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Ageing and Identity as a Problem for Social Justice

Rudolph Glitz

Abstract

This article highlights a problem with social justice criticism in the humanities that treats age inequalities as if they were analogous to inequalities between different races or genders. It claims that what is missing from such criticism is an awareness of the peculiar temporality of age and its implications with regard to the distribution of goods. After outlining the problem with reference to the most sophisticated liberal account of social justice—namely John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness—the article discusses three ways of addressing the problem and concludes with a preliminary evaluation of these.

In literary research as well as social justice activism, age, and especially old age, has long been conceptualized as an identity category that does not only intersect with, but also closely resembles, those of gender, ethnicity, or race. Age, too, has become a rallying point of identity-political concerns, and while these concerns may still be pursued far less vigorously than those of feminism or, say, critical race studies, they are often expressed in very similar terms. Already G. Stanley Hall, one of the early pioneers of age group studies, conceived of the old as "a feeble minority" whose "right" to expressing their emotion needed to be defended (383), and this political approach to age-group differences predictably gained popularity in the wake of the civil rights movements of the late 1960s. Thus, "ageism" was explicitly coined as an analogous complement to racism and sexism in 1968 (cf. Butler 243), and the phenomena it covers would eventually be opposed as such also by literary and cultural critics. Most notably, perhaps, Kathleen Woodward, in her 1991 study *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, produces a reading of ageing that both "insists on the fundamentally ageist ideology of twentieth-century Western culture" and "is a critique of it" (17). Margaret Morganroth Gullette attacks that same ideology in books with titles such as *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of Midlife* (1997) and *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011).

Given the institutional success, in and around the academy at least, of the more established fields of politically engaged social justice criticism, it is of course hardly surprising that advocates of age-political change regularly draw upon these fields for inspiration, methodological know-how, and polemical techniques. With borrowed concepts and argumentative practices, however, there is bound to sneak in the occasional unquestioned assumption whose validity in relation to age is taken for granted rather than carefully ascertained. One of them, and the one I will focus on in this article, is the assumption that identity-based inequalities between social groups are inherently unjust. This assumption may not often be explicitly foregrounded in the age-political literary criticism that relies on it, but still quite obviously underpins it, for instance in such recent studies as Kay Heath's *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain* (2009) or Sylvia Henneberg's *The Creative Crone: Aging and the Poetry*

of May Sarton and Adrienne Rich (2010). As evidence for nineteenth-century ageism with regard to the midlife, Heath simply adduces the suffering of fictional characters—such as Mr. Casaubon from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871)—who are disparaged by their respective authors for claiming conventionally age-inappropriate goods, such as, in Casaubon's case, a much younger wife and her matrimonial idealism (57-59). Henneberg, too, denounces as manifestly ageist her authors' occasional endorsement of standardized social distinctions between age strata, for example when Adrienne Rich describes the deaths of young women as more tragic than those of older ones (49).

Heath and Henneberg's politicized anti-ageism might seem hard to take issue with. At first and perhaps even second sight, the assumption that identity-based inequality is unjust and worth combating seems quite a natural one to adopt for any critic who aims to promote social justice in her work. After all, it constitutes one of the foundational tenets behind the very notion of social justice since the latter was first developed systematically within nineteenth-century liberal philosophy. As John Stuart Mill put it already in *Utilitarianism* (1863), society should "treat all equally well who have deserved equally well of it" (91). And yet: however appealing and uncontroversial the principle of social equality may appear in most contexts, most prominently with regard to politicized identity categories that are largely beyond human control, its application to age in particular still raises a problem that needs to be addressed.

In order to explicate the problem in question, I propose to use as my theoretical frame of reference John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness. Having emerged in the wake of the American civil rights movement, Rawls's egalitarianism builds on the liberal tradition of social justice thinking and arguably constitutes the most influential and philosophically sophisticated account of the equality principle to date. This should render it superior as a theoretical touchstone to any cruder common-sense approaches critics may implicitly take and also to such relatively vague formulations as, say, the above quotation by Mill, which is still interpretable in ways that obscure said problem rather than bring it to the fore while possibly

being more defensible with regard to age than any of its more recent theoretical successors.

Having invoked Rawls's theory of justice, let me hasten to add that, by referring to and invoking parts of it, I am by no means claiming that every age critic and proponent of the equality principle is necessarily a strict Rawlsian or even aware of Rawls's arguments and philosophical commitments. Nor do I claim that Rawls's theory can in every respect be extended to cultural or discursive phenomena: he himself limits the primary subject of justice to "the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation" (6). I am merely using some of his most well-established concepts, distinctions, and explanatory devices in order to pinpoint that which I consider to be widely overlooked in age-political literary and cultural criticism in its current state. While perhaps not doing justice to readers and critics who have vastly differing conceptions of fairness to Rawls's, this approach should at least provide enough nuance and precision for them to modify and interpret my various claims in light of their own theoretical positions.

Where, then, does the problem lie with critiquing certain age-group inequalities through the lens of Rawls-inspired egalitarianism? I would argue that it arises from a synchronic as well as future-oriented bias in the social justice approach whose implications need to be unpacked and which needs to be, if not resisted, at least taken into consideration by any age critic aiming to convince others. This is because that synchronic and future-oriented bias jars with some strong moral intuitions many people have about the fair distribution of goods over one's life course. The politicized social justice approach to age is at odds with those intuitions insofar as it does not take into account either the shifting group affiliations regularly enforced by the ageing process or the past of the affected individuals as opposed to their present and future. Let me clarify these points by rehearsing step-by-step what I consider a rather typical way of forming age-political judgements in the field of literary and cultural criticism—after briefly sketching, that is, the relevant ideas of Rawls's account of social justice.

The Problem with the Social Justice Approach as it Appears within a Rawlsian Paradigm

In short, Rawls's approach can be characterized as a social contract theory that arrives at its principles from a hypothetical "original position" of equality. In order to ensure fairness, the hypothetical lawgivers, who are assumed to be both self-interested and rational, are placed behind a "veil of ignorance" regarding their own place in society:

> Among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. (11)

Rawls uses the original position as a means of expounding two basic principles of justice, which he regards as directly derivable from it. The first is "equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties" and the second the rejection of any social and economic inequalities that do not "result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society" (13). The latter principle is notable as a way of accounting for just inequalities (for example, merit-based ones), but since both are, as Rawls explains, already implied by the original position, I will not discuss them separately in my characterization of the social justice approach.

From a Rawls-inspired social justice perspective, then, ageism in the sense of age-group discrimination would roughly be determined by the following moral algorithm:

1) An inequality is noticed that disadvantages a particular age group in relation to others.
2) The social convention that produces this age inequality is identified.
3) A thought experiment is conducted to assess the social justice of the convention: the critic asks whether it could be reasonably agreed to by somebody who is located behind the Rawlsian veil of ignorance as to their own age and age-group affiliation. In other words, one would ask whether it

is in somebody's interest to support the convention in question if they did not know to which age group and other identity categories they belonged.
4) If the answer to the question in 3) is "no," the convention is unjust, if "yes," it is not, at least until a preferable alternative is found that turns the answer to "no."

Following the above steps, a critic would arrive at a verdict of injustice in pretty much every case of age-group inequality whose toleration is not absolutely necessary in order to prevent an even bigger inequality. Regarding especially old-age discrimination, however, such generosity towards the currently disadvantaged might—from another, but still by no means self-evidently ageist point of view—be deemed excessive if not even itself an injustice. This is because it would apply even in cases where the same system of cultural conventions and mechanisms that currently disadvantages a group of elderly individuals has also already benefitted these same individuals in the past and can therefore be interpreted as merely providing appropriate compensation. Take the frequently-adduced example of the unequal amount of favourable media representation different age groups have been granted since at least the various youth cultures of the early twentieth century: while it may well be true that, at any given moment in that time span, the old had a much lower chance of having their lives and activities fussed over and fetishized, and, as a result, suffered feelings of irrelevance or obsolescence, they arguably did, or at least had the chance to, enjoy the confidence-boosting pleasures of such limelight earlier in their lives, when they themselves were members of the favoured and most socially valued age group. If one takes into account their earlier representational pampering at the cost of their own respective elders, the injustice of their current deprivation is far less manifest than through the lens of the synchronic social justice model I have outlined.

Why is it that the social justice approach as commonly practiced in literary and cultural criticism does not adequately reflect the distribution of goods over the life course? Could the past benefits of the old not be included in the calculation that takes place during step three of the algorithm I have sketched? Possibly yes, I would argue, but only with some difficulty. In my view, the Rawls-inspired social justice approach relies on two features, which, together and in conjunction with age, happen to pose a

considerable obstacle. Firstly, the social justice critic's assessment concerns a synchronic state of affairs: whether implicitly or explicitly, the critic is usually concerned with the socio-cultural system as it is at the present moment in order to set the agenda for future change. Secondly, it relies on a rationality of self-interest that is designed to transcend personal biases, but not necessarily universally human ones, including those that have to do with temporality. While the hypothetical veil around Rawls's "original position" ensures ignorance of one's own place within the available range of possible human identities, making decisions from that position still requires a basic minimum of shared values and assumptions about the world by means of which one can evaluate and select between the available choices. One of these shared values, I would argue, is what Derek Parfit has called "our bias towards the future" (174), a trait he describes as a product of human evolution and somewhat regrettable with regard to our well-being (177).

As Parfit illustrates in detail and discusses at instructive length (170-84), our deeply-ingrained bias towards the future makes us care more about our experiences still to come than those through which we have already lived. It leaves us, for example, largely indifferent towards past pains and pleasures that, if they were future pains and pleasures, would fill us with intense dread and anticipation. Assuming the existence of this bias towards the future, which, by the way, only seems to be present when we consider our own lives as opposed to those of others (see Parfit 181ff), we can easily see how it must affect the social justice critic's judgement regarding old-age discrimination. Past benefits would barely figure in that critic's self-interest-based calculation of the fair distribution of goods across different age groups. Rather, any gains of the past would be dwarfed by present and future experiences, and especially so since the old people who paid for them have already died and are therefore removed from the equation. As long as we find it practically impossible to evaluate our own past and future in terms of temporal neutrality, that is, of looking backward to our past with emotions of pain and pleasure comparable to those with which we look forward to our future, we will always have an interest in discounting past experiences in our calculations of distributive fairness. Given my examples of old-age discrimination, I have mainly spoken of past benefits here, but of course this discounting equally applies to past disadvantages.

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Thus, the social justice critic stumbling over a social inequality that grossly disadvantages the young in favour of their elders would be unlikely to approve of the convention that caused it, even if, diachronically considered, it merely compensated the old for their own, similar exploitation at the hands of *their* elders in the past.

Modifying the Social Justice Approach

One could probably modify the social justice approach I have outlined and make it more sensitive to people's past experiences by reducing either its synchronic, future-oriented bias or its reliance on rational self-interest or both. After all, my pseudo-Rawlsian social justice algorithm is only a heuristic and somewhat speculative extrapolation of what I take to be a widespread and often implicit practice in the field of literary and cultural criticism. As such, it is hardly cast in stone. Rawls himself, in fact, addresses the problem at least in part when he discusses "the problem of justice between generations" (251). "In the case of society," he claims there, "pure time preference is unjust" (260). Yet when he elaborates this point, he discusses the problem merely with regard to the relations between the present generation and its future successors, thus leaving open whether and how the past should figure into our calculations. Our tendency to ascribe disproportionately more significance to events in our near future than to more remote ones (even if these are equally certain to occur) might well be, as Rawls points out, irrational and untenable for anyone behind the veil of ignorance (cf. 260), but this does not necessarily mean that our bias towards our future as opposed to our past is as well.

In any case, even if one developed a philosophically solid and rigorous theory of inter-age justice that takes past experiences fully into account, there is no doubt that the changes in question would not only yield very different verdicts to the ones of my algorithm, but also have quite extensive theoretical knock-on effects on how to conceive the original position in the first place. If the latter is no longer posited as "initial" (Rawls's term), but instead becomes sensitive to historical *faits accomplis*, this is likely to lead to problems with regard to the veil of ignorance and might render this Rawlsian concept useless as a heuristic device. Even if the

Rawlsian framework can be preserved in such an endeavour, the necessary modifications to it would probably much reduce the frequently invoked analogousness between age and such well-established sites of social justice struggles as the identity categories of gender and race.

The special role of age as opposed to those other identity categories can once again be clarified with reference to Rawls. In order to distinguish his approach from more utilitarian alternatives, which ultimately prioritize the sum total of a population's goods over everything else, he explicitly sets certain limits to the calculus of gains and losses:

> Each member of society is thought to have an inviolability founded on justice or, as some say, on natural right, which even the welfare of everyone else cannot override. Justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. The reasoning which balances the gains and losses of different persons as if they were one person is excluded. (24–25)

The exclusion at the end of this passage is telling. With regard to most identity categories it makes perfect sense: the welfare of one person or group can never compensate for the suffering of another. Age groups, however, do not quite fall under this rule. From a diachronic perspective, after all, there is a sense in which at least some of the "different persons" whose gains and losses one is tempted to balance actually are one and the same person, namely the younger and the older selves of the same individuals. This identity-related, age-specific difference would certainly need to be accommodated in any life-course-oriented expansion of the social justice approach to age.

Abandoning the Social Justice Framework

Instead of modifying the social justice approach and thus potentially abandoning many passionately-decried instances of what formerly looked like injustice, one could also abandon it and change one's rhetorical framework, away from conceptions of justice and towards something

one might call life-course engineering or planning. For even if, in view of the entire life courses of the individuals involved, a particular age-group inequality can no longer be regarded as unjust, that does not necessarily mean it is desirable. In fact, many such inequalities can be opposed on grounds other than that they constitute cases of distributive injustice. Some inequalities might be disadvantageous to all of the groups involved—after all, not all human goods lend themselves to zero-sum games with only a limited amount to go around: think, for instance, of kindness, whose spread and beneficial growth within a community forms the topic of numerous social-problem novels. Other age-group inequalities might involve values and assumptions about life and personal identity that differ profoundly from each other and cannot easily be compounded into a single age-political agenda. In the following paragraphs I will outline a few that are particularly salient to this discussion, but in any case, given their multiplicity and vast conceptual variety, it is important to be explicit about what exactly these grounds are, as well as any other value judgment one commits oneself to by opposing the inequality in question.

By way of illustration, let us return to the aforementioned example of George Eliot's Mr. Casaubon and the stereotype he and several other characters in *Middlemarch* seem to reinforce, namely that middle-aged men are on the margins of marital eligibility, unlikely to make good husbands, and had better leave the field to their juniors. One can oppose this stereotype and the inequality it gives rise to without harbouring suspicions of social injustice: after all, the currently middle-aged enjoyed their own youth under a similar age-political regime. If one does so, what one ultimately argues against is less an injustice than a particular, socially-encouraged life-course template and perhaps some of the factual assumptions it is rooted in. Rather than having society encourage marriage at a young age, one's main political goal as a critic of Eliot's fiction might be to promote a social system that grants more flexibility regarding men's transition from bachelorhood to married life and allows them to make this transition at any time throughout their lives. Alternatively, one might want to promote an age-blind conception of love or even interpersonal contact in

general, one that focuses on individual character traits before any collective attributes.

There might also be more general life-course preferences at stake in such an age-political critique. When we oppose large disparities between different age groups and simultaneously take a diachronic life-course perspective that rules out injustice as a basis for our opposition, we are in fact opposing temporal irregularity, that is, the concentration of both gains and losses (of whatever kind) within short periods of a person's life course. In other words, instead of opposing discrimination between different groups, we are actually promoting a life-course model in which gains and losses are balanced as evenly as possible and no life stage is strongly favoured over others. With regard to the marital eligibility of the middle aged, for instance, this means we would be arguing for a longer courtship window for men that comes with the price of some more competition in youth. Similarly, in the recently prominent media case of what is usually reported as a tradition of ageism against Hollywood actresses—namely, that they have trouble to find work in middle age—we would not actually be opposing an ageist injustice, but rather argue for a more even spread of available roles over an actress's life course. Instead of a period of relative plenty in her youth followed by a long drought from her late thirties onwards, we would want the average actress to undergo a relatively more difficult early career but with a better prospect of long-term sustainability. The underlying value that is being appealed to by the diachronically alert critic, then, would be no longer justice in this case, but rather stable and sustained moderation as opposed to instability and extreme fluctuation. This sort of age-political commitment might be less clear-cut than the Manichaean choice between justice and injustice and hence less suitable for media headlines, polemic opinion pieces, and internet clickbait, but it might also prove more convincing to readers who are aware from the outset of the diachronic dimension of age identity.

Preserving the Social Justice Approach at the Cost of Stable Identities

When speaking about the diachronic perspective, I have so far understood identity as, by default, something stable over time—stable enough, in fact, that it can and usually does comprise a person's entire life. Widespread and institutionally entrenched as this view may be in most societies, there is another, hardly less widespread view that becomes manifest whenever people speak of their former or future selves. According to this other view, the changes one undergoes over the course of one's life give rise to more or less profound discontinuities that in turn render at least questionable the commonly presumed stable unity of our selves. Most people's stance towards such challenges to their unified selves will probably come down somewhere between extreme claims of perfect continuity ("I am who I am") and utter fragmentation ("I am not who I was or will be"), but interestingly, the more one veers towards the latter, the more one is in a position to preserve, even while diachronically alert, the social justice perspective that has been challenged throughout this article.

Whereas I have explained the problem with extending synchronic social justice thinking to age as something of an oversight, namely of the diachronic identity relation between the members of different age groups, one could also describe it as a philosophical requirement placed on the social justice approach to age-group inequalities: in order to be consistent, the age critic who endorses it would need to adopt the extreme view of identity as fragmented to the point of self-dissolution. For if one were to regard a person's older self as too discontinuous with their younger self to be identifiable with it at all—that is, if one seriously promoted treating someone's past and present selves as different people—then Rawls's exclusion of inter-personal, as opposed to intra-personal, cost-benefit calculations would now apply after all (cf. the block quotation above). It would render past inequalities irrelevant to present ones, which could then be judged synchronically without leaving out any relevant factors.

This identity-centred interpretation of the social justice approach seems intuitively plausible, not least in the historical context of its moorings in Christian thought. Consider, in this regard, the biblical parable of the prodigal son, who comes back to his father after a dissolute youth of

spending his inheritance. When his father welcomes him home with open arms and at considerable expense, his dutiful stay-at-home brother complains on the following grounds:

> Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home you kill the fattened calf for him. (Luke 15: 29-30; Kohlenberger edition)

The responsible brother clearly takes the diachronic perspective here, according to which the lost son has enjoyed his share of inherited goods in the past and thus deserves his current destitution. The responsible brother, after all, although in a better position now, never enjoyed the lost son's pleasures himself. In striking contrast with this view of the situation, however, the father forgives and treats his lost son like a new man who "was dead and is alive again" (Luke 15: 24 and 31), thus assuming a stance similar to the social justice position (at least to some extent: it is somewhat unclear whether the lost son will fully resume his old standing in the family or not). Since the father figure in the parable is commonly interpreted as representative of God, at least this aspect of Christian doctrine could be seen as favouring the social justice approach and hence lend some cultural support to the latter as an act of charity. Even to non-Christian adherents of secular moral thinking (such as, for instance, myself), the forgiving generosity enacted by the father figure in the parable might exert a strong aesthetic appeal and thus outshine the mundane moral calculus adduced by the envious older brother. Is this perhaps the spirit in which age criticism in the social justice vein is to be understood and pursued? Are we to keep practicing it as before whilst charitably abandoning the conception of the stable human subject?

Conclusion

This article aimed to identify and draw attention to a deep-rooted problem with practising age politics along similar lines to those of race and gender. While the implications of this problem still need to be worked out further and the practical consequences to be drawn from it on the part of the critic cannot, perhaps, be fully surveyed at this point, I would still conclude by sketching my own assessment of these consequences. In my view, the way of preserving the social justice approach I have just discussed, however aesthetically appealing, is not an option. Any abandonment of our concept of the stable self in favour of profoundly fragmented identities seems highly impractical as a solution insofar as it would radically undermine many of our most fundamental notions of morality and justice. Even if radical self-fragmentation were compatible with our cognitive make-up—which is a question whose answer remains to be determined—social justice criticism as currently practised would certainly be complicated beyond recognition in a system that dispenses with individual accountability. Even the Christian code of ethics, however much it may preach radical forgiveness in the above instance, cannot do without such accountability in most other contexts: consider, for example, the notion of the eternal soul and of sinful acts that can tarnish it and incur unavoidable punishment in the afterlife. As philosophers from Nietzsche to the poststructuralists have famously highlighted, our very language use is structured around the presumed stability of the subject (among other things), which makes it very hard and perhaps even impossible to conceive of any ethical code that utterly disregards a person's past actions in the assessment of their present deserts.

There is no easy way around the problem posed by the identity-related peculiarity of age—at least not as long as the latter is treated analogously to such temporally stable identity categories as race or gender. If we hold on to the social justice framework, we will need to include entire life courses in our calculation of benefits and losses before making claims of injustice and in the process need to solve the accompanying problems, for instance regarding the comparability of such benefits and losses at different stages of a person's life course. All in all, this move towards a more diachronic perspective on the status quo is likely to yield different and probably fewer cases of age-related injustice than does the current

opposition to age inequalities. After all, many of the latter will now be justified by compensations elsewhere in the life course. However, we might also need to consider new types of age-related injustices that arise from a phenomenon I have not even mentioned yet, namely that of historical changes to the age stratification of society. For the sake of clarity and focus, I have presumed throughout my discussion a stable age stratification system in which the treatment and valuation of different age groups remains the same from one generation to the next. In reality, of course, the age system of a society itself undergoes historical changes, some of which might be drastic enough to yield injustices of their own: for example, if youngsters are first burdened, say, with a prolonged war experience and then, as they grow older, also economically disadvantaged in favour of a new generation of youngsters. This in turn raises the question of how, as a matter of principle, the justice-seeking critic should deal with historical progress: do its younger beneficiaries have an obligation to give up some of its benefits to their elders? Clearly, the diachronically aware social justice critic still needs to solve quite a number of philosophical conundrums and clarify her commitments with regard to them before she can promote her cause effectively.

Perhaps a more sparingly used and diachronically sensitive version of the social justice approach would work best as a complement to the somewhat less spectacular life course approach I have mentioned earlier. Uncovering the assumptions about good, well-timed, and possibly well-balanced life courses that are implicitly or explicitly promoted by our cultural narratives seems a worthwhile goal of age-political criticism, even where these assumptions do not amount to *bona fide* injustices that urgently need to be resisted and redressed. The subtleties and cultural specificities of past and present life course models seem likely to both reflect and have a far-reaching influence on a person's political outlook, yet are still rarely studied as academic subjects in their own right. Understanding, comparing, and evaluating them would certainly provide an arena of productive contestation for the politically-engaged humanities scholar: should a given society reward 'burning the candle at both ends,' for instance, or rather advocate prudent moderation? Why and due to which circumstances would a cultural artefact promote one over the other?

Answering these and many similar questions is bound to reveal much about how age and our assumptions about ageing operate in our political discourse, and might eventually allow for more lasting interventions than have been and probably could be achieved by decrying present inequalities alone.

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Biography

Rudolph Glitz (1976) is Assistant Professor for English Literature and Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He holds a Master's degree in European Literature from the University of Cambridge (King's) and a Master's degree and doctorate from the University of Oxford (Corpus). His monograph is titled *Writing the Victorians: The Early Twentieth Century Family Chronicle*, Heidelberg: Winter, 2009. He is currently working on two articles about Shakespeare's age politics in the Henriad.