimistic view that there can be no hope because each of us will eventually disappear into oblivion, then we essentially have discounted the living that is there to do for its own sake! The possibility of overcoming death is not the only event that gives life meaning. The, perhaps pedestrian, kind of hope at stake here is not the hope that we will continue on eternally. Hope here makes no claims of resolution or of transcendence. Instead, pragmatist hope consists of the unglamorous desire and expectation that life lived tomorrow will be better than today, and it is filled with confidence in our efforts. The Indo-European root of “hope” is *keu*, which means curve (“keu”). *Keu* entails a change in direction. Pragmatist hope is the hope that we can read our experience to continuously change direction, to make a different way—a better way.

Truly, then, the reply to the existential pessimist is that it is indeed nothing other than hope that nurtures and sustains pragmatism’s melioristic sensibility. It is a profoundly textured hope, a hope not tethered to an eschatology, a hope which acknowledges pessimism, admits ultimate tragedy, that things will not come out right at

the end; yet it also is a hope that recognizes that the world of time and our doings are constitutive of our person, and thus it demands of us to do *better*, to make ourselves and the world *better*, and, above all, to try, try again. It is a hope that inspires “grit”—a colloquial term but a sacred one in America’s history.

DEATH AS A PATH TO IMMORTALITY

The last enemy *that* shall be destroyed *is* death.

1 Corinthians 15:26

In this section we explore the experiential consequences of living life as if it is part of the journey to an eternal afterlife. As explained above, John J. McDermott believes the consequences of living this way dire; he believes that we should experience our lives as a prelude to oblivion. John Dewey agrees: In his later work, Dewey expresses that a belief in immortality has “morally and socially injurious consequences of putting practical preoccupation with another world in place of active interest in this one” (“Intimations” 426). Moreover, argues McDermott, belief in immortality is part of an eschatology that functions as a canopy of ultimate explanation, under which life unfolds according to a purposeful plan. Religious traditions in particular emphasize worldly cultivation of the soul in order to meet the challenge of physical death, which is the portal to an eternal spiritual afterlife.³⁶ Thus the process of living is always connected to its end: Indeed, argues McDermott, *all* experience is funneled into an eschatology. If,

³⁶ There are important secular eschatologies as well: Hegel held a metaphysical eschatology in which all dualities are rendered intelligible within an Absolute system and in which history unfolds as a progression. Marx, in turn, held that all societies progress through a dialectic of class struggle.

following John Dewey, the present is “pregnant with connections,”³⁷ and if, following William James, “the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities,”³⁸ then canopies of ultimate explanation set within the framework of a constructivist epistemology circumscribe the meaning of our experiences; no possibilities for novel relations between experiences are allowed to seep in under the edges.

In short, belief in an eternal afterlife, according to McDermott and Dewey, is a deterrent to a creative life. If we, as Christian evangelist Billy Graham begins the first chapter of his latest publication, *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well*, look back and in everything “see how God’s hand” has guided us, then life has proceeded according to God’s plan (2). It is God who halos our relationing and directs the kind of possibilities that lie before us. McDermott contends that living life in this way dampens the creative, existentially sustaining power of the individual to continuously interpret the meaning of experiences undergone. God functions as a static condition to which experience must conform and therefore stifles novelty. Especially as the end of life nears, then, the aged tie their living to an afterlife: living in senescence becomes essentially a preparation for the challenge of death and the possibility of rebirth. Earthly experience is guided by a greater design, and the questions thus posed by Tolstoy in the beginning of the chapter—What is the point of living? What is the point of wanting anything? What is the point of doing anything? Is there in my life any meaning that will

³⁷ See footnote 4 for the entire quote and citation information.

³⁸ In his “The Stream of Thought” James writes that “the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest by reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention” (73).

not be extinguished by the inevitable death that awaits me?—have answers that lie somewhere, whether known by us or not, because the world of time gains its meaning from a divine realm. Aging, thus, is experienced as a waiting for something more, for something better; and time itself becomes a means to another end.³⁹

It is the pragmatist Eugene Fontinell who cogently rejoins both McDermott and Dewey: He believes that, while it is not without its dangers of hindering responsible living, a belief in immortality can enrich rather than vitiate life. Fontinell, in his *Self, God, and Immortality*, explains that,

[One] claim of McDermott's that I consider open to question is that immortality belief is an obstacle to growth and creative activity, whereas terminality belief is a stimulus. It would seem that there is no compelling evidence either way. Immortality belief does deenergize some, becoming an obstacle to their participation in the "building of the earth." Yet the same belief spurs others to engage in a variety of modes of creative activity. (184)

Thus Fontinell responds that if we examine the empirical evidence, we will see that an immortality belief need not curtail human growth.

Although Fontinell unfortunately neither further elaborates on the way in which an

³⁹ It is important to note that McDermott does not deny that those with religious beliefs can and do act in ways that should receive our moral approbation. For example, most agree that the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25-37 acts in the appropriate manner; moreover, we would say that the Samaritan acts in the appropriate manner *regardless* of the way in which he "reads experience." However, differences in the way the Samaritan reads experience do produce different results insofar as his experience operates as an existential pedagogy of *how* to understand his selfless activity in the world, or of *how* to take the world into his own life. McDermott (and James) should not be construed, at least here, as providing an ethics of how to behave with respect to one another so much as offering individual guidance on how to listen to the phenomena of experience.

immortality belief can spur creative activity, nor does he provide further detail about the empirical evidence of creative activity, we need only to look to New Testament scriptures and to the lives and writings of various Christians⁴⁰ to see that Dewey's assertion that an immortality belief distracts individuals from the this world is far too narrow a portrayal. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preaches that those who serve God are shining exemplars who produce good works.

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

(Matthew 5:14-16)

The kingdom of God may be fulfilled in the afterlife, but, contra Dewey, the kingdom is afoot in *this* life, and believers have a great responsibility to behave in accordance with God's commandments. Moreover, when asked about God's greatest commandments, Jesus replies in part with his version of the Golden Rule: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second *is* like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). Love is the message of God's greatest commandments; love is central to our

⁴⁰ Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, prominently opposed Nazi dictatorship.

lives now, and it inspires great acts of service with generally beneficial consequences.⁴¹

Fontinell, it should be noted, loosely allies himself with William James: James, although he has little explicitly to say about immortality, save his brief essay “Human Immortality,” opines that immortality is “one of the great spiritual needs of man” (1100). Ostensibly concerned with the negative consequences that may result when we *exclude* possibilities in this essay, James responds to several scientifically-motivated objections to immortality. Belief in immortality, James argues, is at the very least theoretically legitimate.

Moreover, although Ralph Barton Perry confirms that “James did not himself have an experience of the presence of God” (266), James is quite well-known for his openness to religion and to the religious experience of *others*, most notably recorded in his “The Will to Believe” and *Varieties of Religious Experience*. However, especially as he grew older, James entertained what Perry calls a “hopeful half-belief in personal immortality” (270). James, quite characteristically, contends in “Human Immortality” that the “whole subject of immortal life has its prime roots in personal feeling” (1100); and James’ hopeful half-belief in immortality in his older age was, according to Perry, primarily motivated by two feelings: first, James’ deepening moral conviction that good should ultimately triumph over evil. Perry maintains that James came “more and more to feel that death was a wanton and unintelligible negation of goodness” (268). Second, Perry continues, although it was subordinate to his desires for novelty and danger, James in his

⁴¹ It is also true that great atrocities have been committed in the name of religion. The reply could still be made to Dewey that, even in these instances, active interest in this world was not replaced by preoccupation with another world.

vulnerable moods was moved by his own suffering and the suffering of others, and he longed for safety and security. Interestingly, it is James himself who argues that monism is pragmatically preferable for “sick souls,” or for those who are not hardy enough to live without an ultimate guarantee, and that the pluralism he espouses is sorely deficient insofar as it requires a “certain ultimate hardihood” (*Meaning* 941). However, a “man is not always at his best,” as Perry illuminates—including James—and “the failure of pluralism *in extremis* is an argument against it” (265). Beliefs in God and in immortality are thus pragmatically essential for these Jamesian “sick souls.”

Indeed, according to many, including Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Dewey, and McDermott, religion is a psychological defense mechanism, constructed to shelter us from the difficulties of existence. Dewey charges that immortality, the “eternal and immutable,” is the misguided “consummation of mortal man’s quest for certainty” (“Time” 99). Further, Dewey quotes Marx, “Of belief in immortality more than of any other element of historic religions it holds good, I believe, that ‘religion is the opium of the peoples’” (“Intimations” 426-27). However, the assertion that a belief in religion, in a monistic God who acts against total dissolution, is an untoward act of denial is *not* pursued in this chapter. Crucially, the belief that it *is* denial *presupposes* that God does not exist, and talk of the existence or nonexistence of God without reference to experience, according to the pragmatist, as already discussed in the first section of the chapter, is without meaning. What *is* at issue in this chapter is whether belief in God and in immortality is pragmatically harmful or helpful. James and Fontinell argue that belief in God can be pragmatically helpful; Dewey and McDermott argue not.

Fontinell's appeal to empirical evidence that individuals with a belief in immortality do indeed "build the earth" may suffice as a response to Dewey, who maintains that religion distracts us from the "here and now"; it does not, however, suffice as a reply to McDermott. In particular, in order to address the crux of McDermott's concern, which is at heart a defense of James' pluralistic philosophy, Fontinell's confidence that a belief in immortality can spur creative activity must be addressed within the framework of McDermott's canopy of ultimate explanation. For McDermott, the central, very difficult, question must be this: Can we live our lives believing in immortality—a guarantee that all will go well for us in the end—without having it become an existential crutch, a static directive for Jamesian "sick souls," a way to explain how and why things go the way they do, including ourselves? If we fulfill our purpose when we reunite with God, can aging, especially in senescence, be anything other than a means to reunite with God? Put another way, if we do indeed identify ourselves with an ideal order in which we will ultimately be preserved, can we prevent this order from becoming a transcendent *telos*, a stale metaphor for the events in our lives?

One might respond with an epistemological question in turn: if God is omniscient, how can God's plan be inadequate? Second, James, notwithstanding his connection between religion and "sick souls," seems to think that we can avoid canopies of ultimate explanation. In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James maintains that what is existentially significant about all of religious experience is a personal identification with a "more" of the universe, which in turn leads to a more satisfying life. He writes that "Apart from all religious consideration, there is actually and literally more life in our

total soul than we are at any time aware of (457); religious experience, in particular, makes us aware of the existence of this processive *more*. James continues that, in religious experience, regardless of whether one identifies herself with, for example, mysticism or transcendental idealism, “the *conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*”⁴² (460). The religious life, James asserts, is one in which we live in a higher union, and it “opens itself to us as a gift” (459). What is significant, then, about religious experience in general is not so much that we find metaphysical security for the unfortunate price of surrendering our lives to a canopy of ultimate explanation, under which we are directed by the plan of a monistic being; rather, what brings metaphysical security, according to James at least in *Varieties*, is that we become very much aware of how we are existentially bound to everything else in the universe: We become aware that we are part of the processive flow.

Thus it is not the belief in immortality *per se* that is crucial here for James; what is crucial, instead, is religious experience: religious experience is the medium through which we become aware of the ill-defined, fluid nature of reality and hence the existential possibilities that exist just outside our own immediate purview. A belief in immortality is of course not necessary to have religious experiences; nor does a belief in immortality necessarily follow a particular religious experience. If, however, we *are* committed to a particular kind of theology and in some form of immortality, then these commitments open up the possibility for religious experiences. If one holds a belief in immortality, then, life can be all the richer.

⁴² emphasis is James’

Indeed, maintains James, the “religious impulse,” enriches life because it positively affects the “personal centres of energy of the various subjects” (*Varieties* 462). Further, he writes, religious experiences “possess, in its true, enormous biological worth. Spiritual strength really increases in the subject when he has them, a new life opens up for him, and they seem to him a place of conflux where the forces of two universes meet” (*Varieties* 455). Hence a life transformed by religious experience need not be one that is prescribed by eschatological metaphors; it need not be lived as merely a temporary expedient to another realm. Instead, a life transformed by religious experience may be one in which time is a sacred journey, characterized by the possibilities revealed in the ever-occurring union between the self and the “more” of the universe. On this interpretation of James, then, we find ground to respond to John J. McDermott: If we believe that death is a path to immortality, we *can* believe in immortality without having that belief strip us of our existential possibilities.

THE ONTOLOGY OF DEATH: A DEFENSE OF RELATIONAL IMMORTALITY

When man encounters himself, he does not do this in and by himself, apart and alone; on the contrary, he always finds himself within another thing which, in turn, is made up of many other things. (60)

I am not my life. This, which is reality, is composed of myself and things. The things are not I, nor am I the things. We are mutually transcendent, but we are both immanent in that absolute coexistence which is life. . . . My life is not mine, but I belong to it. This is the broad, immense reality of my coexistence with things. (158)

José Ortega y Gasset, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*

It is because of the fluid, processive nature of reality that we can answer McDermott's concern that living life as if physical death is a pathway to spiritual rebirth condemns us to living life under a canopy of ultimate explanation. The view that the self is a bundle of relations is defended in Chapter III: Our existence is constituted by our relationing. Thus if in religious experience our relationing occurs with the "more" of the universe, which we identify as God and God's realm, then our existence unfolds in that relationing. It is in that relationing that we may find peace—not quiescence but, rather, in a settling into the rhythm of a personal genesis that occurs in the midst of a billowing, processive unity. We find that there are no separates. We are fundamentally part of a growing totality, interwoven into the fabric of time; and our personal growth occurs as part of the growth of the unity. Our growth constitutes how we age, how we move through time.

If who we are is constituted by our interactions, including our interactions with family, friends, teachers, and so on, identity is then a shared affair. Our relationing is existentially interpenetrating. We thus inherently *matter*, and we have existential *moral* responsibilities to one another to make our interactions pedagogical—that is, conducive to shared personal growth. Moreover, and most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, it is contended here that our interconnectedness even persists after our own physical death—this is *relational immortality*. Relational immortality is an experiential immortality in which, even if death amounts to a permanent loss of a self that interprets the flux, it is not the end of our possibility: Our own embodied experience may end;

however, we can continue to affect the manifold of experience through the relations we made while alive. We remain ontological constituents in the lives of others, shaping their very existence.

In his *Self, God, and Immortality*, Eugene Fontinell, takes a bleak view of any form of immortality in which the “I” does not survive physical death. Fontinell does not defend relational immortality. Forms other than personal immortality, Fontinell asserts, are not “adequate surrogates which can serve to alleviate the pain of loss” (21).

Fontinell’s position is that, assuming “human persons are precious realizations of nature or the cosmic process, the failure to maintain these persons in that mode of individuality upon which their preciousness depends may be a harsh truth to be endured but surely not to be celebrated” (21). Finally, Fontinell argues, any form of immortality in which the individual does not endure has a diminished “pragmatic efficacy,” or diminished ability to ameliorate the self and society. Fontinell next devotes his energies to a detailing of a relational “field model” of the self, in which the divine and human consciousness are continuous. Using this model, then, Fontinell reveals experiential data from which we can extrapolate a survival of the self following physical death.

Although the work in this chapter and in the other chapters does not empirically demonstrate the possibility of the kind of personal immortality Fontinell defends, relational immortality is not wholly unrelated to it. In relational immortality, some part of the self *does* persist following physical death and it does so *in* others, much as ripples in a pond. Experience *contains* the dead after their deaths. It is thus optimistically offered here that relational immortality is an exceedingly robust notion of immortality,

one in which Fontinell and many others might take heart.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has endeavored to show, first, that the meaning of death is the effect it has on our living and that there are two main metaphors at work in our experience of death: death as oblivion and death as a path to some form of immortality. Second, each of these ways has both a destructive and fructifying path. If we believe that death amounts to oblivion, life runs the risk of becoming pointless, absurd; alternatively, on the fructifying path, a life limited by time becomes sacred and should be cherished and nurtured. On the other hand, if we believe that death precedes immortality, we can, if we take the destructive path, weave that immortality into a canopy of ultimate explanation; alternatively, on the fructifying path, we may have religious experiences that open up to us our existential possibilities. Finally, in this chapter it was offered that relational immortality, in which we endure through the lives and experiences of others, is a robust form of immortality with potential for great pragmatic efficacy.

It is of the utmost importance to conclude with a pragmatic epistemological and ontological proviso: this approach to death in this chapter is an application of the pragmatic method and, inasmuch, the conclusions drawn herein are open to modification. Developed here is an understanding of the concepts of death as oblivion and death as immortality that serves life's needs. The universe is unfinished, and as experience changes, so too should our concepts: Our concepts must remain relevant to our lives; they must solve problems and make life better. Pragmatism's commitment to concrete meliorism—to healing—is its greatest contribution to the discipline of

philosophy and to society. Pragmatism, however, cannot offer the security of absolutist solutions in any form—including ontological, epistemological, and ethical; these kinds of solutions, indeed, pragmatists argue, are red herrings—that is, they mislead those who grapple with the making of their lives always in specific, yet ever-changing contexts. The world is open; it grows. We do not know what will happen. Thus there can be no response to the question, “Is death oblivion or does it lead to immortality?” This lack of response, admittedly, can be vexing. But pragmatism rallies: There is an answer to this question to be had *within* our experience. William James elaborates:

For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All ‘homes’ are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope salvation only from its intrinsic promises and potencies. (“Pragmatism and Humanism” 457).

We thus make our finite homes, uncertain though redemptively malleable, following the leads of lived experience. We do the best we can—striving, grappling, growing, helping—and there is always more work to be done.

CHAPTER V

AGING: FROM EXPERIENCE TO POLICY

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

The courage to change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference.

Serenity Prayer

John Dewey's overarching vision is social melioration, and the vision for this chapter follows suit: The purpose of this chapter is to apply the work of the previous chapters, which was to broadly reconnoiter our experience of aging, in order to inform policies that concern the aged. Policy is the method by which we take care of the people in our communities, and this chapter strives to articulate how we can best take care of the aging population.

It is contended here that, in keeping with the pragmatist tradition, aging in the context of policy must begin with a reckoning of the way we experience aging: Experience is the rudimentary tool that helps forge appropriate, resonating reform that has purchase on our everyday lives. Moreover, if we reconstruct our experience of aging such that it is no longer singly funded by metaphors of erosion and decline, as was urged in Chapter III, and, if we reconstruct our experience of aging so that its process is no longer tethered to death, as was advised in Chapter IV, then resulting policy might in reciprocation both protect and promote possibility—not just retard degeneration and forestall death—within the lives of older individuals.

We have seen in Chapter III that living at its most salubrious is a process of creative individual genesis. The character of existence is of our own handiwork: One evaluates or reads experience and then makes a life by envisioning and pursuing a possibility in the midst of ontological uncertainty. The character of time's passing is thus constituted by what we do in time, and this doing is radically creative. Moreover, the activity of building relations is the fundamental way in which we press into our possibilities. We are contextually jointed to the world, and our personal identity always develops in and through shared relations.⁴³

Therefore it is clear that, when we turn to policies that concern the aged, preservation of the individual's *ability* to envision and pursue a life is paramount. In other words, ontological autonomy must be honored, and the aged must be empowered with respect to self-determination. The practical ways in which an individual's ontological choices about her life can be realized must be kept open. Moreover, as ontological choices are sown through relations, policies should encourage meaningful relationships; likewise, they should discourage isolation, which unfortunately becomes increasingly problematic with advanced age, as loved ones age, move away, and die.

It is the contention of this chapter that the primary underlying barrier to adequate policy reform is its one-sided approach to care of those in senescence: Current policy has embraced a concept of aging—namely, the concept of aging as a disease, wherein aging is synonymous with physical and mental decay and destruction. In the current policy purview, aging is a scourge and should be slowed and, wherever possible,

⁴³ See Chapter III for a development of these ideas.

stopped. Unfortunately, what has been grievously overlooked is a second and more important concept of aging—aging as ontological growth—and thus, in effect, policy has retarded individual spiritual growth and shackled the possibility of older individuals. Alternatively, it is maintained in this chapter that aging as ontological growth is a crucial dimension of good care of the human being, which policy should both foster and protect. There must be structures put into place that provide conditions for this dimension of good care of the elderly human being. If we understand and honor the aging process as an ongoing self-transformation in response to the press of the environment, then the “press” of policy, as part of the environment, should lead to beneficial consequences.

The following caveat should be emphasized: The prescriptions for good care of the elderly human being and good care of the human being *at any age* are not unrelated. As discussed at length in Chapter III, the potential problems associated with the process of aging need not be limited to the elderly. Aging as a decline is not just for older adults. If we understand aging as *ontological* decline, as disengagement from the creative process by which we live forward into possibility, then the verb “aging” need not be restricted to the noun “aged.” Put simply, one need not be old to feel old. Aging in this sense is an ontological disease which might occur quite early in life. Movement beyond age-defined policies is thus an essential step to good care for all populations. The spirit of any sort of policy reform should be to promote inner development of each and every individual, no matter the age.

Aging is indeed the narrative of all generations; nonetheless, there is a sense in which adults over the age of sixty are the most vulnerable to the destructive forces of the

aging process—physical, mental, *and* ontological. There is a sense in which they are utterly at the mercy of others. The elderly are no longer the head of their families: their progeny now head their own families, and, especially in western cultures, older generations no longer hold authority over the younger. Older adults have generally left or are leaving the workforce and are often viewed as dependent on others for their income and their care. Moreover, they require more health care because of chronic health conditions and diseases that tend to strike later in life. There are thus overwhelming shadows of burden and alienation within senescence; sans hooks and relations with people and events in the world and viewed as parasitic on the working generation, the aged are resented and cast aside, warehoused, if they are lucky, in geriatric centers.

Therefore, the need to create a warm cultural ambiance of the aged is urgent. This chapter serves as an advocate for the kind of care the aged deserve. One of the most important tasks for policy should be to help the elderly reclaim dignity within in a society that currently warehouses them; it should be to add the spiritually rich dimensions of hope and possibility to the aged persona. Using the ideas presented in this entire work, we can reframe the way we think about aging in the aged to spur much needed institutional transformation. In turn, policy can help the elderly recast themselves as individuals who have the capacity for possibility and are thus worthy of care and concern.

The line is thin, however, between self-deception and what is within reach. Possibility goes not unbounded. There is an approaching of death, of course, which ends

one's own embodied possibility, at least in this world, but there is not only that—there are some things that those in senescence just cannot do. Lack of physical strength and physical and mental stamina constrain activity. It would be out of the ordinary, for example, to see an elderly individual sprinting short distances for exercise. However, each one of us must realize this: There are things that I can do that *only* I can do! Moreover, one of the gifts of advanced age is a synthetic vision, which informs life's possibilities. In her *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf's character Peter Walsh alludes to this vision. "The compensation for growing old, Peter Walsh thought, coming out of Regent's Park, and holding his hat in hand was simply this: that the passions remain as strong as ever, but one had gained—at last!—the power which adds the supreme flavour to existence,—the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round, slowly, in the light" (67). Age brings a depth of understanding of our own past experiences; a sagacious and steady power of relating events, of making connections and drawing lessons from them. It is a synthetic vision with which we guide the present into future.

In order to reconstruct the experience of aging so that it means ontological growth rather than deterioration, the synthetic vision of older adults must be accompanied by courage and determination. Courage and determination are required to transcend cultural opprobrium, to explore the existentially unfamiliar, to do *something* that matters, to make something of oneself. One must take a risk to keep on going, even when, as the hackneyed phrase goes, "the going gets tough" in old age. It is perseverance and fortitude—not blind optimism—that push us forward. Like the subject of Theodore

Roethke's poem, "The Decision," we forge a way through the rough elements.

According to the second stanza,

Rising or falling's all one discipline!

The line of the horizon's growing thin!

Which is the way? I cry to the dread black,

The shifting shade, the cinders at my back.

Which is the way? I ask, and turn to go,

As a man turns to face on-coming now. (169)

"Which is the way?" the man asks; and, indeed, this is the life-giving question that must be asked. The aged, with synthetic vision, with courage and determination, must continually ask what is it about my life now that lends itself to a fresh beginning?

It is imperative that policies intended to care for the aged give them both the means to continuously ask this question and the resources to provide for the answers, whatever they might be. To put it simply, to the question what is it about my life now that lends itself to a fresh beginning, policy must ask in kind, what is it that you need to make a fresh beginning? The interplay of the answers to these questions is the best way in which ontological autonomy and self-determination might be honored and, crucially, personal growth promoted. In addition, it is important to note that facilitating the experience of aging as a dynamic process of existential growth necessitates broad, open-ended, and malleable policy measures to serve changing and likely quite assorted needs. Finally, it is clear that the conception of good care at stake here extends to contexts far beyond traditional health care, which is generally medical in nature and encompasses

medical professionals taking care of individuals' medical needs in healthcare settings such as clinics, hospitals, and geriatric centers. Good care in the context of aging in this chapter is a very rich, qualitative, ambiguous notion, the content of which is shaped by a demand to promote personal achievement and quiet triumph over routine and spiritual lassitude; good care does not seek to promote, at least directly, the more quantifiable traditional indicators of good health, namely reductions in rates of mortality and morbidity.

The capacity of human relationships to fulfill these dynamic, qualitative conditions of good care should not be underestimated. This is because relationships can be ontologically pedagogical insofar as they help us affectively explore and build relations. In a relational ontology, which was defended in Chapter III, the self is a bundle of relations.⁴⁴ Relations themselves are the transitive parts of experience, and they connect the focal parts of experience. Making relations is the activity by which we “read” focal experience: we, in essence, interpret experience, and we thus articulate a certain understanding of ourselves, the world, and our places in the world. The continuous activity of building relations—of connecting and interpreting our experience—is the fundamental way in which we press into the possibilities for novelty in our lives.

To take a germane example, we can reconstruct our experience of aging so that aging ultimately means ontological possibility and not decline. This could be done, for example, by refusing to understand the events that occur in senescence as a prelude to

⁴⁴ Relations are first introduced with reference to William James and John Dewey in Chapter III, pages 3-5.

death; instead, we can understand these events as opportunities for development. To wit, an elderly woman relates the message of her experience in a nursing home.

I've been told that I must not succumb to the facts of my age. But why shouldn't I? I am now in my 91st year and I doubt that my activity for example, in civic affairs, could restore my spirits to a state of bouncing buoyancy. Lack of physical strength alone keeps me inactive and often silent. I've been called senile. Senility is a convenient peg on which to hang nonconformity . . . A new set of faculties seems to be coming into operation. I seem to be waking to a larger world of wonderment—to catch little glimpses of the immensity and the diversity of creation. More than at any other time in my life, I seem to be aware of the beauties of our spinning planet and the sky above. I feel that old age sharpens my awareness. (“Frances” 323)

This nursing-home resident celebrates what age has brought to her—a new awareness of creation—cultivated not within the guidance of relationships with others but within, as John Dewey writes, an “active and alert commerce with the world,” that transforms her experience (“Experience as Aesthetic” 540).

At the most general level, the spirit of policies that concern the aged should be to dispel loneliness and disconnection; it should be to increase relations so that potentialities can be developed. Relations can be cultivated in dynamic activities that require active engagement and are potentially transformational. For example, relations can be cultivated by commerce and with the environs, like the nursing home resident, above, as well as by commerce with other individuals in healing relationships. Relations

can also be cultivated by engaging in aesthetic activities, such as playing an instrument, painting, and gardening. Moreover, our relationing is existentially interpenetrating. That is, who we are is constituted by our interactions with the world and those in it, and identity is thus a shared affair.

It is important that the healing capacity of relationships and our creative endeavors do not imply resolution, cure, or any other variety of certitude so common in medical contexts; healing, instead, implies amelioration. Healing occurs when we affectively read and undergo our experiences such that we continuously find a “place” in the world. Our healing occurs in a rhythm—a rhythm of experiences, old and new, which we weave and then reweave into a relational fabric. Healing thus is a process with no fixed endpoint. The position maintained throughout the present work is that the existential significance of living as healing is an aging experienced as growth. Any relationship is potentially a healing one, including, but not limited to, relationships formed within civic, church, medical, and academic situations.

By way of summary, then, the practical recommendations for policy reforms that promote aging experienced as growth are thus far the following: First, ontological autonomy must be honored, and, likewise, the aged must be empowered with respect to self-determination. Second, policy should aim to increase relations so that potentialities are developed; this could be achieved by creating opportunities to creatively engage with others or by developing potentially transformative capacities such as instrument playing, painting, and gardening. Finally, policy should shift away from measures that cast aging

as a process that requires a “cure” and should shift toward measures that cast aging as a healing process with its own possibilities for surprise, novelty, and renewal.

THE MEDICAL CONTEXT: CARE AS HOSPITALITY

What might, then, a program of care for the aged consistent with these recommendations look like? When we consider care for the aged, we traditionally consider care in medical contexts—namely, healthcare. This need not be so: the kind of care for the aged defended in this work is assuredly not constrained to healthcare. Novelty and the potential for self-transformation are contained even within the quotidian affairs of experience. Anywhere that there is, in John Dewey’s words, “an affair of the intercourse of a living being with its physical and social environment,” an opportunity for ontological growth exists (“Need for a Recovery” 61), and policy need only provide a forum for this intercourse to occur. Moreover, care for the aged in the medical arena is most often linked to death, which modern medicine seeks to prevent. In contrast, great lengths have been taken here to show that aging need not be a disease, physical or ontological, and that aging should not be linked to embodied death; at its best, aging is a journey that has value for its own sake.

However, notwithstanding these shortcomings of the concept of care within medical contexts, it is perhaps most convenient to consider this context as a potential model, albeit an imperfect one with much room for improvement, for policy formulations in other contexts. This is so for several reasons: First, older adults generally *do* require more medical intervention than other populations. Second, medical care is often considered to be the paragon of care, and healthcare professionals enjoy a monopoly on

the provision of care services. Finally, we rely on healthcare professionals to provide appropriate care for older adults, often with the hope and need that a clinical orientation is supplemented with a spiritual orientation, an orientation which is characterized by a serious appreciation and engagement of the existential and spiritual dimensions of human life. Unfortunately, the fact that medical treatment is so one-sided and thus does not meet the spiritual needs of older adults makes restructuring the dynamics of care especially urgent in clinical settings.

It is propitious for us indeed that one division of medicine has already embraced a philosophy of care, wholly different from its clinical, curative division and that this philosophy might only be expanded to buttress the clinical to compensate for its shortcomings; it is a philosophy of care for those who *cannot* be cured and in whom clinicians see “no hope.” This kind of care is palliative care for the dying, or hospice care. To palliate means to relieve suffering, and the goal of palliative care is to improve the lives of those suffering from serious illness by mitigating the physical symptoms of the illness and addressing other emotional and spiritual consequences of the illness, such as depression, guilt, anxiety, and reflections about ultimate meaning. While palliative care can be administered to those with any kind of illness, including curable and chronic illnesses, hospice provides compassionate, palliative care only to those with terminal illnesses.

Hospice centers first developed in Europe in the early 11th century to care for ill and dying travelers. Modern hospice programs are the results of the efforts of Dame Cicely Saunders in the 1960s. She established St. Christopher’s Hospice in 1967 in London,

which was to serve as the model for subsequent hospice programs in America.⁴⁵ The etymology of the word is important: “Hospice” is derived from the Latin word *hospes*, which means both guests and hosts, and “hospitality,” as first described by theologian Henri Nouwen, was later embraced by Leonard Lunn, the chaplain at St. Christopher’s Hospice. Lunn took hospitality to be the vertebral characteristic for spiritual care of the dying. Nouwen’s description of the meaning of hospitality parallels, in many ways, the kind of care suggested here to nourish aging experienced as growth.

Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots and bear ample fruit. It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way. The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs,

⁴⁵ See *The Management of Terminal Malignant Disease*, edited by Cicely Saunders and Nigel Sykes, cited in the affixed Works Cited. This work includes information related to the history of hospice care as well as guidance on its undertaking.

speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own. (qtd. in Lunn 224)

Hospitality describes a space in which a stranger, a guest, befriends another, a host, and in this space, through this friendship, there exists freedom for self-discovery and the possibility for self-transformation. Self-transformation is possible even at the end of life and, indeed, especially so at the end of life, when existential grief may be deep, and when perhaps, after having lived a life “unknown to himself,” the need for self-discovery is greatest.⁴⁶

End-of-life care for those whose lives will end sooner rather than later—for all of our lives will end sooner or later—demands deep spiritual palliation through hospitality. The stranger seeks spiritual connection: to banish loneliness when it has become ontological, to be hooked up in the most intimate of ways with the world, to be loved, to be cherished, to be needed, to matter, and to keep mattering. The stranger must become a friend. And a policy of hospitality is the means by which the stranger becomes a friend. Policy thus becomes the cradle for pedagogical relationships; and what is taught by relationships is how to grow as a human being such that time’s passing is enriching and transformative, is characterized by creative genesis, even when death is imminent.

⁴⁶ Seneca cautions that,
Death weighs heavy on one
who, too well known to all,
dies unknown to himself. (*Thyestes* II.401-03)

Promisingly, within organized hospice care there is a successful new program that is gaining force. Inspired by her conviction that individuals need help leaving the world just as much as they need help entering the world, Phyllis Farley launched Doula to Accompany and Comfort in 2000 at the New York City Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (Kleinfield). As of 2013, many facilities throughout the state of New York utilize doulas to accompany the dying, and doula programs have been organized at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, Baylor Medical Center in Texas, and Capital Care in Canada (Doula to Accompany). Program volunteers provide companionship and comfort to those who have less than eighteen months to live. Most of the patients are isolated and do not have the support of family or friends. Volunteers visit the patients, talk with them, and build personal, life-changing relationships until the end of the patients' lives.

The story of Bill Keating and Lew Grossman, as chronicled in N.R. Kleinfield's *New York Times* article, "In Death Watch for Stranger, Becoming a Friend to the End," is inspiring and instructive. Bill Keating, a buoyant, affluent, retired lawyer, volunteers for the doula program. He completes a training program and is then sent to care for his first case, Lew Grossman, who doctors say does not have much time left. The first few meetings are awkward, and Keating struggles to converse. Grossman then shares with Keating that the food in the geriatric center is terrible, and this is Keating's way in: Lox and cream cheese sandwiches, matzo ball soup, olives, steak tartare, chocolate milk, and doughnuts—Keating prepares it all and shares it with Grossman. Before long, Grossman's appetite returns, and he gains weight; Grossman also becomes more

animated, and there is laughter in his eyes. And, as Kleinfield relates, when Keating departs from each meeting with Grossman, he would “think to himself, ‘I kind of like the fella.’” Next comes the music: After turning off the television Grossman always watches, they listen to jazz and big band, song after song; Grossman begins to divulge pieces of his life. The food and the music create the sacred setting though which Grossman’s story pours forth, including the people he has loved, now absent, his problems with drinking, and his worries about entering heaven. In the meantime, Grossman keeps living. Keating’s friendship, Kleinfield suggests, has become Grossman’s most efficacious medication. Grossman tells Keating, “It’s good to have a friend when you’re old and sick.”

Keating knows he must talk about death with Grossman, but he does not want to because it “gives him a funny feeling.” Grossman, however, is beginning to fail. Keating puts on some Glenn Miller and asks Grossman when he is up in heaven, how he would like to be remembered. Their conversation is pivotal for them both.

Mr. Grossman looked up at Mr. Keating and whispered, “I want to be remembered.” He tried to stop himself from crying.

“You will be remembered,” said Mr. Keating, his eyes damp too. “I will always remember you. People ask me about you all the time. And I say, You’re a fabulous person. Knows more about music than anyone I know. What else should I say?”

“I don’t know,” Mr. Grossman said.

“Well, I know. I’m lucky to have you as a friend.”

We enter hospice care when there is no hope of living. Be that as it may, from the day Grossman and Keating meet, there *is* hope—hope for ontological healing, hope for relations and connection, hope that meaning will be created and found. Grossman is alone and confined to a room at the end of his life. In this room he suffocates. It is Keating and the hospitality Keating offers that opens space for Grossman, space to enjoy food and music, to find his voice, to recall his past and wonder about its implications, to worry about heaven. Through Keating, Grossman is able to engage with the world, to let his past speak, and to live again, however brief.

The healing is not only for Grossman; Keating, although he is not ill, although he is not dying, heals as well. When Keating meets Grossman, Keating apprehends Grossman as simply soon-to-be-dead. He wonders how “sitting death watch would mix with bridge and opera.” But when, as Kleinfield phrases it, “life goes to visit death,” Keating finds Grossman at the brink of life—not just at the precipice of death—waiting to be touched and very much worthy of an earnest friendship. Keating is bewildered when Grossman finally does succumb to death. Kleinfield narrates his reaction: “Funny how the end was so long expected, and yet the crude reality left Mr. Keating stunned. Lew gone? Just like that?” Keating’s communion with Grossman helps recast his views of the dying and of death. In some ways, it is Keating who first enters the room as Grossman’s guest, as a stranger, and Grossman creates the space for Keating to understand that death and those who are dying are anything but sterile, brute facts about life that can be ignored. Death cannot be disentangled from our living; death—those who are dying, those who have died, and our own impending deaths—are contained

within our living, and they add tragic depth and tragic joy and change the way we touch the world. Grossman's and Keating's companionship heals them both because it enriches the quality of both of their journeys.

It is significant that the concept of care as hospitality, embodied in the story of Grossman and Keating, is quite unlike the traditional medical notion of good care in that it is neither prophylactic nor curative. That is, care as hospitality intends neither prevention of harm, as in preventative care, nor does it intend to offer a cure. Hospitality does not ambush bodily illness and death. Instead, it is aspirational. It *promotes* well-being, understood in this specific context as ontological health, and its guiding sensibilities are space, relation, and transformation over and against diagnostication, professional authority, and technical victory.

The subtle message from Grossman's and Keating's story—and the central argument of this chapter—is that kind of multi-dimensional care at stake in their interaction is precisely the kind of care needed to protect and promote the possibility of *everyone*, not just those with terminal illnesses. The lesson is that the philosophy and the practices of Doula to Accompany and Comfort and, more generally, the philosophy and practices of hospice care, can be adapted to serve the pressing ontological needs of those in senescence. The kind of care that is reserved for those at the end of life, care as hospitality, most often administered in hushed settings of disease and collapse, can also be meaningfully administered to older adults in far less grim settings to help them transition not to death but to, rather, a fresh start.

CONCLUSION

The role of care as hospitality in the medical context can and should be expanded to fill the important existential gaps in clinical medicine. Moreover, the role of care as hospitality can and should be expanded to programs and policy formulations in countless other contexts, including business, community, and religious contexts. To reconstruct the meaning of time's passing so that it nourishes the experience of aging as growth rather than aging as deterioration, policy must open a space for self-transformation via, in John Dewey's language, engagement of the live creature.

The possibilities for care of the aged are endless. For example, consider the following: First and foremost, the formation of pedagogical relationships, such as the one between Grossman and Keating, should be one of the primary goals of any program or policy. In addition to organizations like Doula to Accompany and Comfort, which are overtly dedicated to the formation of relationships, inter- and intra-generational relationships might indirectly be facilitated through the built environment, by perhaps redesigning geriatric centers such that they are interpenetrated by a diverse population or, more broadly, by redesigning community structures so that they are accessible to all generations. For the working elderly population, work standards and expectations could change based on perceived current strengths and potentialities, and work would thus offer meaningful challenges commensurate with desires and abilities. Moreover, providing the opportunity for creative expression at work would be a crucial component of policy reform. For those elderly who have retired from work, volunteer opportunities might provide avenues to help others and form valuable relationships.

Another example to model: There have been numerous movements, including within the non-profit and small business sectors, to preserve the stories of older adults. These services help older adults record and even publish their personal memoirs for themselves, their families, and their friends. In particular, the Spaces Between Your Fingers Project is working to build an “archive of human experience.” The project pairs someone with an individual battling Alzheimer’s disease or related dementia to help save a memory. Memories are written on a postcard and illustrated, and they are archived in the Philadelphia Free Library. Efforts like these help to let the past speak and to find new meaning. Moreover, efforts like these ascribe importance and respect to our very existence. Our stories, our books, our things—they are who we are, and they are important and not to be thrown away and forgotten like trash that is no longer needed.

Policy must attend to the possibility of the elderly by opening up the space for them to find courage to change what can be changed for the better. This kind of care is the way in which we honor time’s passing as an opportunity for the live creature to live. It is the way we honor the live, aged creature as worthy of the *entire* journey.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: PHILOSOPHICAL GLEANINGS

Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" 237

The message to be heard here is not that there is nothing new under the sun. Quite the opposite: novelty is everywhere, even in the ruins of the past, even in the weary eyes and ravaged bodies of the aged. Although "the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new," as Baldwin shares with his readers, it is our task to keep it new for ourselves and others by telling it, writing it, singing it, playing it, over and over again, in as many ways as we are able. Novelty is found in this struggle to keep it new; it is in the struggle that our suffering, our joys, and our triumphs speak to us and give us new meaning and new purpose, like light in the darkness.

And the message to be heard here, even with light in the darkness and even at the end of this dissertation, is not that we now have solved the problem, banished ontological and epistemic uncertainty and confusion, tied it all together, and that we can now thus live peacefully. For, in the words of Walt Whitman,

The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections,

They scorn the best I can do to relate them. (part 14.10-11)

Possibility means that the question is always open, that all answers are hypotheses and are thus by their nature, perhaps uncomfortably, tentative. There is no right answer, at least, not for us, not in time, because the world itself is always in the making. There is only the trying to find the answers. And this is why the trying is more important than the provisional answers that we come to. Therefore, the claim that there are no answers does not mean that we have given up the search, the soul and allure of philosophy. It means, quite differently, that the search must always go on, like the blues that must always be played.

Furthermore, the claim that the search must always go on is not the claim that we are not making progress. We *have* made progress in this dissertation, and we are always making progress, provided we are live creatures on the *qui vive*, ready to run the risks of uncertainty. Note well, however: Progress does not mean that we getting closer to “getting it right.” Progress means that, as time passes, we affectively undergo our experiences such that we continuously find our “place” in the world. “Place” should not be read as a static noun but rather as a process; perhaps “placing” would be more apt. “Placing,” then, is a rhythm: It is a rhythm of experiences, old and new, woven and then

rewoven into a relational fabric from which we draw courage to keep on living, to keep on making a somewhere in the nowhere.

If philosophy is a way of life, then pragmatists are often accused of taking the quick and easy way. Claiming non-omniscience, pragmatists abandon questions of ultimate meaning, and they limit their inquiries to differences and effects, like scientists who draw conclusions only after so much data. They then always reserve the right to change their minds wholesale if the data change, now more like capricious lovers who have problems with commitment. Pragmatists' faith in God, some accuse, is too much akin to Pascal's Wager—dispassionate and calculating, based on the belief's pragmatic consequences, and, again, always with room for blasphemous uncertainty.

A response: This is a misconception of pragmatism. A belief, even a belief in God, must be *lived* if the belief is to have any depth. A belief does not come first in the form of the question, Does God exist?—and next in the form of an answer, yes or no. It is much different than this: Belief comes first in the form of the question about a need—What do I need in my life?—and, if the answer is that I need to live in relation with God, then we have the foundation for belief. God then becomes part of the way that we move through the world. Pragmatism does not objectively investigate beliefs outside of the way we experience those beliefs. Indeed, beliefs consist precisely in the way we experience them; this is what makes beliefs so intimate, so wrapped up in our living. Beliefs are truly affective outpourings of our existence, not merely propositions whose truth values are under consideration. For those who still balk at any individual basis for beliefs, consider the words of Kierkegaard.

When one man investigates objectively the problem of immortality, and another embraces an uncertainty with the passion of the infinite: where is there most truth, and who has the greater certainty? The one who has entered upon a never-ending approximation, for the certainty of immortality lies precisely in the subjectivity of the individual; the other is immortal, and fights for his immortality by struggling with the uncertainty. (“Truth”115)

This dissertation, firmly rooted in existentialist and pragmatist sensibilities, has explored the ways in which we view the elderly in Chapter II; the ways in which we experience aging, including aging as both physical and ontological decay and aging as growth, in Chapter III; aging as it relates to death and aging under the auspices of a canopy of ultimate explanation in Chapter IV; and, finally, policies that concern the aged in Chapter V. The main hypothesis that has been put forth is that we should live our lives on the *qui vive*, even in old age, and that this is aging at its best. If, in old age, we continue to make a somewhere in the nowhere, then time becomes the vehicle for self transformation—not merely the vehicle for decay.

A final illustration may prove helpful. In his *Studies in Iconology*, Erwin Panofsky traces the development of the Father Time image in the ancient world. Panofsky explains that there were two concepts of time at work in the Father Time image: *kairos* and the Iranian concept, *aion*. Panofsky elaborates that *kairos* is the “brief, decisive moment which marks a turning point in the life of human beings or the development of the universe” (71). *Kairos* is characterized by “symbols of fleeting speed and precarious balance” (73). *Aion*, Panofsky continues, is the “divine principle of eternal and

exhaustible creativeness” (72) and is characterized by “symbols of universal power and infinite fertility” (73). It is fascinating, as Panofsky notes, that neither of these two conceptions of time in the Father Time image symbolize decay and destruction. Simply stated, then, it has been the chief aim of the dissertation to reinstate this ancient conviction that time’s passing can mean creation, not decomposition and organic death.

Who knows what a new day might bring? Aging in old age can and should proceed with novel meaning and significance, every day. The individual in John Keats’ musings, below, is defined not by number of years but by purpose.

I go among the Fields and catch a glimpse of a Stoat or a fieldmouse peeping
out of the withered grass—the creature hath a purpose, and its eyes are bright
with it. I go amongst the buildings of a city and I see a Man hurrying along—to
what? the Creature has a purpose and his eyes are bright with it. (363)

Aging is a retrospective and prospective exploration of us and the world that fuels a purpose; each and every day, until the end of our days, may our eyes be bright with it.

In the words of the poet T.S. Eliot,

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation. . . .

In my end is my beginning. (129)

T.S. Eliot's contentions and this dissertation are not Pollyanna caricatures of reality, which are devoid of the cacophonous, very real characteristics of our day-to-day lives as well as the great suffering most of us endure episodically throughout our lives. This, instead, is the rhetoric of courage, strength, and endurance, in the midst of utter, ontological confusion and disarray. This is the pedagogy of how to make the journey, especially when the journey is agonizing and dolorous. It is not an effort to "look on the bright side," to "make lemonade," or to "count blessings." Instead, it is an effort to live life intensely, with purpose, and in spiritual communion with others.

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