

Aristotle's Reflections on Old Age

Abstract

Old age in Aristotle's view is a 'natural illness', that is to say a non-pathological condition through which human beings gradually but inexorably lose their vital powers. In such a process, body and soul are jointly involved: as the cognate vital heat slowly decreases and extinguishes in the body, so the mental faculties correspondingly weaken and decline. Based on these premises, the analysis shows if and in what terms the above 'uneasy' psycho-physiological condition affects elderly people in their moral habits and behaviours, influencing their social life and conditioning the possibility for them to exercise functions in the institutional apparatus of the *polis*.

1 Introduction

In the ancient world, old age was a topic of significant interest for both physicians and philosophers. Both investigated the physical and mental characteristics of the elderly and identified similar causes of the phenomenon. Yet, generally speaking, physicians from the Hippocratic doctors down to Galen look at it mainly from the viewpoint of sanitary conditions and 'proto-gerontology', hence as a problem of medical therapy.¹

1 Cf. in the Hippocratic Collection, for instance, Aphorismi III. 31, II. 39 Littré IV (Hippocrate, Oeuvres complètes d'Hippocrate, vol. 4, ed. by Émile Littré, Paris 1844); De victu I. 32–33 Joly (Hippocrate, Du régime, ed. by Robert Joly, Paris 1972 [Collection des universités de France. Série grecque]); De octimestri partu 9.6 Grensemann (Hippocrates, Hippocratis De octimestri partu, De septimestri partu (spurium), ed. by Hermann Grensemann, Berlin 1968 [Corpus medicorum Graecorum I. 2.1]); De natura muliebri I Littré VII (Hippocrate, Oeuvres complètes [see above], vol. 7, ed. by Littré, Paris 1851); De mulierum affectibus I. 7, II. 111, II. 137 Littré VIII (Hippocrate, Oeuvres complètes [see above], vol. 8, ed. by Littré, Paris 1853). As for Galen, cf. for instance De temperamentis II. 2, p. 580 Helmreich (Galenus, Galeni De temperamentis libri III, ed. by Georg Helmreich, Stuttgart 1969 [Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana]); De sanitate tuenda VI. 2 p. 171, 6–21 Koch (Galenus, Galeni De sanitate tuenda, ed. by Karl Koch, Leipzig-Berlin 1923 [Corpus medicorum Graecorum V. 4.2]); De marcore 3–4, Kühn VII (Galenus, Claudii Galeni opera omnia, vol. 7, ed. by Karl Gottlob Kühn, Leipzig 1821–1833 [Medicorum Graecorum opera quae exstant], Leipzig 1821). For an analysis of the medical viewpoint cf. Maria Michela

Philosophers, on the other hand, while sharing the basic themes of ageing with doctors, frame the phenomenon with a more global vision: the aetiological investigation of man in his physical dimension, in his relationship with nature and as a moral and political subject.²

To my knowledge, neither in modern studies on ancient philosophy nor in modern Aristotelian studies old age is a topic investigated as a whole in its complexity. Among the ancient Greek philosophers, Aristotle is not the only one dealing with old age and reflecting on the characteristics of this condition. Democritus, for example, wondered about the most convenient way for the elderly to speak or about the identification of strength and beauty as characteristics of young people and wisdom as a trait of the old. At the same time, he believed that wisdom is not a gift of the years, but rather the fruit of education and nature and that there is a need to take advantage of what is good in youth, given the uncertainty of being able to reach old age in the future. He also wrote about the negative features of old age as being a kind of impairment and lack of vitality.³ For his part, Hippon of Metapontus, counted among the Pythagoreans, focused

Sassi, Normalità e patologia della vecchiaia nella medicina antica, in: Chiara Crisciani/Luciana Repici/Pietro B. Rossi (Eds.), *Vita longa. Vecchiaia e durata della vita nella tradizione medica e aristotelica antica e medievale*, Firenze 2009 (Micrologus' Library 33), pp. 3–18. For a comparative analysis of the medical and philosophical viewpoints, cf. ead., *Giovane e Vecchio, umido e secco, caldo e freddo. Giochi di polarità nel sapere antico*, in: Simone Beta/Francesca Focaroli (Eds.), *Vecchiaia, gioventù, immortalità fra natura e cultura*, Fiesole (Firenze) 2009 (I quaderni del ramo d'oro 8), pp. 11–32.

2 Against the background of the topic there is therefore the broader problem of the relationship between medicine and philosophy in antiquity, the intersections of which are such as to justify the question of whether health is a medical or philosophical concern. This question is discussed by Sabina Grimaudo: Sabina Grimaudo, *Difendere la salute. Igiene e disciplina del soggetto nel "De sanitate tuenda" di Galeno*, Napoli 2008 (Elenchos 49), pp. 25–33. For his part, Aristotle hoped that medicine and philosophy could cooperate: "But it behoves the natural scientist to obtain also a clear view of the first principles of health and disease, inasmuch as neither health nor disease can exist in lifeless things. Indeed, we may say of most physical inquirers, and of those physicians who study their art more philosophically, that while the former complete their works with a disquisition on medicine, the latter start from a consideration of nature" (*De sensu* 1, 436 a17–b1, transl. by John I. Beare, revised in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton 1984 [Bollingen Series 71,2], pp. 693–713, at p. 693. Cf. also Aristotle, *De vita et morte* 5, 480 b20–30).

3 These different issues are the subject of maxims or sentences. Cf. Democritus (68), B 104 Diels-Kranz: "Amiable is an old man who knows how to entertain and speak seriously"; B 294: "Strength and beauty are the goods of youth, but wisdom is the flower of old age"; B 183: "There can be intelligence in young people and no intelligence in the old, because time does not teach wisdom, but timely education and nature"; B 295: "The old man was young; but there is no security that the

in particular on characteristics of old age such as dryness on the physical level and a lack of perceptual faculties on the mental level.⁴ When Plato deals with the phenomenon, many different aspects are highlighted. To briefly name but a few, old age is not, in his opinion, an unsuitable age for making philosophy, but rather is also the age at which freedom from desires can be achieved, provided that the soul is arranged in the best way and governed by reason; from the latter point of view, however, there is no distinction between old and young, even if in the soul of young people reason commands.⁵ From the physiological point of view, moreover, old age for Plato is a condition characterized by a progressive decrease in the process of assimilation of nutrition, which continuously loosens the bonds in the body and reduces its strength until death. And finally, from the political viewpoint, Plato assigns a particular leading role in the organization of symposia to the elderly in the ideal "City of the Laws".⁶

On the whole, it can be said that many of the themes present in the Platonic reflection on the phenomenon of ageing were taken up by Aristotle and it is therefore reasonable to ask whether Plato and Aristotle said the same things about old age.⁷ It seems to me, however, that the case can be part of the usual strategy that Aristotle adopts when comparing himself with his predecessors and with Plato in particular: the topics dealt with are common, but reservations are advanced about the depth and consistency of the investigations already carried out and, nine times out of ten, his solutions challenge the results obtained. What is more, Aristotle's approach to the phenomenon under scrutiny is the most complete and comprehensive analysis of it. For, in his treatment, previously dispersed or not integrated aspects are conflated into a more systematic unitarian perspective and into an original synthesis. As a result, old age is, so to say, the central focus of different conceptual lines ranging from macro- to microcosm, from the natural world to the living beings.

young man will reach old age; therefore the past good is better than the future and uncertainty"; B 296: "Old age is a complete mutilation, because it has everything but lacks everything".

4 Hippon (38), A 11 Diels-Kranz: "The old ones are dry and lack sensation, because they do not have moisture. Similarly, even the plants of the feet lack sensation."

5 On these issues cf. Gorgias 484 c–485 c, in the context in which Socrates is criticized by the sophist Callicles precisely because he does philosophy, despite being old; *Respublica* I, 329 c6.

6 *Timaeus* 81 d4–e5; *Leges* II, 671 a–672 a.

7 Simon Byl, *Platon et Aristote ont-ils professé des vues contradictoires sur la vieillesse?*, in: *Les Études Classiques* 42 (1974), pp. 113–126 and, for a more general investigation into the problem: id., *Vieillir et être vieux dans l'antiquité*, in: *Les Études Classiques* 64 (1996), pp. 261–271.

2 Aristotle and the Ageing of All Things

In his view, therefore, old age in men and its relative anthropological dimension must be placed within the natural scenario to which they necessarily belong. That means that growing old is a state of affairs congenial by nature to human beings but not only pertaining to them. In fact, everything in the world that is prone to generation and corruption ages. For Aristotle, the world as a whole is in and for itself eternal, because it is not born and does not perish, while everything that is born is bound to do so sooner or later. Generation and corruption also do not concern the upper region of the world, that of celestial bodies, where only eternal entities dwell.⁸ Rather, it is in the lower or terrestrial region of the world that movements of generation and corruption and all related changes and alterations take place. It is in this context that, with due differences, all things, including living beings and men no less than animals and plants, are born, grow old and die. With this attempt to correlate old age in men with similar processes in the natural sphere, Aristotle perhaps intended to show that ageing is an inevitable necessity for beings subjected to generation and corruption and, at the same time, remind them that this inevitable necessity is not only about them. Ageing therefore falls within the natural order of things and cannot be avoided. But in Aristotle's view of nature, there is no order prearranged once and for all, and a certain event may thus accidentally not take place. Nature, in his view, amounts to teleologically oriented processes, where, however, the end is realized if the conditions are in place for it to happen. Aristotle in fact sees what he called "conditional necessity" at work in nature, by which an event such as old age in men takes place if, and only if, nothing greater prevents it.⁹ It is possible (or rather, not impossible) therefore not to become old, if an unexpected obstacle, such as a deadly disease or some other accident, get in the way.

8 *De caelo* I. 10, 280 a11–23 and, on the impossibility of celestial bodies being subject to generation and corruption, II. 6, 288 b7–18, where the proof is based on the simplicity of the material constitution of stars in comparison with the complexity of animals' constitution. For further details cf. Luciana Repici, "Tutto invecchia per opera del tempo". Senilità e senescenza in Aristotele, in: Crisciani/Repici/Rossi (Eds.), *Vita longa* (see note 1), pp. 19–40, at pp. 19–22.

9 Aristotle's key texts are *Physica* II. 4–6, II. 8; *De partibus animalium* I. 1. For discussions on the topic cf. David M. Balme, *Teleology and Necessity*, in: Alan Gotthelf/James G. Lennox (Eds.), *Philosophical Issues in Aristotle's Biology*, Cambridge 1987, pp. 275–290; John M. Cooper, *Hypothetical Necessity and Natural Teleology*, in: Gotthelf/Lennox (Eds.), *Philosophical Issues* (see above), pp. 243–274; Wolfgang Wieland, *La fisica di Aristotele*, Bologna 1993 (Italian translation), particularly pp. 293–351. For a comparative study of the problem, cf. Julius Rocca (Ed.), *Teleology in the Ancient World. Philosophical and Medical Approaches*, Cambridge 2017.

Aristotle also recalls, on the other hand, that an indefinite prolongation of life is impossible. No living being as an individual, he claims, can “take part with continuity in what is eternal and divine”. Mortal as an individual, a living being nevertheless survives as a species and it is in this form that each (man, animal or plant) can participate in the eternal and the divine, obviously as far as it is possible, that is, “according to the more or the less” or in different degrees.¹⁰ As a rule, in fact,

“times – i. e. the lives – of the several kinds of things have a number by which they are distinguished, for there is an order for all things, and every time (i. e. every life) life are measured by a period. Not all of them, however, are measured by the same period, but some by a smaller and others by a greater one; for to some of them the period, which is their measure, is a year, while to some it is longer and to others shorter”.¹¹

This is the theme dealt with by Aristotle in the short monographic writing of his named “On Length and Shortness of Life”, where two relevant aspects are pointed out. Firstly, in the compound of soul and body of which the nature of living beings consists, it is the body that undergoes decay and corruption, while the soul neither perishes nor decays by itself, but follows the misadventures of the body precisely by virtue of its close union with it.¹² Secondly, among the qualities that characterize the constitution of living beings, only humidity and heat promote life and support it; this is why “to live is to be of such a constitution, while old age is dry and cold, and so is to be dead”.¹³ Equally decisive are the conditions of the environmental surroundings, which can affect, for better or worse, the individual natural constitutions of men, animals and plants. Comparatively, however, plants are the longest-lived beings, while men and elephants are longer-lived among blood animals, i. e. those with a higher degree of heat.¹⁴

10 De anima II. 4, 415 a25–b7, transl. by John A. Smith, revised in: The Complete Works of Aristotle (see note 2), pp. 641–692, at p. 661.

11 De generatione et corruptione II. 10, 336 b10–15, transl. by Harold H. Joachim, revised in: The Complete Works of Aristotle (see note 2), pp. 512–554, at p. 551. Cf. also De generatione animalium II. 10, 777 a31–778 a9.

12 De longitudine et brevitate vitae 1–2. For a more detailed analysis of this writing, cf. Aristotele, La fiamma nel cuore. Lunghezza e brevità della vita, Gioventù e vecchiaia, La respirazione, La vita e la morte, Introduzione, Traduzione, e Note, ed. by Luciana Repici, Pisa 2017 (Testi e commenti 20), pp. 35–49, 110–120.

13 De longitudine et brevitate vitae 5, 466 a18–20, transl. by George R. T. Ross, revised in: The Complete Works of Aristotle (see note 2), pp. 740–744, at p. 742.

14 Ibid., 4–6.

3 Aristotle on Old Age in Men as an Age of Decay

Heat sustains the life of living beings insofar as it ensures nutrition, i. e. it allows the assimilation of the nourishment necessary to survive and grow after birth.¹⁵ But, in order to function at its best, this vital heat must be “refrigerated” (a task that Aristotle assigns to breathing), and be balanced between excess and deficiency, being neither too intense nor too weak. Youth is the period of life when heat reaches its strongest expansion, as growth progresses. Therefore, as a condition contrary to this, old age is the age at which the expansion process converts into a process of contraction and decline and decay takes over, because the heat becomes weaker and weaker. The transition is not immediate, however, for in between the two contraries there is a middle term, which constitutes the prime of life.¹⁶ Consequently, on the one hand, youth and old age are opposed to each other and are characterized by opposed properties: expansive growth in youth, and decline and decay in old age. On the other hand, however, they are also both opposed, either with regard to excess or deficiency, to a median condition between them (the prime of life).

Decline and decay in old age can only have negative effects. They are already made apparent by the circumstance that the respiratory organs, which are entrusted with the task of “refrigerating” the vital heat, harden more and more and become, so to say, “earthy”, so as to make the normal movements of expansion and contraction in breathing difficult. Hence, even a small disturbance can cause death in old age as little heat remains

15 *De vita et morte* 2, 479 a29–30, transl. by George R. T. Ross, revised in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 745–763, at p. 761: “Generation is therefore the first participation in the heat of the nutritive soul, while life is the permanence in this <participation>.” Aristotle considers nutrition a task of the soul because in his view, in the union of soul and body, the soul is responsible for bringing the functions that characterize a living being as such to a successful end, using the body as a tool in functions that take place through the body such as, first and foremost nutrition, on which the existence in life of all living beings, plants, animals and men depends entirely. Cf. *De anima* II. 1–3 on the definition of the soul and II. 4 on its specific nutritive function.

16 *De vita et morte* 2, 479 a29–30, transl. by George R. T. Ross, revised in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 745–763, at p. 761: “Youth is the growth of the first part which brings in refrigeration, old age its decay, whilst the intermediate age between them is the maturity.” For a commentary on both this passage and the passage quoted in the preceding note, cf. *Aristotele, La fiamma nel cuore*, ed. by Repici (see note 12), pp. 150–152. The “first part which brings in refrigeration” is the heart; as it is located in the central region of the body, the vital heat that it contains is refrigerated by the movements of the respiratory organs (lungs or gills) surrounding it. On the crucial importance of balancing heat, cf. Richard A. H. King, *Aristotle on Life and Death*, London 2001, pp. 106–113.

at this stage of life and, even a minimum of stress that affects the organ in which the very principle of life resides with heat, (the heart), has death as the inevitable result. Aristotle described it as follows: "It is as though the heart contained a tiny feeble flame, which the slightest movement blows out"; in which case, "... death in old age is painless, for no violent disturbance is required to cause death, and the severance of the soul is entirely imperceptible".¹⁷ Other signs also make ageing visible. The head grows bald and the hair turns grey, especially in males; the skin becomes harder and thicker; teeth fall out; the generative power decreases or fails; the sight weakens and grows dim; the voice becomes sharp.¹⁸ These are, however, the inevitable consequences of the nature of old age, which is cold and dry, indeed "earthy" (*geeron*), as its own name *geras* says.¹⁹ Therefore, the aforementioned manifestations are natural, and not the result of diseases. However, looking at its debilitating effects, it is not unreasonable for Aristotle to say that old age is a "natural disease". The main difference is that, when health is recovered, a disease can reverse back to health, whilst a natural disease such as old age never turns back again into youth. Inevitably old age progresses towards death.²⁰ Changes resulting from the passing of time also take place in animals and plants, for plants shed their leaves and birds their feathers. For plants and animals, the seasons of the year are the turning point of their lives; so that, when the seasons change, they change accordingly and recover what they have lost. Quite differently to the situation in men, where the stages of life are defined by age; hence, since age cannot be reversed, neither can the conditions specific to each season.²¹

Nor do decline and decay in old age only affect the body, the soul too is involved. For, youth and old age fall within the number of the psychosomatic or "common to body and soul" properties in beings endowed with life, in men and animals no less than plants. That means that body and soul are an organic and functional unity, whose components cannot be separated in the same way as, by analogy, no function could be performed if

17 De vita et morte I, 479 a7–23, transl. by George R. T. Ross, revised in: The Complete Works of Aristotle (see note 2), pp. 745–763, at pp. 760–761, and for a commentary, Aristotele, La fiamma nel cuore, ed. by Repici (see note 12), pp. 14–34, 150–151.

18 On these occurrences cf. De generatione animalium I.18, 725 b21–22, I.19, 727 a8–10, II.6, 745 a31–33, V.1, V.7.

19 De generatione animalium V.3, 783 b2–8.

20 Ibid., V.4, 784 b23–34.

21 Ibid., V.3, 783 b8–20, 784 a11–21.

separated from its proper instrument.²² Thus, since the relationship between them is of the sort that the soul is the set of functions that characterize the living being as such and the body its instrument, it is not impossible that negative conditions of the latter can affect the functioning of the former. If therefore sensory organs weaken due to the physical decline typical of old age, their ability to perceive weakens in parallel, as we have seen. “If the old man” – Aristotle argues – “could recover the proper kind of eye, he would see just as well as the young man”. But his conclusion is that “the incapacity of old age is due to an affection not of the soul but of its vehicle, as occurs in drunkenness or disease”. Similarly, even thinking can be affected by a poor condition of the body, at least to the extent that, no less than sense-perceiving, thought too belongs to flesh and blood individuals. Yet also “thinking and reflecting decline through the decay of some other inward part and are themselves impassable”. For, “thinking, loving, and hating are affections not of thought, but of that which has thought, so far as it has it”. And this is why “when this vehicle decays, memory and love cease”; they were “activities not of thought, but of the composite which has perished”.²³

Memory in particular, is an instructive case. Aristotle connects this cognitive activity with sense-perception, for the objects of memory are images of things perceived in the past: it is through the sense-perception that an image of things is stamped on the soul like a picture. But, in those who are affected by an intense inner movement, such as those suffering from passions or ageing, no memory is formed, “just as no impression would be formed if the movement of the seal were to impinge on running water”. Neither is an impression stamped on those in whom the receiving surface is either “frayed, as happens to old walls” or “hard”. The allusion here is apparently to very young and very old people, that both, therefore, have a defective memory. For, both are in state of flux, the former because of their expanding growth, and the latter because of their progressive decay.²⁴ Memory, however, incidentally touches upon thinking as well; for it is able to

22 For a recent analysis of the question cf. Pierre-Marie Morel, “Common to Soul and Body” in the *Parva Naturalia* (Aristotle, *Sens.* 1, 436 b1–12), in: Richard A. H. King (Ed.), *Common to Body and Soul. Philosophical Approaches to Explaining Living Behaviour in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Berlin 2006, pp. 121–139.

23 *De anima* I. 4, 408 b11–29, transl. by John A. Smith, revised in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 641–692, at p. 651. On the topic cf. Philip J. Van der Eijk, *The Matter of Mind. Aristotle on the Biology of ‘Psychic’ Processes and the Bodily Aspects of Thinking*, in: id., *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity. Doctors and Philosophers on Nature, Soul, Health and Disease*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 206–237.

24 *De memoria* 1, 450 a25–b, transl. by John I. Beare, revised in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 714–720, at p. 715, and, for a commentary, Aristotle, *On Memory*, ed. by Richard

represent intellectual objects through images and thought itself 'thinks' only by means of images of disembodied things.²⁵ Thus, it cannot be excluded that in the young (because of the excessive fluidity of their mind) and the old (because of the opposite cause due to hardness / dryness in their mental condition), a defective memory also affects other aspects such as learning, retention of what is learnt and the readiness to learn.

On these opposing traits, the well-known description of the different human characters that Aristotle makes in his "Rhetoric" is also founded.²⁶ Schematically, the differences can be summarized as follows (see table 1):

Tab.: Character Traits of Young and Old People according to Aristotle

Young People	Old People
Strongly passionate	Slackening passions
Changeable in desires	Uncertain and under-doing everything
Hot-tempered, sanguine	Chilly in temperament, distrustful
Confident in the future	Turned to their past
Courageous	Cowardly, suspicious of evil
Inclined to do noble rather than useful deeds	Small-minded, ungenerous
Ruled by character rather than by reasoning	Ruled by reasoning for their usefulness
Fond of their friends for their company	Fond of themselves

In this classification, the opposites are neither passionate or emotional states (*pathe*) such as anger and calm, for example, nor virtuous or vicious dispositions,²⁷ but rather the psychological states and the attitudes, the behaviours and tendencies that define a character and frame by types categories of individuals and human groups as a whole. Other types are distinguished not by age as young and old, but by social status, and the classification here includes those who are noble by birth, rich, powerful and fortunate.²⁸ In this case,

Sorabji, London 1972, pp.80–83. For a general discussion on Aristotle's theory of memory, cf. Maria Michela Sassi, *Aristotele fenomenologo della memoria*, in: ead. (Ed.), *Tracce della mente. Teorie della memoria da Platone ai moderni*, Pisa 2007 (Seminari e convegni 9), pp. 25–46.

25 De memoria I, 449 b30–450 a23. Cf. De anima III. 7, 431 a14–17.

26 Rhetorica II. 12–14 and, for a commentary, cf. Aristotele, *Rhetorica. Introduzione, traduzione e commento*, ed. by Silvia Gastaldi, Roma 2014, pp. 485–493.

27 For the analysis of these aspects cf. Rhetorica II. 2–11.

28 Ibid., II. 15–17.

however, the description more appropriately highlights similarities and dissimilarities among the types; thus, it is that the mentioned groups share traits such as arrogance, ambition, an inclination to contempt for others and ostentation. However, the powerful are, for example, more ambitious and dignified than the rich, and the fortunate less arrogant than the others because they are grateful to the divinity for their goods.²⁹ The opposite conditions (poor, powerless, unfortunate) are not examined in detail in this classification.

On the contrary, in the classification of character types by age, the different conditions are examined in detail, the oppositions are clearly delineated and, above all, in between the two opposites, youth and old age, an intermediate term is identified. These are the men in their prime. In their character they unite both confidence and timidity and are equanimous, neither trusting nor distrusting everybody. They are also brave as well as temperate and vice versa, neither brave but intemperate, like young people, nor temperate but cowardly, like the old. Their life is guided both by what is noble and what is useful, neither by parsimony nor by prodigality, but always by what is fit and proper. Briefly, men in their prime “have a character between that of the young and that of the old, free from the extremes of either” and, generally speaking, “all the valuable qualities that youth and age divide between them are united in the prime of life, while all their excesses or defects are replaced by moderation and fitness”. It takes many years to attain such a mental condition, for, if the body reaches its prime from the age of 30 to 35, the mind, however, needs much more time, namely up to the age of 49.³⁰

As a result, old age is contrary to youth as its opposite, but on the other hand they both are opposed as extremes to what is intermediate between them. Both therefore represent negative conditions as opposites, one by excess and the other by deficit, to the middle term that is a combination of them both. Accordingly, only the latter is, properly speaking, the best condition, being as it were a state of excellence, whilst youth and old age are equally unfavourable conditions, being, as it were, ‘vices’. In this context, however, passions or emotions and characters are not analysed as themes of ethical relevance,³¹ but

29 Ibid., II. 15, 1390 b17–24, 16, 1391 a1–6, 17, 1391 a20–28, 1391 a30–b3.

30 Ibid., II. 14, 1390 a28–29, 1390 b6–11, transl. by W. Rhys Roberts, revised in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 2152–2269, at p. 2215.

31 Scholars wonder why the treatment of ethical issues as relevant as these is entrusted by Aristotle to a work of rhetoric, and not to the writings of ethics or the treatise on the soul, and therefore question the philosophical quality of his Rhetoric. For some approaches to the topic cf. Michael Billig, *Arguing and Thinking. A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*, Cambridge 1996 (European Monographs in Social Psychology); Thomas Conley, *Pathe and Pisteis. Aristotle Rhet. II. 2–11*, in: *Hermes* 110 (1982), pp. 300–315; John M. Cooper, *Ethical-Political Theory in Aristotle’s Rhetoric*,

rather as a repertoire of arguments that serve the speaker in his effort to elicit agreement in the audience.³² Hence, the prime of life in between youth and old age can hardly mean a “right mean (*mesotes*)” in between two opposites ‘vices,’ one by excess and the other by defect, to which amounts excellence (*arete*) in human behaviours.³³ Rather, the intermediate prime of life between youth and old age is a state of psycho-physical maturity, where “all the valuable qualities that youth and old age divide between them are united” and “all their excesses or defects are replaced by moderation (*metrion*) and fitness (*armotton*)”.³⁴ Yet, it is precisely in terms of opposite extremes and defective states, that youth and old age are interpreted by Aristotle with reference to ethics, assuming as a middle term the status of excellence that distinguishes men in their prime and their behaviours.

in: David J. Furley / Alexander Nehamas (Eds.), *Aristotle's Rhetoric. Philosophical Essays*, Princeton 1994, pp. 193–210; John M. Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Emotions*, in: Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, Berkeley 1996 (*Philosophical Traditions 6*), pp. 238–257; Troels Engberg Pedersen, *Is There an Ethical Dimension to Aristotelian Rhetoric?*, in: Oksenberg Rorty (Ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric* (see above), pp. 116–141; Eugene Garver, *Ethos and Argument. The Ethos of the Speaker and the Ethos of the Audience*, in: *Papers on Rhetoric 3* (2000), pp. 113–126; Silvia Gastaldi, *Aristotele e la politica delle passioni. Retorica, psicologia ed etica dei comportamenti emozionali*, Torino 1990 (*Biblioteca storico-filosofica*); Gisela Striker, *Emotion in Context. Aristotle's Treatment of the Passion in Rhetoric and His Moral Psychology*, in: Oksenberg Rorty (Ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric* (see above), pp. 286–302; William W. Fortenbaugh, *Aristotle's Rhetoric on Emotions*, in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 52* (1970), pp. 40–70; id., *Aristotle on Persuasion Through Character*, in: *Rhetorica 10,3* (1992), pp. 207–244; id., *Aristotle on Emotion. A Contribution to Philosophical Psychology, Rhetoric, Poetics, Politics and Ethics*, London 2002.

32 Francesca Piazza, *La retorica di Aristotele. Introduzione alla lettura*, Roma 2008 (*Quality Paperbacks 256*), pp. 101–102, 107. In her view, therefore, there would be a specifically rhetorical viewpoint on the passions, whose aim would be to highlight the relationship between language, emotion and sociality in human beings, whilst the purpose of characters treatment would be, as Aristotle himself claims, to provide the speaker with useful information to appear, of themselves and in their speeches, as possessing a certain character. For, “... people always think well of speeches adapted to, and reflecting, their own character; and we can now see how to compose our speeches so as to adapt both them and ourselves to our audience”; *Rhetorica II. 13*, 1390a24–27, transl. by W. Rhys Roberts, revised in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 2152–2269, at p. 2215.

33 *Ethica Nicomachea II. 6*, 1106b36–1107a8: “It [sc. excellence] is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while excellence both finds and chooses that which is intermediate”, transl. by William David Ross, revised by James O. Urmson, in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 1729–1867, at p. 1748.

34 *Rhetorica II. 14*, 1390b6–9, transl. by W. Rhys Roberts, revised in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 2152–2269, at p. 2216.

4 Old Age in Aristotle in Its Ethical-Political Aspects

As Aristotle puts it, friendship is “an excellence or implies excellence and is besides most necessary with a view to living”.³⁵ It is a basic excellence for strengthening relations between members of a polis; indeed, in Aristotle’s view, it supplements and, in a sense, replaces justice, the mother of all political excellences. For, when men are friends, they have no need of justice, whilst when they are just, they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality.³⁶ Its effects benefit both young and old, for it helps the young to keep from error and aids older people by providing for their needs and supplementing their activities that fail due to weakness. It also inspires those who are in their prime of life to noble actions.³⁷ However, only excellent men, that is, those who possess the sovereign virtue of wisdom that regulates the choice of the right mean, love their friends for themselves and dispassionately wish them well. This is why perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good and alike in excellence: they wish well (good) alike to each and they are good in themselves. Such friendships are rare because such men are rare; but this is the complete friendship both in respect of duration and in all other respects.³⁸

On the contrary, young people seek friends in view of their pleasure. For, they live under the guidance of emotions and pursue above all what is pleasant to themselves; but, as age increases, their pleasures change. Consequently, they quickly become friends and quickly cease to be so: their friendship changes with what they find pleasant and such a pleasure swiftly changes.³⁹ For their part, old people look for friends in view of their utility, that is, for the sake of what is good for themselves. But utility changes no less quickly than pleasure, so the motive of friendship soon dissolves and, together with it, friendship itself. Hence, no less than friendship in youth, friendship in old age is only incidental and lasts until the utility, like pleasure, changes its target. There is no true friendship in advanced years, only something similar to it; indeed, it is the worse type of friendship, for men in this age are not fond of each other, but only look for profit. Nor do old people make friends easily; as is the case in ill-tempered people, there is little

35 *Ethica Nicomachea* VIII. I, 1155 a3–5, transl. by William David Ross, revised by James O. Urmson, in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 1729–1867, at p. 1825.

36 *Ibid.*, 1155 a26–28.

37 *Ibid.*, 1155 a12–15.

38 *Ibid.*, 3, 1156 b7–9, 1156 b24–25; 4, 1156 b33–34.

39 *Ibid.*, 3, 1156 a30–b1.

pleasant in the old and no one would spend his time in unpleasant company, seeing that “nature seems above all to avoid the painful and to aim at the pleasant”.⁴⁰

We thus come across another ‘defect’ of the old and, given the socio-political value of an excellence such as friendship, this is not a minor one. For, what seems to be lacking in the old is the sociability that is necessary to establish relationships with friends and other members of the political community to which they belong. It is therefore not surprising that, for Aristotle, they should be excluded from performing state duties. They are certainly citizens, he argues, but not in a fully qualified sense, just as children conversely are too young to be included in the citizenship register. It is quite natural that the older are more fitted to govern and the younger to obey, just as in the biological field the male is better suited to command than the female in the family, and the father more than the children and wife. It could also be said that the elders are good men and well trained in manly virtue. But it is disputable that those who have to judge important causes should hold office for life, for “the mind grows old as well as the body”. Hence, the state duties should be entrusted according to age; for, there are duties that require strength, like in warriors, and duties that require wisdom, like in counsellors. Duties therefore will be entrusted to different persons in their prime of life and not to the same person at the same time, but in accordance with nature, which possibly endows the younger with strength and the older with wisdom.⁴¹

Besides, the legislator in charge of the well-being of future generations of citizens must take care that old age is not an obstacle or a detriment instead of a resource. He will then have to take care of the weddings and set the maximum age limit for reproduction (seventy years for men, about fifty for women). For, men who are too old or too young generate children “defective both in body and in mind”, particularly if generated by very old men. The criterion to be followed will be “the age of the prime of their intelligence”, i. e. about fifty in most men, and those who are four or five years older will be forbidden to have families.⁴² As such, a prime is seen here as a sort of “blooming (*akme*)” like in plants, and it could be said that, for Aristotle, intelligence is in its full bloom in the prime of life and that the old, whose generative power declines in parallel with their bodily

40 Ibid., 3, 1156 a19–26; 5, 1157 a15–20; 6, 1157 b14–18.

41 *Politica* I. 12, 1259 b1–4; II. 9, 1270 b35–b1; III. 1, 1275 a15–16; VII. 9, 1329 a8–17; VII. 14, 1332 b35–41, transl. by Benjamin Jovett, revised in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (see note 2), pp. 1986–2129, at pp. 1998, 2023, 2016, 2109, 2115.

42 Ibid., VII. 16, 1334 b29–1335 a15.

strength and mental activities, can be compared to plants in the process of withering and drying out.⁴³

5 Conclusions

Aristotle himself refers to the use of poets to metaphorically describe old age as “the evening” or “the sunset” of life.⁴⁴ In summary, we could say that, realistically, there is hardly any poetry in his portrait of old age. A state of physical and mental decline is typical of the old (§ 3). Their characters, too, are altered; a bad light surrounds them both in the common opinion which a speaker draws when elaborating his speeches aimed at eliciting persuasion in the audience, and in the analysis of excellence in man such as is required by his nature of “political animal” (§ 4). On the whole, the picture appears bleak and one can understand critical reactions such as that of Cicero in his brief treatise “De senectute”, which is a solemn defence of old age.⁴⁵

It seems to me, however, that, for a more appropriate assessment of Aristotle’s approach, his treatment of the topic needs to be placed within the context of his interest in the philosophy of nature (§ 2). From this standpoint, old age can be seen as an exemplary case study in the context of research into the processes of generation and corruption in the sublunary world. Hence, the attention paid both to old age and its opposite, youth, can be seen as emblematic states of the basic opposition that marks out all bodies that can be generated and corrupted. This also explains the primacy attached to the middle term, the intermediate state between the two extremes, which, in the ages of life as in behaviours, avoids excess and defect and achieves the best condition as far as it is possible to do (§ 4).⁴⁶ In the history before his time, Aristotle could find

43 Ibid., VII.16, 1335 b32. In “De vita et morte”, it is the prime of life, i. e. the “intermediate (*meson*)” between youth and old age, that is introduced as a period of blooming (De vita et morte 2, 479 a32). Death is but the completion of the process of withering and drying out (ibid., 479 b2–3).

44 Poëtica 21, 1457 b23–24.

45 Aristotle appears to be challenged on key points such as the interpretation of old age as a natural disease, the decline of strength and mental activities and the vicious traits of the character: cf. Marcus Tullius Cicero, Cato maior de senectute, in: M. Tulli Ciceronis De re publica. De legibus. Cato maior de senectute. Laelius de amicitia, ed. by Jonathan G. F. Powell, Oxford 2006 (Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis), pp. 267–315, at 4–5, pp. 271–272, 21–38, pp. 280–290, 65–66, pp. 304–305.

46 The primacy assigned to the middle term is frequent in the bio-physiological field. For example, the production and the generative power of semen is said to be at their height in adulthood, and

numerous medical and philosophical, and even poetical reflections on the same theme (§ 1). Those examined above were the original terms in which he dealt with it. Future research will be able to state whether or not his invitation / solicitation to address old age as a complex psycho-physical condition and in the framework of the family and social contexts to which elderly people belong has been accepted and developed by other philosophers and / or philosophical schools of antiquity and what its usefulness and applicability might be in the field of modern gerontology.

not in old age nor in childhood and youth: cf. *De generatione animalium* I. 18, 725 b19–25, 727 a2–10. The sight is the best in the eye whose constitution is neither too much nor too little liquid: cf. *De generatione animalium* V. 1, 780 a17. The well-pitched voice is in due proportion between the two extremes of deep and high: cf. *De generatione animalium* V. 7, 786 b7–9.