

Ageing: A Dialogue

Arnold Berleant - Michael Alpert - Valery Vino

In April 2021, longing to learn first-hand about ageing philosophically, Valery Vino reached out to the legendary Arnold Berleant (who was 89 at the time of writing), to see whether he might be interested in recording a dialogue to this theme, with a companion of his choice. Berleant selected his ideal collaborator Michael Alpert, book designer and collector, poet, senior, and treasured friend. Over the following six months, a rich tapestry of leisurely reading, contemplation and discussion unfolded, culminating in an unrehearsed, free-flowing conversation about ageing, which has been recorded, lightly edited and offered here for readers to share. | *Keywords: Arnold Berleant, everyday ageing, experience, identity, bears*

Vino: We're fortunate to discuss ageing with Arnold Berleant and Michael Alpert. With a few exceptions, the philosophy of ageing is neglected in contemporary philosophy and education. Yet, in classical philosophy, gravitating toward the personal matters of life and death, our subject is common and canvassed by the giants like Aristotle and Epicurus, Cicero and Seneca, the great elders who refer to it as 'old age'. This cross-cultural contrast is both alarming and intriguing.

Berleant: I'll begin by saying that old age connotes a state of being, and I don't think that it's a useful way to deal with our question. For my part, I've never felt myself to be in a state, but always in a process of being. I never thought of myself as being old until I was very old, by anybody's standard. Ageing is a much better descriptive term because it identifies a process; and we're all in stages of ageing, in the process of ageing from birth to death. In this discussion, we're interested in the late stages of ageing, when one has a rich fund of experience and thought to draw on.

Alpert: Thank you, Arnold, I am in basic agreement with what you said. I'd add only that I see old age as a state of brokenness, poor old tired horse, you know, the term itself means brokenness. Whereas ageing is a certain engagement with the world. It's a way of being in the world. And then engagement alters with a certain number of years when one's conception of the future, and of the past and present, change.

Berleant: My friend Michael and I have talked about ageing. While there are many ways in which to approach the subject, we'd like to focus on what we can call a more phenomenological angle, to talk about our perceptions. Our perceptions have changed, our perceptions are changing, and, in particular, how they're more acute in this time of life than they may have been earlier. Of course, sense perception is not all we're referring to because sensory acuteness begins to diminish with the ageing process. In my case, my vision is not sharp as it once was; other people begin to lose their hearing. What is interesting about perception is that it's not a purely sensory phenomenon. It's a form of awareness that is tied to self-awareness: reflecting at the same time as perceiving. It's a reflective perception.

I've found that my perception has become more deliberate, more self-conscious, and also far more acute than earlier in my life. When one is young, one lives more in the moment and with great intensity. With age, the fund of experience has diminished the intensity, to some extent (but not very much in my case). But the awareness has increased, and the self-conscious awareness as well. I don't know what would illustrate this most effectively, but will start with a mundane example. I live in the country, in a countrified area of the state of Maine in the United States. I look out the window. My favorite view is two large trees in a large lawned area, and I've watched these trees grow and change with the seasons, and with the years. I've been living here for 25 years, and I'm seeing more than I saw before, because I'm also seeing not only the trees, but the ground under the trees, the shadows on the ground, and, in winter, snow on the ground. Instead of looking at the trees, I'm now finding myself looking at the ground, because there are patterns of shadows at this time of year, and they vary with the position of the sun. So it's a constantly changing pattern. It's not just all shade, it's interspersed with areas of brightness, the shadows that reflect individual branches, and things like that. It's a panorama that's constantly changing, as the sun changes, as the sky changes with the light and the cloud formations.

I've discovered the whole world of shadows: that's something that I've seen since childhood, but I've not seen with the acuteness and attention that I'm seeing with now. For me, this is a revelation. It's a very mundane sort of thing, but it's nonetheless a revelation because it has opened up a completely new perspective on my experience. What has struck me is that the world has enlarged as my perceptual awareness has increased, and that's certainly one of the ways in which ageing has been a great addition to my life experience.

Alpert: Your example, Arnold, points to the immediate: what you see becomes important, becomes more important; and this immediacy of perception includes also absence. For instance, the end of the Antonioni film *L'Eclisse* (1962), when two lovers are going to meet at a certain street corner. Each of them decides to not show up. So, Antonioni films the street corner for six very long minutes: the cars are going by, people who, in the middle of the city, stopping at that street corner, and so forth. Viewers of the film watch these miniscule events, rather than engage in the film's characters' ambitions and intentions.

At any age, you can experience the world in a very different way. *L'Eclisse* ends without resolution except for the obvious absence of resolution. For another example, I recently went to the unveiling of a gravestone for a lovely person who'd died in his late 90s. As I was entering the cemetery, there was a fox with a mouse in its mouth, the tail dangling. Not afraid, the fox bounded off into the neighboring field. I was aware of the fox's absence. In younger years, I would have had a naturalist's interest in the fox, but I might have not fully noted the absence of the fox.

Berleant: It's not as if this is a single lane highway. As one gets older one has more experiences, usually, more memories. And I find not only do I remember things early in my life, or what happened many years ago, but many of my memories are living memories. I know that they record past experiences, but they're still living in the sense that they are alive in my mnemonic experience. This may be a strange way to speak; but I'm trying to articulate experience, a memory and how it has a certain living presence, even though the events and things remembered are not present.

This is a very rich dimension that increases for people as they get older. It's something worth noting because it changes the present. The present carries with it this backlog of remembered experience and it makes the present more resonant because of the living experiences that are embodied in that present experience – remembered events. I live with the awareness of several very close friends of mine who have since died, but they're quite present when I think of them as personalities, as vital presences.

Alpert: I can give a personal example of this. My older brother, living in Thailand, called me one day and said our parents did things that were mistaken, and that he forgave them. My reply was, "Bernie, forgiveness is not good enough, you need to see them as suffering individuals." I was, of course, thinking about what is called 'the human condition'. As the conversation continued, we modified our memories. As Viktor Frankl wrote, whatever our circumstance, we always retain the freedom of our attitude. By confronting our habitual attitude, my brother and I came to a better place in terms of understanding our past experience.

If we're going to investigate memory, and how memory works, as one ages, we need to think about the future too. The turning point comes when the future presents itself in a less amorphous way. For young people, the future is indefinite – and, in a way, infinite – because typically they don't think about it in terms of their own person, their perception of themselves and of the world. At a certain point, that assumption changes; the shift has to do with suffering, that one perceives the world as suffered and suffering. I am referring here to the knowledge and acceptance of mortality, or to say it another way, the acceptance of human specificity.

As we age, the present changes, we become more engaged with the present, and the past grows in the sense that we cherish those memories. It's not just that we have them, but that we adore them, even the negative memories – they are *defining*. It all depends on what we do with our understanding of time: if you live in the past, you're in trouble.

When asked what he would advise to his elderly patients, Carl Jung said during a 1959 BBC *Face to Face* interview, “I would advise my patients to live for tomorrow as if they were going to be alive for 200 years.” All our internal time consciousness changes as we age. In terms of classical philosophy, to consider time truthfully means to accept the fact of it, to be one with it.

Berleant: I spoke earlier about the vividness of memories in my experience. Michael is right in pointing out how understanding can affect those memories by being more tolerant, and also by other memories to which we can relate any particular memory. I don't want to be so abstract, but I don't want to use specific examples, because the ones that come to mind are not very pleasant. Mnemonic process – of remembering, forgetting, remembering and having more experiences, adding them to the fund memories – is endless. It's not as if we have a slideshow that we can turn on every so often; the slides are always being changed, undergoing modifications.

Philosophically (and prosaically) speaking, I am very aware of how things don't fit into neat categories. We talk about a memory: it's not a thing, it's not a place, it's not a container; it's an aspect of consciousness that draws on past experiences and makes them presently apparent, which is an enrichment of the present. At the same time, one can gain greater understanding, as hopefully Bernie did when you pointed out, Michael, that your parents were suffering, too. To understand something like that, changes memory. So memory is not a thing, it's not an object, it's not a fixed quantity. *It's a process.* When I rethink past experiences, it's rethinking what is present and what is alive. This helps me to put things in perspective, because I can relate different experiences by their similarity in some cases, and so I can make more sense out of the kaleidoscopic profusion of memory.

Alpert: In the present nothing is replaceable. At the present moment, you are where you are, you are who you are. If you're having a memory, it's that memory: nothing in the present is replaceable. As ageing continues, you start seeing all aspects of your life as not replaceable. Your friends, your home, your body. It all exists in the present as an absolute, in terms of one's actual perception of the world, and the perception of one's self.

Berleant: I was thinking about something related, which is the sense of one's identity. It seems to me that when we're young, we don't know quite who we are (becoming, if it's a process), we haven't been tried out in various contexts, we don't have a life pattern or a life trajectory. So we feel a sense of being lost, which I certainly remember experiencing; I'm sure this is quite common, taking the form of students not knowing what to major in, or not knowing what profession to aim toward, or what kind of lifestyle to follow, if they're reflective at all! (I'm sure there are people who don't think about that at all, and just live from impulse to impulse, from need to need.)

One of the benefits of ageing can be the growing sense of one's personhood, one's identity. I can only speak from my own experience, which is that this has grown. While the identity is far more complex than I would have imagined earlier, it nonetheless has a coherence; this coherence is not only historical,

but it's intellectual and experiential. So the idea of finding ourselves, so to speak, is a lifelong process. It's an interesting process, and I am more aware of who I am now than I ever was. While limitations have increased, of course, with the diminution of energy, of strength and endurance, it's nonetheless been an experience of continuous enrichment, complexity, and coherence. While I miss certain physical capabilities, it's a very rich time of life. I have a better idea of who I am, with a huge body of memory and experience, knowledge and understanding.

Alpert: I am not in complete agreement with you, Arnold. A couple of thoughts. One is that I think that from the time you're born, you do know who you are, you know absolutely who you are! You may not be able to articulate it and put it into the realm of ideas, but at the level of perception and feeling: you know. In terms of your place in the world, with other people, you may not know that. I think misfits know that they're misfits; they know it only too well, maybe much too well.

Now, there are some complicating factors. The major one today is technology. Anybody my age has seen the way in which technology has affected the way many people gain affirmation. Today, I see young people with their heads in smartphones all the time. All the time. Part of that behavior is that they're finding affirmation outside of themselves, through technology. This is a sense in which their cognition can be lost in the world of others. Part of that has to do with very young people learning through imitation -- we learn language through imitation, behave through imitation. It takes time to realise that we are independent.

Technology is the ocean we swim in. There's no getting out of it. Whatever the technology is, the specifics of it can affect our ability to live in the present. That's something that I'm seeing right now.

Berleant: I certainly agree with that, and am struck constantly with the tremendous increase in electronic technology changing the world people live in, as well as our behavior. When I was young, I used to wonder at elderly people who couldn't get used to the telephone, or couldn't get used to things when the radio was a new invention. And now I find myself not being able to get used to installing *Audacity* on my computer.

I want to go back to something that Michael said, which was that he thinks we have identity, even when we're very young. I don't think it's an identity that we have; we have awareness of a present or perception, our feelings are very much present, and maybe aware of those. But identity is more stable, complex, and I think that's something that (at least in my own experience) has taken decades to develop and become more coherent. It's something that I'm pleased to have accomplished, because I'm not only aware of my present, but I'm aware of my past. I'm not only aware of my feelings, but I'm aware of memories of feelings that I no longer have. So I can't speak for Michael, I can't speak for anybody else, but only for myself in saying that I am more clear now about who I am than I ever was. It's continued to develop as my experiences increase. Life is always interesting in different ways, and ageing processes have their own unique interests and surprises.

Alpert: I think there's a certain ambiguity in the word 'identity'. I had a clear identity of myself at the age of four, and that hasn't changed. What has changed is my ability to articulate that identity, to fill the content of that identity, but the vital part of it was set very early. I think this is true of everyone, frankly, and that we live in an illusion that we don't know ourselves.

Berleant: Are you thinking of identity as a sense of self?

Alpert: As a powerful awareness.

Berleant: Of the self?

Alpert: Of a person. To paraphrase Simone Weil, the difference between a person and an individual is that the person is there from the beginning, the individual, the individual has to do with particular traits that do change with time.

Berleant: This is one of those questions that we could debate endlessly.

Vino: This notion of coherence is fascinating. As one ages, their memories, conceptions and feelings of the self can be deeply discordant with one another. It's not uncommon, it's difficult to keep it all together.

Alpert: The relationship of trauma to self – to make the issue more emphatic – is always problematic. In ageing, whether you articulate it or not, you realize you've survived whatever trauma you may have experienced. A kind of stoical response that you can overcome trauma by being indifferent to it. Of course, in a psychological sense, you can't do that. Trauma relates to everything we've been talking about: our relationship to time, to limitations of all kinds, and to our accomplishments.

Berleant: I agree with that, too. Any differences in what we're saying are more or less verbal, or conceptual, and not substantive, because we recognize that we're the center of our experiences; and that there's a certain persistence and coherence over time.

I was thinking when I was child I thought of myself as more or less conscious of myself, but I could never have imagined that some of my childhood dreams would be figments of wishful thinking, and some things would come to happen that I couldn't have imagined. Yet, they all form part of my life history and my life present. We can be confused about how we think about ourselves, and we can be clearer. I think we're trying to articulate the clarity that we hope to find in this discussion.

In anticipating this discussion, I've been reading a book by Jean-Paul Sartre, called *The Words* (1963), his autobiography. I'm an admirer of Sartre, as a writer, and also as a philosopher. I certainly do not accept many of his ideas, but he loved to write, and he thought in terms of writing. This autobiography isn't a long book, and half of it is called 'Reading', devoted to reading his early childhood, and his relationship with his grandfather. The other half (which I haven't read yet) is called 'Writing', and I can imagine what that is: to use half of your autobiography to talk about your early

childhood is rather interesting! It's a good account of his articulating the sense of self in a historical and personal context.

I find that interesting, but I thought if I were to write my autobiography, I would never spend much time talking about my childhood; I would spend much more time talking about what we're discussing today, which is what's most interesting to me. Because how I got to where I am, is a historical issue, but what's most interesting to me is where I am, and what I'm thinking now and what I'm puzzling over. It's this perceptual present, that is the center of the world that I live in.

Alpert: To augment that, I think imagination has a very important role in ageing. Imagining your past and the rest of your life as you're perceiving the present, and that is always liberating. It becomes even more liberating as you grow older. If you're a stockbroker in New York, for instance, you're always looking at what's happening at that moment outside of yourself. You're engaged, your livelihood depends on it, and also your personal identity somehow is swept up in this parade of numbers. There are many variations of this; any career involves that kind of ticker tape thinking, where you're not left to daydream, to look at an unusual bird in your yard, imagine the bird's life or your life in relation to it.

I just had an experience where I saw a whole group of bears, close-up. They're beautiful! I was free to look at them. They were not threatening, the big bears, little bears. They were maybe twenty feet from me, with no protection, which made me a little uneasy, but I felt free to imagine their lives, and, in a limited way, to experience their behavior. In cities, people never see bears (except in zoos), but they can, for instance, see a sunset; many of their experiences can be satisfying and can engage their imaginations, as well as their intellect. That's a part of what ageing is about: to be standing in a place instead of being the kind of hiker who is intent on getting somewhere so quickly that he never sees the landscape around him. Surely, just to stand and look is a great blessing.

Vino: Do wisdom and happiness have to go hand in hand? One example is Michel de Montaigne, a wise person, and his evasive self does not tend to appear happy in *Essays* (1993). Let us indulge in a few lines from 'On Repentance' where he defines old age as "a powerful illness which flows naturally" and then remarks:

But it seems to me that in old age our souls are subject to more troublesome ailments and weaknesses than in youth. I said this when I was young, and they scoffed at me for my beardless chin. I repeat it now that my grey hairs give me authority. We call the queasiness of our tastes and our dislike of present-day things by the name of wisdom. But the truth is that we do not so much give up our vices as change them, and in my opinion for the worse. (Montaigne, 1993, pp. 249–250)

Alpert: I think that Montaigne, at the moment that he was writing those words, was extremely happy. He was happy to be writing those words. He may have been unhappy about the world, but his joy is evident: why would he bother to write anything if writing did not bring him happiness?

[Laughter]

Vino: Thank you!

Berleant: I've got nothing to add to that. I enjoy walking around outside my home, where it is very beautiful. Looking at curtains and looking at trees and looking at the changes as the seasons develop. A little bit like Thoreau's comment in *Walden* (1854) that he never traveled more than 50 miles from his home, but he's seen the world. The world is present wherever you are.

As far as younger people living in urban settings, I was one of those for the first thirty years of my life. I know what that's like, know its sensory qualities and limitations. Like many other people, I wanted to break free and find my own place, not the place I happen to be situated in by circumstance. Not knowing where that place would be was part of the trauma of early maturity. That's why I think identity is something that one acquires, because I know better where I want to be, what that place is, what it offers, what it doesn't offer, and the compromises that one has to make in the life situation in which one finds himself. It's a good place to be, I am glad to be here.

Vino: It's interesting that you both foreground pleasurable experiences. Becoming familiar with some of the thinkers of the past, their own ageing, one can't help noticing sizable disparities, diverse lifestyles and aspirations, even within a single lifetime. One of the texts I read in preparation for our meeting is *Henry Miller's conversation with George Belmont* (1972). I am still grappling with Miller's remark that when he was younger he was very critical of the world, like myself, but having aged he found the world to be not that bad, after all!

Alpert: One of Henry Miller's books is titled, *To Paint is to Love Again* (1968). It's about Henry Miller who writes about himself as a painter. In any kind of academic sense, he was a horrible painter, had no talent whatsoever. He knew that and did not care. He loved painting, and his watercolors are quite lovely in many ways, but they're not what would have earned an MFA. It's strictly amateur. And that's what freed him to like painting into old age. He didn't care about selling it, he just wanted to do it, to engage with it. That's one of the keys to happiness. If you do what makes you happy, you will be happy. If you don't, you won't be. I think Henry understood how to be happy, though he offended a lot of people. To live aesthetically is a part of ageing: in healthy ageing, health and engagement are twins.

Vino: Let's conclude, then, by accentuating the aesthetic dimension of engaging with the world.

Alpert: Well, Arnold's everyday philosophy is important here.

Berleant: Valery, you used the word 'engaging', and that's a key term in the philosophy of aesthetics I've developed, aesthetic engagement, which is central to aesthetic value. It ties in with what we've been discussing, namely our awareness of ourselves in the ageing process.

I began with the example of shadows, noticing shadows, a very particular immediate instance of the perceptual present, of living in the perceptual present. It allows us to experience our world more directly and more readily than all the things that block us from it: inhibitions, traditional moral and social constraints, conventions that have lost their purpose in social living, as well as our own physical and personal impediments.

But the freedom to engage is something that can develop and hopefully will develop as one increases ageing experience, so that perhaps people like Michael and me are more capable of experience than we were earlier. Well, many people deliberately close themselves off from experience, through fear, through inhibitions, through the habit of not noticing. So I'm all for the liberation of awareness. And if age can bring that with it, that's a benefit, a great benefit.

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