DEATH AND AGING IN TECHNOPOLIS: TOWARDS A ROLE DEFINITION OF WISDOM

EDMUND BYRNE

The way a society treats its elder members depends to a large degree on the value it attributes to old age. The value of old age to a society depends in turn upon its views about the meaning or purpose of life. And a society's views about the meaning or purpose of life are formulated primarily to help make sense out of the inevitability of death. Thus it is apparent that in any given society there is a close connection between its treatment of the elderly and its philosophy of death and dying.

Now it is well known from anthropological studies that the elderly are treated quite differently in different societies. In some cases they are shown great respect. In other cases, they tend to be resented like guests who have over-stayed their welcome.[1] The factors that determine these and other differences in attitude towards the elderly are numerous, and include among others the ratio between population and resources, the availability of housing, employment and services, the system of owning and distributing property both on the part of individuals and collectively, the average life expectancy, and so on. In other words, it is the total human ecology of a society and its environment that determines how that society will think about and deal with its older members. Accordingly, it can be argued that any favorable attitude towards the old which disregards perceived ecological constraints is probably some form of selfserving hypocrisy. But this argument fails if in fact it can be shown that a truly human ecology must include at least some concerns that go beyond the confines of the spatio-temporal world of immediate and mediated perception. And this, I would contend, is certainly the case with regard to people's attempts to assay the very meaning of human life in the face of imminent death.[2] For, what people conclude about this primordial concern can and does affect just about every aspect of their behavior towards the natural and social environment in which they live. And in particular it would

[1] Compare, for example, the following: Lucy Mair, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 50-52, 106-11; A. P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1964), p. 87; William Graham Sumner, *Folkways*, (1906; New York: Dover, 1959), nn. 12 and 547; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 329-45; Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho*, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1962), pp. 117-9.

[2] The issue here presented is strikingly illustrated by Elkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 311-38. See also G. Van Der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), Vol. I, pp. 212-3.

seem to have a pronounced effect upon how they deal with old age, whether in themselves or in others.

In this paper I will argue that our own society's philosophy of death and dying has a largely negative effect on public policies towards the elderly, and that these policies will be changed for the better when and if we come to appreciate our elderly as the principal sources of our collective wisdom. Towards these ends, I shall consider in turn some basic types of theories about death, some basic attitudes towards dying and the duration of dying, some models of aging as they affect and/or embody attitudes towards old age, and finally the place of creative expansion in one's advanced years.

1. *Theories of Death*

People die of many different causes, and sometimes it is important medically or legally to determine with some accuracy the physical causes of a person's death. This, of course, is especially the case if there is some reason to suspect that the person has not died of so-called "natural causes." What is meant by natural causes, presumably, is a set of organic conditions which, without any external interference, become so deleterious that the organism can no longer function. When this point is reached is a matter that is decided partly by the current standards of medical technology. Sufficiently continuous absence of brain waves is now the basis for determining death; but the absence of pulse or of breath were once taken to be adequate signs of death. Given the capabilities of modern medicine, the earlier signs of death would no longer be considered adequate; and, to think futuristically for a moment, it may be that not even the cessation of brain functioning will forever remain a definitive sign of death.[3] The point here, however, is that whenever and however death comes to the organism, it marks the end of that organism's existence as a viable functioning entity; and accordingly it also marks the limits of medical responsibility.[4] Social responsibility extends to disposition of the now lifeless

---

[3] It should not be concluded from these remarks that artificial maintenance of life is necessarily desirable or even justifiable. Religious, ethical and financial considerations enter in now as ever. And to these must now be added the exceptional burden placed on the medical definition of death by the new and ever expanding field of organ transplantation. See Christian Barnard and Curtis Bill Pepper, *One Life* (New York: Bantam, 1971), pp. 353-402; David W. Louisell, "Transplantation: Existing Legal Constraints," in *Law and Ethics of Transplantation* (ed. Gordon Wolstenholme and Maeve O'Connor; London: J. A. Churchill, 1968), pp. 91-4; Catherine Lyons, *Organ Transplants: The Moral Issues* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), pp. 75-89; Robert S. Morison, "Dying," *Scientific American*, Vol. 229, n. 3 (September 1973) 59.

[4] In a different vein, to say that medical responsibility extends even as far as organic death presupposes a somewhat idealized – or at least legally sensitive – interpretation of the Hippocratic oath. In a complex situation, however defined, some criteria of selection are often operative in order to focus available personnel and material on those deemed most likely to benefit from immediate treatment. These criteria may be overt, *e.g.*, in the case of transplant recipient decisions or in the case of "truage" decisions in a war zone military

body; and legal responsibility extends to settling the affairs of the person who has died. These various responsibilities having been duly carried out, there remains only the most difficult task of all: to make some sense out of the event that has taken place.

The task of making some sense out of death has, of course, resulted in a rich and varied profusion of cultural responses. But it is sufficient for my purposes to reduce all of these responses to essentially two: one which is satisfied to see death as a termination of life, and one which prefers to see death as some sort of transition from one mode of life to another. Thus we may for short speak of a termination theory or a transition theory of death. Either theory may be predominantly individualistic or predominantly holistic in orientation. A termination theory, for example, might stress the finality of the individual or it might stress the continuity and/or priority of the group. A transition theory might emphasize the continuation of the deceased as a distinct individual ("personal immortality"), as a familial or tribal ancestor, or simply as subsumed under some all-encompassing spiritual personality. Transition theories may be further divided into those that recognize only one condition or status after departure from this earthly life (call them "arrival theories"), and those that recognize any number of stages or phases hereafter, sometimes including reincarnation, but usually providing for an eventual attainment of some permanent status (call these "stage theories").

Which of these theories of death would strike the reader as being most acceptable depends upon a variety of factors, the most salient being those of personal need and cultural availability. The latter determines whether a given theory qualifies as what William James spoke of as a "live option," but cultural interpenetration has so intensified since the nineteenth century, when James was writing, that every option with regard to a theory of death must be considered as being at least potentially live for any individual regardless of his or her formative culture. Thus personal need, or preference, assumes a greater importance than ever before. On the other hand, there are arguments to the effect that each and every one of these theories, however metaphysical or supernatural its mode of expression, is essentially just one more manifestation of a given society's need for self-maintenance and perpetuation. These arguments, especially as articulated in structural anthropology, sociology of knowledge and phenomenology of religion, are in my judgment persuasive.[5] And accordingly I see no need to make any clearcut distinction between a

---

hospital; or they may be tacit, as in the case of socioeconomic constraints that make medical treatment of any kind a privilege of opportunity which the poor of the world enjoy only minimally.

[5] See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1967; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966; Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed*, New York: Mentor, 1965; Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, New York: Schocken, 1961; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Mentor, 1964; Alfred Schutz, "Symbol, Reality and Society," in *Collected Papers*, Vol. 1 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), pp. 287-356.

supernatural transition theory, which I would reject, and a natural transition theory, one form of which I find empirically defensible and personally appealing.

This particular transition theory of death, which underlies all that follows, takes a group-oriented and even species-oriented view of death as one's transition from being an agent (or efficient cause) to being a model (or exemplary cause) of human advancement. On this evolutionary and vitalist theory of death, an individual lives first in his or her own works and then in the effect of those works on others who will live after. The quasi-immortality thus suggested is, of course, not automatic, but is rather an opportunity for a kind of organismic apotheosis, whether among a few survivors or among millions. In either case, we thus achieve what Clarence Darrow sought when he said, "The emotion to live makes most of us seek to project our personality a short distance beyond the waiting grave."[6]

2. *Attitudes Towards Dying*

Given the fact of death as what Paul Tillich called "the end, the last moment of our future,"[7] both society as a whole and each of us as individuals do adopt some stance or attitude with regard to death. In the abstract, of course, it is easy enough to recite the syllogism which concludes from the mortality of man and the humanness of John that John is mortal. It is, however, in the concrete that John experiences that mortality; and if I happen to be John, the mortality in question is not just a statistic but perhaps a constant pain which I must continually acknowledge in some appropriate way.[8] In other words, my death will be a problem not for me but for others; it is my dying, my approach to death, that is a problem for me existentially. The range of reactions which I may take towards my own dying has been articulated by many writers, including John Donne, André Malraux, and Thomas Mann.[9] It has been portrayed by Ingmar Bergman in such films as *Wild Strawberries*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Cries and Whispers*, and by John Boorman in his

---

[6] Quoted from Darrow's *The Story of My Life* (New York: Scribner, 1932) by Althea J. Horner, "Genetic Aspects of Creativity," in *The Course of Human Life* (eds. Charlotte Buhler and Fred Massarik; New York: Springer, 1968), p. 135.

[7] "The Eternal Now," in *The Meaning of Death* (ed. Herman Feifel; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 32.

[8] Quite common in literature, this theme of the fatal flaw is well exemplified in Leon Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* and in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. The personalization of mortality is, of course, a prominent theme among the existentialists, most notably Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre. See Robert G. Olson, *An Introduction to Existentialism* (New York: Dover, 1962), pp. 192-212; Jacques Choron, *Death and Western Thought* (New York: Collier, 1963), pp. 222-61; Walter Kaufman, "Existentialism and Death," in Feifel, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-63.

[9] Donne's views are expressed in a diary of his own illness; Malraux's especially in *Man's Fate;* Mann's in *The Magic Mountain, Buddenbrooks*, and *Death in Venice.*

brilliant film, *Zardoz*.[10] To clinicians probably the most authoritative analysis of attitudinal stages in the dying process is the justly famous work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.[11]

What all these studies tend to show is that on the level of lived experience one can distinguish a number of different attitudes, or mindsets, towards dying and that in many cases these distinct attitudes occur successively in the same person who is dying. It would be of considerable interest to determine to what extent the accounts of the different studies on attitudes towards dying are consistent (in some ways they seem not to be). But my object here is simply to develop a framework for discussing old age; so it will suffice to assert that no matter how many different attitudes towards dying can be experienced existentially, they can all be divided analytically into four basic modes: neutral, negative, affirmative, and mixed (or conflicted).

The neutral attitude, first of all, has had some staunch defenders down through history, especially in military circles. If thought of as absolute fearlessness, it is perhaps best illustrated by the old maxim, "Cowards die a thousand deaths; brave men die but once." If thought of as an absence of all emotion and even of any willful preference, it calls to mind the ancient Stoic ideal of *apathia* towards all pain and suffering, including dying, which amounted to a kind of equanimity that one maintains, in the words of Marcus Aurelius, "whether in chains or on the throne." This extremely rationalist approach seems not to have been an entirely successful censor of affect in time of stress, since the suicide rate among the Stoics was notoriously high.

The negative attitude, which may range from simple disapproval through intense opposition, is usually thought to be the most prevalent of all attitudes towards dying. In its most gentle form it has been poignantly articulated by Lewis Carroll:

> We are but older children, dear,
> Who fret to find our bedtime near.[12]

The sentiment here expressed is, to be sure, exceptionally gracious, and is no doubt exemplified in individual cases. But even in the face of Freud's assurances that we are as strongly motivated by a death-wish as we are by a will to pleasure, even those of us who have suicidal tendencies would be prepared to accept the old maxim that "where there's life, there's hope." And thus has the average person's reluctance to die been used against him so often

---

[10] Both Bergman and Boorman start from the premise that death is presently inevitable. But whereas Bergman's films have focused on personal responses to this inevitability, Boorman's *Zardoz* is, among other things, an elaborate *reductio ad absurdum* which attempts to show that death is in fact desirable even or, better, especially if science should eventually render it no longer inevitable.

[11] *On Death and Dying*, New York: Macmillan, 1969.

[12] Quoted from *Through the Looking Glass* in *The Life of Man* (Waukesha, Wis.: Country Beautiful, 1973), p. 182.

by those whose quest for power is undaunted by any ordinary scruples about the sanctity of life. Almost always understandable and sometimes even commendable, this will to live can in exceptional circumstances simply point up the mediocrity of our values, as an anonymous "A" reminds us in his poem about the Hungarian Revolution of 1956:

> As long as the fighter breathes
> The world holds its breath.
> As long as he cries and calls
> People hold their silence around him.
> As long as he lives
> The world plays dead.
> When he gives up and dies
> The world begins to live again,
> Selling cotton, river cruises, good meals.[13]

The affirmative attitude towards dying is often recommended as being most appropriate for anyone who is in fact going to die. And at first glance this seems to make very good sense. In particular, it would seem to be eminently appropriate for a person with a terminal illness, provided only, as Kubler-Ross has shown, that that person shall have first gone through such other stages as denial and rebellion. But apart from this special clinical situation there is reason to question the applicability of Kubler-Ross's recommendations. For, the very claim that someone is going to die is itself problematic: granting that each of us is indeed *going* to die, who of us is in fact *about* to die? Who of us should feel required to say, with the gladiators of old, "Nos morituri salutamus"? These questions invite us to expand our discussion of attitudes towards dying to take into account such factors as one's expectations and preferences as to the time and cause of death and as to the duration of the dying process, and the effect of age on these expectations and preferences. And by so doing we will prepare a context for describing the mixed, or conflicted, attitude with regard to dying.

Viewed simplistically as a straightforward matter of actuarial statistics, one's expectations as to time of death vary inversely with age: the older one is, the sooner one expects to die. But if the unexpected or atypical be taken into account, as in the case of an impending head-on collision, this expectation might well be revised downward rather precipitously. If one's preferences in the matter also be taken into account, the ratio between expectation and preference can vary quite markedly over the course of one's lifetime; and the resulting attitudinal pattern will be unique for each individual. Thus, if one tried to construct a graph of a person's attitudes towards life and death over time, it might look something like an irregular cardiogram, with the most dramatic shifts towards preference for death occurring on the occasion of an

---

[13] "Budapest 1956," in *From the Hungarian Revolution: A Collection of Poems* (ed. David Ray; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 107–8.

adolescent trauma, a divorce, the death of a loved one, a professional failure, a painful illness or injury, and so on.

In short, my personal expectations and preferences with regard to living and dying are different at different times in my life, and the resulting graph of my attudinal shifts over time is uniquely mine. In a similar fashion, the way in which I measure the duration of my dying might be unique to me as an individual. Considerably less unique to the individual, and perhaps most readily associated with the duration of dying, is the often dramatized situation in which the patient is informed by his physician that he has only N units of time left to live.

Still more generalized models of the duration of dying are found in the diversified repertoire of our cultural heritage. There is a tendency on the part of some Christian sects, for example, to view the whole of life as a preparation for death; and the corollary to this view, which is traceable to St. Augustine among others, is that we begin to die the moment we begin to live – a kind of personalized law of entropy.[14] A much more common view is the one that encourages us to think about our life-span as ascending and descending a hill, with all the resulting talk about being "at the peak" or "over the hill" or "on the decline" or whatever. Take, for example, these few lines from Sara Teasdale's poem, "The Long Hill":

> I must have passed the crest a while ago
> And now I am going down –
> Strange to have crossed the crest and not to know,
> But the brambles were always catching the hem of my gown.[15]

To show that this downhill or denouement view of the duration of dying has been responsible for a great deal of mischievous public policy towards the elderly would require a separate paper; but I shall return to it below when I take up the parabolic curve model of aging. For the moment it is enough just to note that, happily, this view is not universally accepted. For example, when Oliver Wendell Holmes addressed the nation by radio on his ninety-first birthday he compared all the years that went before to a horse race, and then went on to remind his listening audience that "The riders in a race do not stop short when they reach the goal. There is a little finishing canter before coming to a standstill."[16] An even stronger statement along these lines is contained in a note which George Bernard Shaw wrote at the age of ninety-four, on the day before an accident that led to his death:

---

[14] Gerontological research is now discovering a cellular basis for this degenerative view of human life and, accordingly, might one day lead to means of overcoming it. See Rona Cherry and Laurence Cherry, "Slowing the Clock of Age," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 12, 1974, pp. 20ff.

[15] *The Life of Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 162.

> The will to live is wholly inexplicable. Rationally, I ought to blow my brains out, but I don't and I won't ... Most people hold on to the last moment and die a "Natural Death" as I mean to, though at 94 I ought to clear out, my bolt being shot and overshot.[17]

How different was Shaw's approach to dying from that of a prominent Indianapolis attorney who submitted his own obituary to the local newspaper in 1943, when he was sixty, and then proceeded to live another thirty years! Indeed, Shaw almost seems to be saying that it is cowards, and not "brave men," who die but once. His final statement is most important, however, for the distinction it makes between dying a natural death and dying a violent death (examples of which are mentioned in the full text). For it is this distinction which forces us to modify clinically based recommendations about the need for a terminally ill person to arrive eventually at an attitude of resignation. Studies show, for example, that children as a group only gradually come to accept the finality of death around the ninth or tenth year.[18] And Herbert Marcuse even sees libertarian reasons for not accepting death too readily. As he puts it, "Compliance with death is compliance with the master over death: the polis, the state, nature, or the god."[19]

What is at issue in all these instances is the survival value of a will to live in the face of apparently imminent death. Such a will to live is medically significant in certain kinds of cases; and it is of quite universal significance when the threat to one's life is external rather than internal to the organism, as when one is confronted by an assailant, or by an imminent traffic accident, or by any of an uncounted variety of wartime situations. In such instances, generally speaking, the greater the likelihood of death, the greater the survival value of an unwillingness to die.[20]

Such, then, are the factors that come into play in the mixed or conflicted attitude towards dying, which is probably the most common of all. In this mode, one's attitude is a kind of stressed neutrality, in that it includes both affirmative and negative attitudes towards dying. More specifically, the mixed

---

[17] Quoted by Arnold A. Hutschnecker, "Personality Factors in Dying Patients," in Feifel, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

[18] Maria H. Nagy, "The Child's View of Death," in Feifel, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-98.

[19] "The Ideology of Death," in Feifel, *op. cit.*, p. 76. This lucid critique of the existentialists' emphasis on human finitude is on the whole complementary to views here being espoused.

[20] I say "generally speaking" because there are obvious qualifications which point to the need for a more careful statement than my documentation would allow. "Unwillingness to die," for example, cannot be taken to mean mere physical rebellion against dying; for, this might in fact do more harm than good, as in the case of one falling to the ground from a considerable height (here relaxation is probably the most salutary attitude to take). What an "unwillingness to die" does mean is well illustrated by the case of Louis Washkansky, the first recipient of a human heart transplant: Christian Barnard and Curtis Bill Pepper, *op. cit.*, pp. 337-53. See also Grosser/Wechsler/Greenblatt, eds., *The Threat of Impending Disaster*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1964.

mode takes so many factors into consideration that it makes the distinction between affirmative and negative seem somewhat simplistic. What are these factors? They include, among others, health, life expectancy, threats to life, status, life-style, self-image, human relationships, cultural heritage, values, goals and ideals.

It is perhaps impossible to construct an adequate representation of such a complex configuration. But one can at least suggest how the various factors are interrelated by considering the dynamics of the self in terms of: (1) its reality-context; (2) its goals; (3) its behavior preferences tending towards these goals; (4) its culturally established priorities; and (5) the situational demands made upon all of the foregoing. Each of these factors, to be considered in order, is represented in the model in Figure 1.

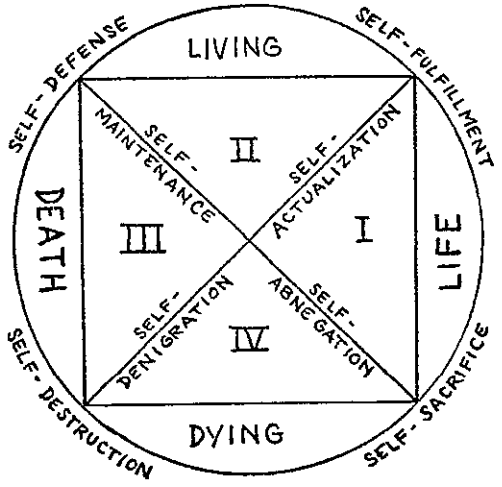

Fig. 1. Attitude Systems with regard to life and death, living and dying.

The reality-context may be thought of as consisting of two polarities: life and death; living and dying. The first polarity is exclusive, *i.e.*, one or the other but not both obtains in any given case. The second polarity is inclusive, *i.e.*, both not only may be co-present but in most instances are. Life is a pre-condition for living, but it is also a pre-condition for dying. Death is the termination both of life and of living, and is always preceded by a period of dying, however brief.

In response to the reality-context of life and death and of living and dying, the self may seek to achieve any or all of the following goals:

a) *Self-fulfillment*, a goal formulated out of the assumptions that "life is for the living" and that it should be lived to the fullest;
b) *Self-defense*, a goal formulated out of the assumptions that death stalks the living and that accordingly one must ward off death in order to live;
c) *Self-sacrifice*, a goal formulated out of the assumptions that dying is the

inevitable end of life and that accordingly the best use of living is for learning how to die;

d) *Self-destruction*, a goal formulated out of the assumptions that living requires more struggle than it is worth and that death is therefore the lesser of two evils.

Even if the goals just enumerated are not ordinarily achieved, each of them is approached by a specific set of *behavior preferences*. The first of these, self-actualization, tends towards the goal of self-fulfillment. Self-maintenance tends towards the goal of self-defense. Self-abnegation tends towards the goal of self-sacrifice. And self-denigration is directed towards the goal of self-destruction.

Each of these goals and each of these behavior-preferences is operative to one degree or another, at one time or another, in each and every one of us. Some of them, moreover, tend to be correlated in more or less stable configurations, especially under the influence of a given cultural setting or cultural heritage.

Self-actualization and self-denigration (and their respective goals) appear to be logically and diagrammatically opposed to one another, and so presumably would not often be adopted simultaneously. But the sight of a Buddhist bonze immolating himself in the streets of Saigon warns us to be mindful of a widespread belief that the self is fulfilled only insofar as it is dissipated into an absolute Self. Similarly, it would seem at first glance that self-maintenance and self-abnegation (and their respective goals) are both logically and diagrammatically opposed to one another. But here again the logically inconsistent proves to be psychologically compatible; for, there are many people, especially but not exclusively among the elderly, whose entire strategy for self-maintenance depends upon a meticulous attention to the bidding of others – in short, self-abnegation. The first set of diametric opposites is also reminiscent of Freud's dichotomy between Eros and Thanatos; and the second set calls to mind a long tradition of erudite debate over the relative merits of egoism and altruism.

Turning from the diametric opposites to each of the four triangles in Figure 1, we can represent certain preferences for combinations of goals taken two at a time. The respective configurations are identified by Roman numerals, and can be briefly described as follows:

Configuration I: The chief value is life itself, which must be maintained at any cost and which, paradoxically, can be brought to fulfillment only through self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. (Although perhaps somewhat a caricature of Christianity, this caricature is accurate enough to have been accepted by Friedrich Nietzsche and others as the reality.)

Configuration II: The chief value is living, which one should seek to the fullest, directly through self-actualizing endeavors and indirectly, when necessary, through self-maintaining behavior. (This predominantly humanist view, which may or may not be egocentric depending upon how 'self' is defined, probably represents mainstream thinking at least in the developed countries of the world. It is not easily distinguished from hedonism, but as

formulated in humanistic psychology it is a very responsible and at times altruistic point of view.)

Configuration III: The chief value consists of dealing with and dealing out death, especially insofar as it is precisely by means of such dealing that one maintains oneself, unless and until one loses the gamble in this zero-sum game and is destroyed. (Though perhaps most readily associated with the ethos of the underworld, this view is in its essentials shared by many adventurers and by career military personnel all around the world.)

Configuration IV: At first glance, it would not seem that there could be any widespread preference for an attitude configuration that combines self-abnegation and self-denigration, except in a pathological way. Thus the morbid tendency towards self-sacrifice and self-destruction would be expected in a case of chronic depression; and, as was shown in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, people doomed to death by bubonic plague might well take to flailing themselves in reparation for their sins. What is less readily recognized is that the whole thrust of what we call modern civilization tends to maneuver the elderly as a group into this configuration.[21] But, as Albert Camus has suggested in *The Plague*, there are other and nobler ways to respond to the inevitable.

In light of the foregoing, we may note finally that one configuration is more likely to be adopted in a given situation than others, but the more likely configuration might not be the most appropriate. As the studies of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross seem to show, for example, self-fulfillment is the most appropriate goal even for one who is terminally ill; but the clinical setting has not tended to foster that goal or the attitudes inclining thereto. In the case of old age, a whole variety of factors has conspired to encourage attitudes that favor dying more than living, death rather than life. And not the least of these factors is the prevailing model of the human life-span, that of the parabolic curve.

---

[21] An appeal to the development of geriatrics as counter-evidence in this regard is muted most effectively just by noting the almost total neglect of the aged, except as an economic problem, in most studies of the problems of society as a whole. For example, in all of the over 400 pages of his *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970), Alvin Toffler barely manages to note in one passing line that ours is "a nation in which legions of elderly folk vegetate and die in loneliness" (p. 325). Yet even this brief observation is more than will be found in Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970) or in Riesman/Glazer/Denny's *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950). Films such as NET's *Old Age – The Wasted Years* (1966) are correctives, as are such recent publications as Susan Jacoby, "Waiting for the End: On Nursing Homes," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 31, 1974, pp. 13ff.; and especially Mary Adelaide Mendelson, *Tender Loving Greed*, New York: Knopf, 1974. Controversy over the latter work in particular seems to indicate the American conscience is not prepared to admit in the wake of such programs as Medicare that Michael Harrington's description of "The Golden Years" in his *The Other America* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963, pp. 101-18) might still be essentially accurate.

4. *Models of Aging*

The standard model of the human life-span is one which assumes that power or energy is the measure of life and that accordingly one's life-span follows a curve that rises and then falls, parabolically.[22] Commonly viewed as a hill that one ascends and descends, as already noted, this standard model is only described more eloquently by the erudite. Note, for example, the words of Carl Jung:

> With the same intensity and irresistibility with which it strove upward before middle age, life now descends; for the goal no longer lies on the summit, but in the valley where the ascent began. The curve of life is like the parabola of a projectile which, disturbed from its initial state of rest, rises and then returns to a state of repose.[23]

Noting next that "the psychological curve of life . . . refuses to conform to this law of nature," Jung then goes on to find some justification for this psychic recalcitrance in parapsychological phenomena.[24] But his willingness to consider life after death an open question for science is not typical of the scientific community, current popular interest in the occult notwithstanding. Against a cosmological backdrop of universal death (the law of entropy), living species on the planet earth are seen to rise and fall in accordance with their ability to cope (survival of the fittest); and the same applies to the history of the human species as well. So why should it be any different for individual human beings? Such, at least, is the effect of much public policy, especially as it pertains to the elderly.

Committed as it is to the parabolic model of life, society generally has even less use for the old than it does for the young. And just as it deals with the young as those who are preparing to live, so does it deal with the old as those who have already lived or at least had their chance for life. It is by no means self-evident that this is the most desirable distribution of status and meaning in a society; but it is certainly the most prevalent in a modern industrial nation such as ours. Victor Frankl once noted that if one's life has any meaning, it should have meaning even when one has little to look forward to but death.[25] But how difficult this becomes when the society in which one lives makes all of the sources of meaning practically off-limits to all but those who are riding the crest! For, not only power but also pleasure and wealth and knowledge and even the opportunity for service are most readily available to the middle-aged monopolizers of our society.

---

[22] This standard model is even accepted by Charlotte Buhler and Fred Massaryk in their *The Course of Human Life* (*op. cit.*), which is subtitled "A Study of Goals in the Humanistic Perspective" and in which are acknowledged "late culmination" and "late-age peaks" (p. 62). See in this regard pp. 44 and 60.

[23] "The Soul and Death," in Feifel, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 5-15.

[25] *From Death-Camp to Existentialism* (Boston: Beacon, 1959), pp. 64-84.

About the only significant source of meaning that is not monopolized by the middle-aged managerial class is wisdom. Wisdom, long understood as a holistic understanding of some complex process: a skill or craft, the sciences, the universe as a whole, or most especially the way to live one's life as a human being. Thus understood, the ancient ideal of wisdom is in some respects comparable to today's systems approaches to problem-solving in areas as diverse as traffic control, courtroom litigation, or cancer research. Indeed, these latter approaches, especially when linked to the computer, seem so sophisticated in their technological meticulosity as to make mere human wisom seem pre-historic at best.[26] Nonetheless, many people – with or without access to a computer – are manifestly incapable of building meaningful lives for themselves in today's technopolis. So they look for guidance to rock music, astrology, psychotherapy, psychocybernetics, turbaned gurus, and any of a hundred other more or less fallible revelations. Does this not indicate that for all our technological prowess, we are just as much in need of human wisdom as any of our pre-industrial forebears?[27] Our forebears, however, looked to their elders for such wisdom, whereas we in general do not. Why is it that we have so little respect for the wisdom of our elders? The underlying reason, I believe, is to be found in the very structure of a highly technological society.

In the low-technological society, tools are still selected and valued according as they fit in to the needs of the people. In the high technological society, by contrast, it is people who are selected and valued according as they fit into the needs of society's tools. Much is gained, of course, by this willingness to sacrifice the organic to the mechanistic way of life. But the values lost in the process are, in the judgment of many observers, far more precious. These values, generically identified as humanistic, include all that A. Tonnies found worthwhile in the community (*Gemeinschaft*) of old: a preference for the interpersonal, the familial, the organic. The modern way of doing things requires people to live more anonymously, contractually and impersonally as they go about what tasks remain to humans in a world that thrives on making, selling, servicing and using machines.[28] As society replaces one kind of machine with another, it in effect shifts its values from those who served the old to those who serve the new. Thus, the man who knows everything about vacuum tubes is soon displaced by a man who knows something about transistors – or about printed circuits, or ....

In a society such as this, wisdom tends to be left in the attic of discarded mementos, as people search for more modern ways to ward off the villainy of

---

[26] See, for example, John Beishon and Geoff Peters, eds., *Systems Behaviour*, New York: Harper & Row for Open University Press, 1972.

[27] The need for wisdom in today's world has been stressed in various ways by such writers as Karl Jaspers, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Kenneth Boulding, Josiah Royce and many others. A serious and knowledgeable attempt to articulate this need systematically is John David Garcia's *The Moral Society* (New York: Julian, 1971), which calls for "generalists" who have "total awareness."

"future shock." Talk of "retraining" people is no more efficacious than talk of recycling bottles. For, neither is considered necessary to keep the wheels of production turning. (It is only when one stops to wonder who will *buy* all the products turned out that people acquire value as "consumers" and unemployment becomes an *economic* problem.) So it is preferred that people, like bottles, be conveniently disposable. If only the pattern of life today remained somewhat constant from one generation to the next, the young could learn much of value from their elders, as was once the case in the pre-industrial world. But if the only constant is change itself, then the future is god and the young are its priests. This, at least, is what Margaret Mead seems to be saying when she characterizes ours as a postfigurative rather than a prefigurative society.[29]

In short, the traditional value of the elderly to a society was their claim to a wisdom that comes precisely with age. But today, if there is any interest in wisdom, it is more likely to be sought from the middle-aged or the young, if not from some non-human source like the computer. The elderly, of course, are still free to contend that they are of some value to our society; but the burden of proof is on them. Unfortunately, few of our elders contend anything of the kind. Most tend instead, however reluctantly, to accept the myth of rugged individualism that requires them either to "make it" on their own or else move over to make room for those who purportedly can.

What is especially noxious about this system-serving ostracism of the old is that it commits us all to the Malthusian zero-sum game that makes the rise of some require the demise of others. This way of dealing with the elderly further assumes that the evolution of the human species is to be measured only in terms of external or material growth, to the total neglect of internal or spiritual growth. What does it matter, we seem to be saying, that some of our greatest musicians, writers, statesmen and philosophers are also among our most long-lived members? These few, we like to believe, are but exceptions that prove the rule. And yet the rule itself is of our own making.[30] Our oppression of the old is so effective that the few who thrive in spite of it must be truly outstanding – much like children who escape the ghetto. What magnificent and ennobling contributions might we therefore expect of our senior citizens if we once would recognize that what they can best offer is not worthless but truly priceless?

Maybe we have not yet suffered enough as a people from social alienation, political corruption, economic crisis and personal disillusionment to really concern ourselves seriously with the possibility that we have bought society

---

[28] *Community and Society*, tr. C. P. Loomis, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963.

[29] *Culture and Commitment*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970.

[30] Empirical support for this speculation has been reported by Alexander Leaf, "Getting Old," *Scientific American*, Vol. 229, n. 3 (September 1973) 44-52, especially p. 50: "It is characteristic of each of the areas I visited that the old people continue to be contributing members of their society ... The old people, with their accumulated experience of life, are expected to be wise, and they respond accordingly."

at the price of community. But if the day ever comes when our hunger for community is intense enough to make us ask basic questions about where we are really going as a people, we may then remember what simple folk have never forgotten: if one must go where one has never been, it can do no harm to ask directions of another who is already there. Thus might one yet hear, as Carlos Castaneda heard from an Indian "man of knowledge":

> (Old age) is the cruelest (enemy) of all, the one (a man) won't be able to defeat completely, but only fight away . . . But if the man sloughs off his tiredness, and lives his fate through, he can then be called a man of knowledge, if only for the brief moment when he succeeds in fighting off his last, invincible enemy. That moment of clarity, power and knowledge is enough.[31]

Such a recommendation would not have been surprising to the science fiction writer, Ray Bradbury, who once said:

> My books are victories against darkness, if only for a small while. Each story I write is a candle lit for my own burial plot which it may take some few years to blow out. More than many writers, I have known this fact about myself since I was a child. It puts me to work each day with a special sad-sweet-happy urgency.[32]

Bradbury's notion of working against time and almost against death is a fine example of the individualistic quest for quasi-immortality through one's work. What this view lacks, at least in its explicit statement, is an awareness of the species-specific significance of an individual's work and how this can help to aggrandize an elderly person's view of his or her continuing role in the scheme of things. This latter view is nowhere stated more eloquently than it was by Bertrand Russell in his *New Hopes for a Changing World:*

> An individual human existence should be like a river – small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being. The man who, in old age, can see his life in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death, since the things he cares for will continue. And if, with the decay of vitality, weariness increases, the thought of rest will not be unwelcome. The wise man should wish to die while still at work, knowing that others will carry on what he can no longer do, and content in the thought that what was possible has been done.[33]

Thus does Bertrand Russell formulate a model for a wise old age by combining the work ethic of the West with the often repeated image of the flowing

---

[31] Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan* (New York: Ballantine, 1968), p. 83. See also *A Separate Reality* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), pp. 183-7.

[32] Quoted by James L. Christian, *Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art of Wondering* (San Francisco: Rinehart, 1973), p. 476.

[33] Quoted in *The Life of Man, op. cit.*, p. 173.

river so dear to the philosophy of the East.[34] And by so doing he implicitly aligns the intellectualist tradition of a community of scholars with such evolutionistic models as those of Friedrich Nietzsche and Nikos Kazantzakis, each of whom views the individual as a bridge over which mankind walks to a richer and more meaningful life.[35]

What all of this suggests is that we need to work towards a society in which the elderly would play a sapiential role that can be represented by the model in Figure 2.

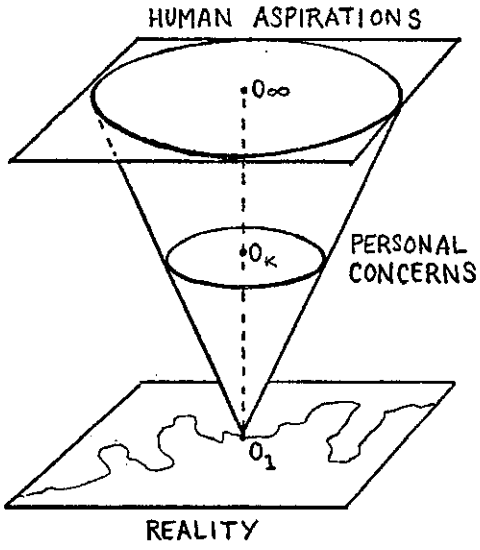

Fig. 2. Sapiential Model of Individual Life-Span.

Imagine an inverted cone the point of which is on the plane of action and the base of which is on the plane of human (or species specific) aspiration. Imagine further that a second circle is formed by a plane of personal concerns (Figure 1, above) that transects the cone between its point and its base. The cone as a whole moves horizontally in various directions, and as it dies it traces out on the plane of action a pattern which represents the unique life span of this one particular human being. This human being's attention, represented by the entire cone, is free to move up towards the fullness of human aspiration or down towards the concrete particularity of action in the real world. But actions performed in the concrete attain the fullness of human aspiration only as filtered through the plane of personal concerns; and so it is inversely with any attempt to express such aspirations in one's concrete actions. There are degrees of accomplishment, however, depending upon how closely the plane of one's personal concerns comes to approximate the plane of human aspira-

[34] This same model will also be found in Hermann Hesse's *Siddharta*.

[35] See Maurice Friedman, *To Deny Our Nothingness* (New York: Delta, 1967), pp. 62-79.

tion. The more one's personal concerns recede from that high plane to the level of reality as given, the more the pattern traced in reality will resemble the pattern of every other person in one's immediate environment. But the more one's personal concerns approach the plane of human aspirations, the more one's actions in reality will trace out a new and different pattern that can be of service as a guide and inspiration to others.

Thus, for example, the black woman portrayed by Cecily Tyson in *The Autobiography of Jane Pittman* accepted every racist evil that came into her centenary life, until in her advanced old age she at long last defied segregationist constraints, drank from a forbidden drinking fountain, and by that act enlarged the scope of possibilities towards which her people could thereafter aspire because of her. So it can be with every human being whose personal concerns rise through time to become one with human aspirations and thence produce creative actions that change the pattern of human life. We are, for better or worse, what we do, both as individuals and as a species. But what we do is of value only to the extent that it helps all of us learn something more about how to be fully human. It is in this sense that I choose to interpret what Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in his poem, "The Chambered Nautilus":

> Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
> As the swift seasons roll!
> Leave thy low-vaulted past!
> Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
> Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
> Till thou at length art free,
> Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's
> Unresting sea!

IU – Purdue University at Indianapolis