

**Martha C. Nussbaum and Saul Levmore.** *Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations about Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, and Regret.* Oxford University Press 2017. 264 pp. \$24.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190600235).

Around the time he became a Buddhist monk, Leonard Cohen said that getting old had its upside: at parties, you could have a conversation where neither person was trying to get the other into bed. This might seem to say more about Cohen (or Buddhism) than about aging, but old Cephalus from Plato's *Republic* (329c) was also glad to escape 'the mad and furious master' that is desire. Finally freed from passion, we can, in our later years, enjoy the fruits of well-spent powers, contemplate fine and finished things, or withdraw from society in preparation for something truly out of this world.

This traditional image of aging is at stake in the recent collaboration between philosopher Martha Nussbaum and economist Saul Levmore. *Aging Thoughtfully* is divided into eight chapters, each containing an essay and a reply, on everything from Social Security to the sex lives of older people. When Levmore writes the lead essay, the chapters have a tighter, practical focus ('Retirement Policy,' 'Inequality in an Aging Population'), while the other chapters range more widely ('Learning from King Lear,' 'Looking Back'). If there is a unifying thread, it is Nussbaum's indignant assault on the traditional image: 'baby boomers are refusing to lie down and die' (58). With her usual style and imagination (and some uncharacteristic rhetorical excess), she argues for a particular conception of active and intellectually vigorous aging, while Levmore quietly makes space, within the bounds of fairness, for people to age as they see fit. Because these seasoned scholars are more interested in elaborating than in reconsidering their long-held views, there are *almost* two distinct books here (*Aging Passionately* and *Aging Pleasantly?*), but the indirect nature of their 'conversation' turns out to be one of its many charms.

Nussbaum's opening essay on *King Lear* is meant to double as an account of what philosophy can and cannot bring to the study of aging. Her theme is control (Lear's difficulty adjusting to dependency), but the argument veers off unexpectedly into a memorably nasty attack on Simone de Beauvoir, author of *La Vieillesse*, a rare philosophical classic on old age. Nussbaum calls that book 'worse than preposterous ... an act of collaboration with social stigma and injustice' (20), since it 'validates contingent and derogatory stereotypes, and ... deprives aging people of agency' (19). Beauvoir sees aging as something that 'happens to you' (20) in a flash of painful awareness that others now despise you as 'old' (19). She is also criticized for holding the elitist view that '[t]he majority of old people live barren, deserted lives in isolation, repetition, and boredom' (21), though Nussbaum herself later takes the view that the inhabitants of 'presentist' retirement communities ('Leisureville') live like 'nonhuman animals' (140). Without a hint of irony, she traces the evils of Beauvoir's 'unwise generalizing' (16) to an 'annoying French propensity to tell other people what the correct way of being this or that (a woman, a citizen) is' (19-20). 'Why,' she asks, 'should I permit a French philosopher seven years younger than I currently am (sixty-nine) to tell me the meaning of my life as a philosopher in the twenty-first century?... I feel quite sorry that she is not happy, but why doesn't she just say, "I have the following unhappy experiences?"' (19). To which one answer is, if we start denying that there is anything to learn from thinkers who died barely thirty years ago, we should reasonably expect the unhappy experience of seeing our philosophy departments shut down once and for all.

If phenomenology has nothing to offer, what then should philosophizing about aging involve? One possibility is thoughtful conversation with philosophers of the past, such as we find in Nussbaum's rich letter to Cicero (a pre-21st century thinker who, fortunately, survived the ban).

Another is the sort of personal experience Nussbaum would have accepted from Beauvoir. Thus, in a heroic commitment to the examined life, Nussbaum recounts the story of a colonoscopy, which she proudly underwent without sedation so that she could observe her own intestines in the ‘wonder of self-discovery’ (109). In a more worthwhile bit of self-revelation, she writes of her ‘delightful’ but ‘manipulative’ and ‘shallow’ grandmother, who felt unburdened by a past that included cruel indifference to her first husband, a suffering man who eventually took his own life: ‘By her commitment to freedom from care, she virtually willed his demise’ (130). It may be uncomfortable to witness Nussbaum condemning her late grandmother so publicly, especially in a chapter concerned with morally appropriate attitudes toward the past (‘Living the Past Forward’), but her story adds undeniable interest to an engaging and important chapter by a tough-minded philosopher who digs fearlessly for insight even where it hurts.

Nussbaum normally prefers to seek illumination through literature, opera, and film. The poets are allowed to do what philosophers may not, i.e., speak for others—in fact literally put words in other people’s mouths. It then falls to the philosopher to pass judgement on their work (‘Lies of Richard Strauss, Truths of Shakespeare’). This is a risky method, and Nussbaum’s judgements are (according to me) hit and miss. In her comparison of *Antony and Cleopatra* to *Romeo and Juliet*, she says that young people forget that they have ‘real pulsing’ bodies with ‘hungers and limits,’ and that ‘teenagers... are just not good at erotic love with a real person’ (159). The second of these two generalizations is intriguing and plausible, but the first is so obviously false that you wonder if Nussbaum isn’t right after all that it helps to be a certain age to ‘write convincingly’ about it (158).

Her critique of youth is partly a reaction against the ‘youth-worship’ (59) endemic to the United States, but she seems divided over what to do about this phenomenon. On the one hand, she writes effectively about coming to terms with our animal nature, and rages humanely against the view that aging bodies are ‘smelly, ugly, revolting’ (115). Yet she also endorses Botox (118) and cosmetic surgery to remove signs of aging, and suggests, unjustly, that those opposed to these measures are depressed or full of self-hatred (121), rather than (say) courageous for refusing to conform to youthful models of beauty. Similarly, Nussbaum suspects false consciousness or ‘adaptive preferences’ (56-7), rather than noble resistance to a youthful ideal of productive life, among those who defend mandatory retirement.

It is on the theme of retirement that we find the sharpest contrast between Nussbaum’s rhetorically charged (61) assault on ageism (‘one of the great moral evils of our times, the next frontier of justice’), and Levmore’s patient comparison of policy options. (Righteous anger aside, does a 58-year-old unemployed woman have a better shot at getting work in a society that *enforces* mandatory retirement, or in a society that does *not*?) For Levmore, mandatory retirement is a tolerable form of discrimination, because old age (unlike ethnicity, gender, etc.) is a status that awaits us all, if we live long enough (44), and he arrives at this conclusion despite his own desire to go on working indefinitely (40). Compare this with Nussbaum’s somewhat more self-serving argument against compulsory retirement for university professors: ‘In today’s climate, I fear we’d find most of our humanists on short-term contracts.... Nor would universities take the retirement of senior humanists as an occasion to hire more young humanists.... They would be more likely to downsize the whole division. And without famous senior people to defend those programs, these cuts would have less opposition than they would today’ (57).

Elsewhere, Levmore’s emotional detachment yields bizarre results. In discussing whether parents should give a daughter her inheritance before they die, he observes that an early payday means the kid will have one less reason to visit old Mom and Pop, and regards such strategic thinking as ‘not irrational’ (33). Levmore views friendship as ‘a medium-length insurance contract’ (90), and

he struggles (unsuccessfully) with his ‘inner economist’ over the right way to think about the prospect of his spouse leaving him: ‘I would not be cheerful about it.... In principle I should be grateful for the rejection; I want what is good for her, and if she is sure that I am no longer an asset in her calculation, then perhaps I should trust her judgment’ (176). Since it is nearly a cliché in philosophy circles to view instrumental rationality as an inadequate guide to the moral life, Levmore’s calculating agents will certainly fascinate even as they alarm.

Perhaps because Nussbaum and Levmore are still on the young side of old age, they have relatively little to say about the problems of the *very* old, e.g., mental decline, memory loss, serious illness, or imminent death. One of the great moral questions of our time, assisted suicide, is mentioned only in passing (198). More strikingly still, they completely ignore those questions of religion, faith, and spirituality that preoccupy older people everywhere.

What they offer, instead, are two attractive and thoroughly humanistic visions of aging: one, combative and vital; the other, serene and pleasant. The noise of the agora, the peace of Leisureville. A place in the sun, a place in the shade.

You want it darker?

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