

# Age Against the Machine

## What Counts as Health in Old Age?

Michael Campbell

Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value  
University of Pardubice, Czech Republic

# Outline

1. Two definitions of health; austere and rich
2. Advantages of the austere version
3. Advantages of the rich version
4. 'Age is just a number'
5. Consequences of adopting a rich view of health for theories of the value of life in old age

# Austere Definition of Health

**Health** = the absence of pathology

**Pathology** = a "state of statistically species- subnormal biological part-function, relative to sex and age." (Boorse, Second Rebuttal on Health, p.684)

Pathologies include **diseases**, **disabilities** and **injuries**.

1. the **reference class** is a natural class of organisms of uniform functional design; specifically, an age group of a sex of a species.
2. A **normal function** of a part or process within members of the reference class is a statistically typical contribution by it to their individual survival [or] reproduction.
3. **Health** in a member of the reference class is *normal functional ability*: the readiness of each internal part to perform all its normal functions on typical occasions with at least typical efficiency.
4. A **pathological condition** is a type of internal state which impairs health, i.e., reduces one or more functional abilities below typical efficiency. (684)

# Advantages of the Austere Version

1. Provides an account of health which chimes with biological approaches to organisms:

--- Explains the difference between mere **differences** and defects

--- Explains the mechanism of evolution – our parts are arranged as they are due to the ‘survival of the fittest’.

2. Allows us to view the human body ‘objectively’:

Facilitated by the medical technologies that frame and focus the physicians’ optical grasp of the patient, the medical gaze abstracts the suffering person from her sociological context and reframes her as a “case” or a “condition. (*The Birth of the Clinic*, p.7)



# Disadvantages of the Austere Version

Yields some implausible conclusions:

1. Makes some non-pathological conditions pathological, e.g. skin colour
2. Cannot explain features of the doctor-patient relationship

# Rich Definition of Health

Replace 'survival and reproduction' with '**eudaimonia**'

Normal functioning of parts is to be explained by reference to their contribution to likely flourishing of the individual. In this case survival and reproduction are only instrumentally valuable; a trait can be healthy even if it fails to contribute to S&R if it contributes (or typically contributes) to flourishing.

World Health Organisation definition of health: "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."



# Disadvantages of the Rich Version

Builds (even more) evaluative notions into our concept of health: We now need a concept of flourishing (or well-being) in order to have a theory of health

May seem overly capacious: how can being healthy be equivalent to being well?



# Advantages of the Rich Version

Allows us to account for the nuances of the doctor-patient relationship, i.e. when we determine whether a 70 year old is healthy we do so by asking whether they are capable of living a fulfilling life.

i.e. captures the thought that a medical check up is about enquiring into the state of the person not merely their body.

Allows us to account for the role of technological change in the constitution of health – i.e. improvements in technology can alter the dependence of health on the vicissitudes of the body.



# 'Age is Just a Number' - con

Misleading if it implies that the very same attitudes which are appropriate when one is young are appropriate or even intelligible when one is old. Some goods are time-specific, such as the thrill of young love or the innocence of childhood. In practice, the possibilities of enjoying other goods, particularly sensory goods such as sexual pleasure or the pleasures of food or drink are attenuated or extinguished by the degradations old age.

Similarly, the virtues which the elderly can manifest are different from the virtues which are manifested by the young; for instance, the ways in which we manifest courage are different at different life stages. Courage in the face of death means something different when one is old rather than when one is young.



# 'Age is Just a Number' - pro

There is no necessary inequality between people at different life-stages, in terms of either their capacity to enjoy pleasures or to do good. The goods enjoyed by an 80 year old may be no less valuable, to them, than the goods enjoyed by a 20 year old. The value which we attach to states of affairs is subject to a **reference effect**, and part of this reference effect can be the realisation that there is a finite amount of time left, and this can make one's current experiences even more valuable.

Moreover, there are some pleasures which are not subject to the vicissitudes of age. **Socrates learns to dance** when he is in prison awaiting trial.

Although the virtues which the young and the old are expected to manifest may be different, it is only if one has an overly heroic conception of the virtues that one will think that the elderly have past the point where they can do good deeds, where they can manifest goodness in their actions or benefit others.



# Ramifications of the Rich

## Version I

[To] assess how bad it is for a person to die [...] we must [...] ask the following questions:

[1] How close would the prudential unity relations have been between the individual as he was at the time of his death and himself as he would have been at those later times when the goods of his future life would have occurred?

[2] Are the individual's previous gains from life below or beyond the norm for people with psychological capacities comparable to his own?

**[3] Did the individual's life have a narrative structure that would have been rounded out or completed by the future life of which death deprived him?**

[4] Had the individual made significant investments in his own future that were retroactively rendered futile or pointless by his death?

[5] Were the individual's previous actions or character such as to make him deserving of the goods he lost?

[6] Would the goods of which the individual was deprived have been ones that he desired at the time of his death? [*The Ethics of Killing* p.183]



# Ramifications of the Rich

## Version II

McMahan hopes to provide a theory of how much value a life will contain at different points.

But any such criteria are controversial: it will depend on the subject's own attitudes – in particular, the attitudes that we adopt towards the elements on any such list.

For some people, narrative will be irrelevant. Why should I think that any narrative rounds out? Why should that be important for me?

In other words, whether or not one is healthy in old age depends on one's personal conception of the self, of who one is.

