

Positive Aging for an Aging Society

by Harry R. Moody

Foreward to Andrzej Klimczuk, *Economic Foundations for Creative Aging Policy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

The phrase "positive aging" can mean many different things. In an obvious way, to speak of aging "positively" is to turn away from the prevailing, largely negative images associated with later life. This critique of negativity was announced more than four decades ago by Robert Butler in the term "ageism." Ageism denotes prejudice or discrimination on grounds of age, but, more deeply, it describes a fundamentally gloomy or negative view about the second half of life.

In recent decades there has been an ideological revolt against ageism, even a celebration of positive features of later life. The ideological turn comes just in time since, on a global basis, widespread declining fertility signifies a shift to population aging: a larger proportion of the population will be over the age of 50, 60 or whatever marker we choose. If we are to adopt a hopeful attitude toward the coming of an aging society, then a turn toward "positive aging" seems indispensable. Let me describe some elements of this turn and then suggest some implications for the economic foundations for creative aging.

European discussion of positive aging has often centered around the phrase "active aging," which is semantically interesting because it seems to suggest an opposition to "passive aging." But this formulation also poses a question. Does "activity," as in "active aging," by itself have any intrinsically positive content? Why is "activity" a good thing at all? Could one even be suspicious of this idea in a world where "hyper activity" seems to be a psychological disease becoming more and more widespread? But perhaps this criticism is too sharp. Perhaps we should celebrate "active aging" because the opposite (passivity) is to be avoided, so let us simply accept this semantic version for positive aging, but pursue the question about its content.

Two other formulations have recently laid claim to what positive aging might mean. The first of these is "successful aging," as developed in the influential book of that name (John Rowe and Robert Kahn, *Successful Aging*). To think of later life as "successful" is to emphasize positive elements like absence of disease, high levels of physical and mental function, and active social engagement. One implication of this formulation would be a strategy of health promotion, where "health" is construed in the widest possible way, as we see in the famous, and very broad, definition offered by the World Health Organization. An economic implication of "successful aging" is that promoting optimal health and well-being could reduce health care costs and perhaps other costs as well. To be "successfully aging," one might argue, could even be an essential condition for "creative aging." In any case, optimal health or well-being seems to be a positive element in itself, whether or not it leads to "creativity."

A second formulation of positive aging is the goal of "productive aging." This formulation is more than activity alone and more than being in good health or having high levels of mental or social functioning. Productive aging implies some kind of contribution to the world beyond the self: for example, through extended worklife (in contrast to retirement) or volunteer roles, whether through family and friends or in the wider society. "Aging productively" means

contributing to others, whether through paid or unpaid labor. Thus, "productive aging" seems to be a critical economic foundation for creative aging.

These formulations of "successful" or "productive" aging actually have a long history, not only in gerontology, but in the larger culture. One could argue that the earliest formulation of these ideas appears in Cicero's essay "On Old Age" (*De Senectute*). The key point here is that Cicero's formulation, however attractive, commanded no support on behalf of the economic needs of Roman imperial society. By contrast, today's ideological formulations of positive aging prove to be indispensable if we are to change social institutions and practices in order to take advantage of the "human capital" represented by an increasingly large segment of the adult population. If we were to take seriously the idea of successful aging, we would make changes in health care to emphasize health promotion. For example, we might emphasize social interventions, which are likely to be more cost-effective than approaches offered by medical technology. Similarly, if we were to take seriously the idea of productive aging, we would move away from the "three boxes of life" (education, work, retirement) in favor of lifelong learning, retraining older workers, and reducing barriers to work life extension and volunteer roles for the older population.

So, can we stop right here and celebrate these two versions of what positive aging might mean? Not quite. However much we celebrate "success" and "productivity" at some point we may reflect on the fact that these are distinctively values of youth and middle life, far more than old age. We can extend these familiar values into the "Third Age," but can be confident about extending them into the so-called "Fourth Age," when decline and frailty are far more evident? More critically, whatever the values of good health and productivity, can these be simply the entire content of "creative aging?" We are entitled to our doubts.

The economic dimensions of good health and productivity are instrumental values, means of living, but not ends in themselves. No one in their right mind would say that the purpose of living is to be in good health. Health is a condition for another kind of human flourishing. Nor could we say simply that the purpose of living is "to be productive." Productive for what? It seems that our celebration of positive aging has gotten submerged in the formulation of means instead of ends. Our account of "economic foundations" has somehow escaped any understanding of what "creative aging" could possibly mean. As so often in our lives, we have devoted ourselves to the means but have forgotten what the end is all about.

No one has put the matter better than Carl Jung ("The Stages of Life"): "A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life's morn." The phrase "pitiful appendage" is appropriate here. Is it possible that in celebrating "success" and "productivity" as essential elements of positive aging that we have really just celebrated youth and middle age? Are we just extending, in a simple-minded way, the virtues of youth and middle age to become the desirable characteristics of "positive aging?" And if we lose these positive elements, as we all must at some point, then are we in danger of thinking of ourselves as a "failure" or as "useless?"

Perhaps we need a third leg for this stool of positive aging: not successful or productive aging alone, but "conscious aging." Whatever definition we give to it, "conscious aging" must signify a growth in life for its own sake, and, in particular, a celebration of the distinctive creativity of the last stage of life. We find examples of such creativity in works of great artists, especially in self-portraits such as those of Rembrandt and Kathe Kollwitz.

But the implication here is not to celebrate artistic creativity, whether externally "productive" or not. The point is well made by the great art critic Ananda Coomaraswamy: "It's not that the artist is a special kind of person. It's that each person is a special kind of artist." To see our lives in this way is to see the last stage of life as a time of fullness or completion, as I have argued (*Abundance of Life: Human Development Policies for an Aging Society*). Creative aging, then, is not a means towards another goal. It is the goal of life. Our economic foundations can have no firmer basis than to support this goal of creative aging. If we truly believe this, we will not see the coming of an aging society as a portent of decline, but instead as "the last of life, for which the first was made" (Robert Browning, "Grow Old Along With Me"). This element of hope has never been more needed than today.