



## Turning 25: ageing without the age

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### ABSTRACT

This article offers an opinion piece that explores attitudes towards ageing and the elderly from a younger person's perspective. Drawing on personal experience and ideas of the progression ageing brings, it proposes a concept of mental ageing as comprising development, refinement and decay. These are illustrated through evaluation of attitudes towards ageing, loss and respect along with a look at how they affect values, change fears and shape perceptions.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Age and ageing are concepts that usually draw the mind to the elderly, but as sure as time passes, people age, no matter when you choose to start counting. I have been as susceptible to this change in the last 10 years of my life and have, since the age of 15, changed in fairly dramatic fashion. This can be best represented in the physical change that comes with finishing puberty and the ending of processes that had been an omnipresent part of my life since day dot. I will never forget having to clear my throat before saying thank you to the bus driver, lest I be filed away in the other occupants' heads under 'some form of squeaking toy'; or waking up each morning and using the bathroom mirror to help identify which mountain range best represented the new eruption of pimples on my face. While the memories of the comedy of ailments of a pubescent teenager are not going to add much substance to this special issue on ageing, nevertheless, I hope that my reflections on the ageing process and the fairly dramatic mental changes that occur in what might be referred to as early ageing may complement and contrast with those on the same subject from those older contributors.

As you may well have guessed by now, I am on the younger end of the age spectrum, and, at the time of writing, am just under a month past my 25th birthday. The realization that I have orbited around the sun 25 times and, in that time, spun around on this comparably small rock in space a massive 9,125 times has made me somewhat dizzy! In an attempt to give a clear focus to the article, I describe how it came about and highlight what I think I bring to the table in terms of a younger perspective on ageing.

At the time of writing, I was lucky enough to be living in the house of Keith Tudor, the editor of this special issue, and his family – and, thereby, was exposed to the cornucopia of books and journals, spanning a huge range of subjects, which seem, at some points, to be load bearing parts of the house's structure! Along with this multiplicity of literature, which, for me, carries very strong connotations of refinement and age, come the myriad

interesting visitors to the house, usually as a contributor or source of knowledge to help add another to the already vast number of texts! One such visitor was Isabelle Sherrard (another contributor to this special issue), with whom Keith was working on a book of her late husband's work and life (Sherrard, 2017). Given the subject matter of that book, the presence of a previous edition of this journal and Keith's involvement in this special issue, it was inevitable that the conversation turned to age, ageing and the effect this has on both people and the world. For my part, I was curious about the ages of the contributors to this issue and, sure enough, at that stage, the large majority of them were at least double my age. I didn't feel aggrieved by this in any way; those who have more experience in the ageing process would no doubt have more to say about it than I. Nevertheless, I suggested (in the discussion) that there is less recognition of the ageing process starting from a younger age, especially given the way that the world has changed so dramatically in the last few decades, the information we have available to us and the way that the current world shapes our opinions. At that point in the conversation, I offered to put some of my thoughts down on paper, and here we are.

Firstly, I start with some of my own thoughts relating to age and follow this by looking at a series of questions that I found in my search for inspiration for this article.

### **Mental ageing: development, refinement and decay**

I think that ageing is one of the first signs of a process I have named 'mental refinement', which takes place in your head following the 'mental development' that takes place throughout the preceding years. Here I am choosing to define mental development rather roughly as the academic education (reading and writing), initially clunky social progression (e.g. making friends), physical achievements (from crawling to standing up and so on), emotional development (recognizing family and personal relationships) and societal understanding (locating oneself in terms of where we stand in wider society) of people from birth, infancy, childhood and adolescence and out the other side into adulthood. I see mental refinement as a continuation of this *and* the honing of the skills that you learn throughout the mental development process (such as standing up for longer periods under different conditions). I think and feel that the mental refinement stage is one marked by greater self-awareness and analysis than the development stage as it does not require the learning of primary skills in anywhere near the same quantities, while it does require the ability to take on memories of previous experiences and apply them to one's decision-making.

Following on from the mental refinement stage is the – almost – inevitable mental decay that comes with the drawing to a close of a person's life. This decay can take various forms and may not affect all people, and, even in those that it does affect, it is certainly not universally present in the same intensity. Easily recognizable manifestations of mental decay stem from illnesses like Alzheimer's and dementia, and the loss of physical and mental co-ordination, struggles with memory and confusion that follow from these conditions are the most pronounced forms of mental decay.

Thus, I see mental ageing as an umbrella term, overarching mental development, mental refinement and mental decay. As with most stage theories, it is difficult to pinpoint where one stage ends and another begins. What I can say, however, is that mental ageing is a concept that contains all three stages of life, with their blurred borders becoming more pronounced at certain ages in certain people than in others. Reflecting that I am no longer

squarely in the mental development stage has made me realize that ageing is now also a process of refinement and maturing. Sure, it comes with some potential decay attached, but the slightly negative connotation it held for me before feels premature now that I have actively thought about what ageing means to me.

While researching ideas about ageing, I came across a questionnaire produced by Kathleen Dowling Singh (2015), which, while aimed at people older, and perhaps with a greater spiritual background than me (the site is one which addresses classic and contemporary Buddhism), I found many of the questions applicable to my own situation and thoughts on ageing. Here, I use several of the questions as a way of structuring my reflections on ageing.

## Values

***(Have my values changed as I have aged? Which values have been discarded? Which have been consciously chosen and retained? What are my emerging values?)***

One of the major aspects of mental ageing, specifically at the start of the mental refinement process, is the recognition of the conscious and unconscious choices that you make; choosing those aspects of your personality/values that you want to maintain from your childhood, those that you want to rid yourself of and those that you want to edit slightly and mould into a suitable trait for the life that you inevitably want to lead. It would be nice if the process started by making these choices depending on what kind of adult you see yourself as being and working backwards from there. Alas, at least for me, this was not the case. I think that I now have a clearer view of my desired place in the world, but unfortunately this clear view was nowhere to be seen when, at 16 or 17, I started making decisions that have had a direct impact on who I am today.

I think that my values have remained largely the same, in terms of the core tenets of what I believe to be the right thing and the right way to lead my life, which include humility, kindness, the importance of sharing (both physical things and knowledge), defending what you think is right and challenging what you think is wrong. They are not identical to their decade-old predecessors by any stretch of the imagination, but the changes that have occurred have been in their consolidation as well as an increase in my confidence in knowing and living them, rather than discarding them or developing new or different values. This consolidation of ideas is symbolic of the start of the mental refinement process. As an example, I am now very confident in my belief that money is the root of a lot of the world's problems, and that the seemingly endless rhetoric by those who have money to encourage others to seek riches and to value success in life by income is both divisive and a barrier to societal progression. I have always felt that there is too much emphasis placed on monetary value in society, but I would not have been able to make a statement like this, which demonstrates a specific value, with the same confidence when I was in my teens. This change can partly be credited to my formal education, which has helped develop my ability to argue and evidence my beliefs. Nevertheless, I do feel that general life experience has also given me a helping hand in developing from an unconfident and dependent mind-set ('Adults know best'), to a more confident and independent one ('My opinion is just as valid as anyone else's'). I see this as a contrast to later in life as it is a change at a more basic level than values: a mental consolidation, something

that, once learned, can facilitate the further refining of values throughout the mental refinement stage of life.

As I consider my emerging values, I am again drawn to the view that these are confirmations and perhaps prioritizations of existing ideas, such as a commitment to pacifism while actively defending those things I think should be defended. I have followed many trails of thought but always come back to one specific tenet: the importance of promoting an equality of opportunity for all. There are many approaches to creating this equity and many reasons that influence its existence or absence. However, there is no argument in my mind that this is incredibly important; it has driven many of my decisions to date, and influenced my future.

## **Fear of ageing**

### ***(What are my fears about my own experience of ageing – to date and in the future?)***

Along with the gaining of many measurable physical freedoms through the ageing process, I recognize the loss of the mental freedom that you have as a child/younger person. This was something I realized on my own and was informed about by others, which, in turn, led me to fear the process of ageing and what I would end up as without these freedoms. There are many examples of simple survival functions that contribute to a person's mental freedom that I feared may be my undoing in later life: providing myself with food and shelter; looking after my body and mind; and many more functions that for many are 'second nature'. The large majority of these were my parents' job for a long period of time; taking these over for myself was something I was very fearful of. I am happy to say that providing myself with food, for example, has now become second nature for me, too, a process that I have developed and now refined into something that will always, and mostly unconsciously, be a part of my future planning – and in which I now take pleasure. Tackling the obstacle of providing myself with shelter is something that I can quite easily manage on a temporary basis but, long term, I am fairly worried that I will never own my own property, at least not without putting myself into massive debt. Given shifting social policy on pensions and retirement, I am also fearful of chasing my retirement age and never quite getting to a point when I can stop working and still enjoy my life to the full. This is a fear I've tried to alleviate through travelling – something I see as enjoyable and that will facilitate my mental refinement. I have met many people of 50 plus years who have said, 'I wish I could have travelled more when I was younger', which, as a manifestation of regret of missed opportunities, is a situation that, in the past, I have also feared. I have taken these comments to heart and, for the best part of two and a half years, have travelled extensively, enjoying almost every second of it. It has also helped counter a lot of the other fears that I previously held regarding my social skills, my ability to fend for myself and adapt to situations, and my ability to cope in foreign environments. Despite all these positives, it has also aided in the development of a new fear: that I may not enjoy the rest of my life in the same way I am enjoying it now!

All of the above are personal fears that are often tackled on a day-to-day basis. However, along with personal difficulties, there are much larger concepts to fear. Technology has

advanced exponentially in the last 25–30 years and this has obviously led to an enormous increase in information flow. The knowledge of the state of the world is something that hit me very hard, and was certainly a contributing factor to a severe dip in my mental health for a number of years – and still constitutes my greatest fear. In relation to ageing, my fear is not ageing itself, it is whether I will even have a place I want to age in. I fear a loss of the freedoms that I currently have – free speech is slowly ebbing away through media censure; freedom of movement, specifically through Europe, is being taken away through Brexit – and the security that comes with my safeguarded human rights. I fear a loss of physical places that I want to enjoy. Scuba diving is a hobby of mine. With the impact of bleaching or dredging of coral reefs, plastics in the ocean and over/careless fishing, this might not be something I get to do for much longer. With regard to place, we may well lose countries (e.g. the Netherlands) to rising sea levels, and a plethora of other effects of global warming. I fear a permanent loss of peace and a prolonged and increasing level of inequity; the rise of right-wing nationalism all over the world; the flagrant disregard for people who have suffered the unimaginable through war and poverty; and the continued dominance of an economic system that is fantastically effective at creating inequality: all make me fear for what is to come in the rest of my life. Originally, I was going to write that I would imagine these fears would ease with age, but I honestly don't think they will. I think that this burden will only ease with a lot of hard work from a lot of people, and even then, I am not confident that what we are left with will be even a shade of what people have enjoyed over the past century or so.

### **Absorbed (internalized) views of ageing and the elderly**

***(What views about ageing and the elderly – both positive and negative – have I absorbed from my cultural and family background? How do I feel these may be unconsciously influencing my current thoughts, feelings, beliefs and attitudes?)***

In relation to the elderly, this answer revolves around the notion of respecting one's elders, a concept taught almost universally throughout any society. If I take the example of my two surviving grandparents and ask myself whether I respect them, the answer is not only 'Yes' but a quite emphatic 'Of course, what a stupid question'. My Grandpa is a published author with a very impressive catalogue of books on a varying array of subjects, many of which are focused around the rail and canal ways of the UK, something I can very easily respect. He has taken an interest in something, dedicated himself to it and worked hard, all of which is admirable. My Granny also has my respect for her attitude towards working life and what she did to facilitate her children to go forward and succeed as they have in life. I know that my Granny was an incredibly hard-working woman who made sacrifices for the betterment of her children, a trait that has clearly been passed down to them. These two examples are not the sole reasons behind my respect for them, as I have a growing realization of the sheer length of time they have spent in the mental refinement phase of ageing and the impact that this time has. As with any other generation, they have earned my respect and I hope that I have theirs.

However, 'respect your elders' is a loaded statement which, in a lot of cases, implies an unconditional respect for those of a greater age, which makes absolutely no sense to me. Take Rupert Murdoch, for example, the 86-year-old billionaire media tycoon, who's an

elder of mine – by quite some way – and a man for whom I do not have a modicum of respect. He has built an enormous media empire and I recognize what he has done to achieve that, but I do not respect him. Admittedly, he’s an easy target for my lack of respect due to his political and business practices, but he’s still an elder. Moreover, gerontocracy – the rule of elders – is a problem, as evidenced by the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s election to the most powerful office in the world. Both of these results demonstrate a clear correlation between old age and voting for regressive policies (to leave Europe and for Trump, respectively). Apart from any short-term considerations, these votes show a certain lack of respect for the younger generations that will have to deal with the consequences of the votes for a much longer time in a world that has already been made difficult through wild financial handling (sub-prime mortgages being a major culprit) and crippled in the sense of the environmental impact of people’s behaviour in the last 50–60 years.

Of course, this lack of respect cuts both ways, and, unfortunately, the disrespect of elders for the young fosters a disrespect for elders. I think that this intergenerational tension will only be solved on a personal level, through greater knowledge of the person and a mutual earning of respect. Laing (1970/71, p. 4) puts this ‘knot’ well:

A son should respect his father  
 He should not have to be taught to respect his father  
 It is something that is natural  
 That’s how I’ve brought up my son anyway.  
 Of course a father must be worthy of respect  
 He can forfeit a son’s respect  
 But I hope at least my son will respect me, if  
 only for leaving him free to respect me or not.

With regard to my views about ageing, I must confess that, although I have outlined my many fears in answering the previous question, I am looking forward to the mental challenges that ageing will bring. Physically, I am, of course, not so keen. I hope that refining my thoughts and ideas, through continued education and gaining of life experience, will allow me to tackle the problems that cause my fears. I am unlikely to be able to change many of these things alone, but I now realize that I look at life as one big puzzle and, throughout the process of ageing, you are given more and more clues to help you traverse this puzzle. I look forward to (re)solving these clues and applying them to help me get to where I want to go.

## Countering internalized ageism

***(In what ways have I deliberately tried to counter any attitudes that I feel are negative or unhelpful? Additionally, in a wider sense, are there patterns of thoughts and feelings that cause me stress and, if so, how have I tried to counter these?)***

In the past I have queried the ongoing positive contribution of the elderly to the advancement and development of the world that we live in. Faced with a dearth of evidence to

convince me of their positive impact on the lives of myself and others, I had previously held a largely negative view of the elderly. In an effort to counter this, I have taught myself to recognize that the only reason for my perceived lack of evidence is time. As I look at my future, I acknowledge that, although I want to have a positive impact, I do not want to be proving my worth with actions and hard work until the day I die; at some point, I would like to retire and feel that I have done my part in bettering the world. Due to my young age, most of those whom I now consider elderly, I have always considered elderly, giving rise to my understanding of them not actively influencing the world in spheres that I would be party to.

My desire to have a positive impact on the world around me has also led to my having an unhelpful view of ageing, which is twofold. Firstly, it has led me to worry that I have not had enough experience in life to effect my desired impact on others. Secondly, I felt that, looking forward, I would never have enough time to consolidate my knowledge to a satisfactory extent. This has led me to understand that I need to measure my idea of a 'positive impact' with regard to ageing and the elderly in smaller increments. Taking smaller, inter-personal scenarios as victories means that I can see a positive impact every day, which, in turn, gives me a sense that I can achieve greater things by building on past successes.

## Approaches to loss and death

***(What losses have I faced? What losses do I still face? How do I cope with loss? What would help me cultivate the capacity to handle inevitable loss better, to maintain a relationship of greater ease with impermanence?)***

The first major experience of loss that I remember was the unfortunate misplacement of my beloved Thunderbird 1 toy that is no doubt still somewhere in the bowels of Kuala Lumpur Airport. I loved that toy and I can only imagine the effects of my loss on the poor passengers of the subsequent flight home.

The timing of this loss, and its significance to me, is an interesting contrast to the unfortunate lack of poignancy that the deaths of my grandparents held for me during my childhood, and highlights the difference in losing something of my own and recognizing the loss of others. I have been incredibly lucky compared to others that I know. I have only lost two of my grandparents during my lifetime. I do still think of them fondly on quite a regular basis, but something I found quite difficult to come to terms with in the past is how these losses did not affect me a great deal at the time. This was due to my age at the time and the fact that I was still, especially with my Grandad, in the relatively early stages of mental development. My Grandad died when I was nine years old and although I obviously knew who he was and what he meant to the family, I never really understood the emotional impact of his death. My Grandma's death when I was 17 affected me more, as I was older and slightly more emotionally developed; this time I understood the emotional impact of her death but I didn't quite feel it as others were clearly feeling it. I think that my lack of connection to the losses, due to my age, has given me quite a sheltered view of loss and has therefore shaped my opinion on death, as you can read in my response to the next question.

I have experienced quite a poignant loss in the last year, which is that of my childhood home and, with it, a sense of having a home in general. In the time I have been travelling,

my parents have retired and relocated to France. I know that I was sad that the house was sold, but, as I have been away for the best part of two and a half years, I don't feel that its sale has truly hit me, as I have not had to adapt to not having a guaranteed place to stay when I return to Sheffield, which I regard as home. I know that I have acknowledged that I may not have felt the full impact of the house sale quite yet, but I do feel that there are a few things that have affected how I feel about it, the main one being the large number of social connections that I have in Sheffield and the knowledge that I do have a place to stay (with others) if I ask for it, which means that, although my life is based in various places these days, I am still able to go and visit the place I used to call home in relative emotional comfort. Last year I went back to the house for what proved to be the final time and in an effort to say a 'proper' goodbye. Looking out at the view from the kitchen window, Sheffield looked exactly as I was expecting, reminding me that, although I would no longer have the physical view to look upon, I could call on the memory in my mind at any time. This realization that I carried the sentimental parts of home with me at all times gave me a great sense of closure.

The content and process of this passage is a rather telling example of how I currently deal with loss. My first instinct (and story) was to resort to humour. Humour is a wonderful tool for easing the feeling of loss and, coupled with an appreciation of the thing that you have lost, can help you cope with things that may otherwise be overwhelming. In addition to this, understanding and accepting the fact that loss is inevitable can really help you deal with the situation as you have somewhat dealt with it before the event has happened. At the same time, humour can be a distraction from experiencing the impact of loss and, indeed, I refined this section in subsequent drafts. The more you experience, the more you realize that very little in this world is permanent, and, if you get too attached to certain things, and, very importantly, do not appreciate that you may lose other persons or things, then you are going to struggle deeply with its loss. I think that this fits in well with the idea of mental refinement, as dealing with each loss provides more evidence that you can improve your ability to cope with inevitable losses in life.

***(What are my thoughts about my death? What inner strengths am I developing or do I wish to work on developing so as to face sickness, ageing and death with greater peace and equanimity?)***

The idea of understanding the inevitability of loss can very easily be applied when dealing with the idea of one's own mortality, and I recognize that this is certainly something that has shaped my general opinion about my own death. Death and its inevitability is something that I have thought about on many occasions, usually after discussing others' thoughts and fears on the subject. I am confident that my opinion reflects how I truly feel, right now, and although I know that some aspects of this response may change over time, to put it simply, I am not bothered about death itself. I'm not scared of it nor do I worry about when it will happen. Obviously, a large part of being dead is not actually knowing that you are dead, so I don't feel like I should be scared or worried about something that will not, beyond the initial process, affect me at all. Unfortunately, I cannot be as blasé about the 'initial process' of dying, i.e. the event(s) or process(es) leading to death. The idea of a slow or painful death (dying) is something that I know I don't want but – and this is where I think my age plays a factor – is also something that I find very easy to



dissociate from. That said, I am also aware that this view may change over time. While I was at school, I saw the idea of graduating from university to be a fanciful and incredibly distant concept; now, four years after graduating, I feel very little time has passed between those two thoughts and, no doubt, I will feel the same about the time that will pass between the writing of this article and the inevitable time I begin to worry about how my health might slowly or rapidly deteriorate towards my death.

Reflecting on my responses to the questions I have posed in this article, I can pin-point the one area that will effect a change in my opinion about death. Earlier I referred to the fact that I see ageing and mental refinement as the collection of clues and hints in the puzzle of life. This is a puzzle that, to follow my own advice, I have to accept will inevitably come to an end, most likely without the clean conclusion of a completed crossword or sudoku. This lack of a clear-cut end point or completion is the one thing I feel I will find harder to come to terms with as the years go by. I may want a few more years to solve one more problem, which, of course, invariably leads to further problems and wanting a few more years for further solutions – an example of the bargaining stage of death and dying, according to Kübler-Ross (1969). The way I see of tackling this is to get myself to a point where I feel that I have done enough to be satisfied with the answers I have accumulated until that point.

### **Conclusion: mental ageing**

I am young, and my views of ageing and the elderly may or may not differ dramatically from those of people at other stages in their life, but my attitude towards the time that I have left will differ, if only due to my knowledge that there should be a lot more of it. I don't feel like anyone ever stops refining themselves mentally; the world is changing around us so rapidly that resisting change is nigh on impossible. Moreover, to deny this change or to consider oneself a finished product is both arrogant and laughable. As I am trying to condense and finalize the jumble of thoughts, feelings and ideas in my head into a codified example, I have narrowed my thoughts on 'mental ageing' down to two main points.

Firstly, ageing comprises both the recognition of certain ideas and the knowledge of how to apply information to situations. Recognizing that the world is changing and that your opinion on how to adapt may vary from that of others, that your life experiences will never be identical, is important as you acknowledge that what is best for you or what you want may be detrimental when applied to someone aside from yourself. Understanding this is a huge part of being able to develop mentally in order to have a positive impact on the world. Having the knowledge of how to apply information to situations correctly enables the ability to find and act on the truth (or as close as you can get to it). This development is easily achievable through education alone, and not recognizing this, or even ignoring it, can lead to a general negative impact on people or society.

Secondly, having a tacit understanding of the preceding ideas will allow you to understand that refinement, and development to some degree, is never ending. Acceptance of this notion is something that will allow one to move through life in a freer sense, not being stalled by problems that changing or adapting might solve.

Throughout the rest of my life, there may be other stages of 'mental ageing' that I haven't currently recognized, but I look forward to adding these other pieces to the never-ending puzzle that is life.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor



**Patrick Body** is currently a gap year student, and at the time of submission was living in New Zealand where he held a temporary position as Programme Administrator in the Faculty of Health & Environmental Sciences at the Auckland University of Technology. He is currently awaiting the start of his Master's degree, commencing in September of this year, studying an MSc in Sustainability with a focus on Corporate Social Responsibility; he is aiming to further his knowledge and commence a career in corporate accountability.

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