

Ageful and proud

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There is something splendid about the word ageful – a word which I had not encountered before reading Bytheway (2000). Ironically, Bytheway does not share my affection for his invention; rather, for him it seems to have negative connotations, reflected in his comment: ‘as gerontologists we are vulnerable to seeing ourselves and those we study entirely in terms of age: as *ageing* rather than *living* individuals: ageful rather than ageless’ (2000: 785–6). But why this juxtaposition between ageing and living? Surely there is an interconnectedness between the two. We are ageing from the moment we are born; the longer we live, the more full of age we become.

Although Bytheway implies that I think of age as something which only older people have, in fact my argument is quite the reverse. Age, I believe, is something we all have. I have always liked the idea of having, rather than being, an age. In French, one is not a particular age, but rather has a certain number of years. I have years; I embody years; they, and the experiences contained within them, are what makes me me. This is why the term ageful resonates so with me, and it also, perhaps, encapsulates the heart of the difference between Bytheway and myself.

Bytheway identifies five contentious arguments which I have put forward. These are: (1) old age is no different from other stages of life; (2) old people are old, and should be accepted as such; (3) the self/body split is false and should be abandoned; (4) claims of agelessness are a form of ageism; and (5) we should rehabilitate stigmatised words. Each of these points I would like to address.

Regarding the first claim, my belief is that as I age, I am both the same and not the same, as I have been in all preceding phases of my life. This is true both physically and psychologically. My argument with Bytheway is that he appears to address only that part of the self which is continuous. Far from his claim that I think that old age is no different from other stages of life, I feel that the real difference that is there – the

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stuff of which our lives are made – is not validated in and of itself. In my original article, I wrote:

Many old people feel they are the same person deep inside as they have ever been. At the same time, they are changed by the years they have lived not only physically, but psychologically. Thus old people's readings of their social world, and the positionings of themselves within it, are very nuanced, and it is the complexity of this perspective, complete with its apparent self-contradictions, which researchers must try to keep hold of as they proceed in their investigations. (Andrews 1999: 313)

My argument is built upon an assumption regarding the integrated nature of continuity and change throughout life, and it is perhaps this apparent contradiction which Bytheway finds so difficult to grasp.

Although Bytheway concludes his commentary with an appeal for the relativism of age-related categories, and the language used to identify them, in earlier passages his message seems to be quite different. He takes issue with the metaphors of transformation which I offer, and suggests that the problem is that we simply don't know when old age really is. Of course old and young are as much a matter of perception as any other descriptors (tall and short – suggested by Bytheway – fat and skinny, even kind and nasty). All of these descriptors beg the question compared to what? Recently my five-year-old returned home from school quite pleased with herself. She and her best friend had tricked some really little kids (i.e. four-year-olds) due to enter the Reception Class in the autumn, who were being shown around her school: they announced to everyone that they were six years old. For them, the age they pretended to be is almost unimaginably old. But while my daughter and I might not agree in all cases about who is old and who is not, for me that is insufficient to negate the existence of the category. For Bytheway however, it seems to be significant that there are no firm boundaries marking the beginning and end of old age. But for what other stage of life do we require such explicit gateways? When does a neonate become an infant, an infant a toddler, or a child an adolescent? All of these terms we use in our daily lives, and no one has suggested that we should cease doing so. Despite the lack of precision in meaning, these are useful (and sometimes limiting) groupings.

Under the heading 'Old people are old', Bytheway laments my lack of disclosure regarding my own age. He argues that the question of who 'we' are and who 'they' are becomes critical in how one writes about old people (2000: 3). While I did not refer to my age in my article, in personal correspondence with Bytheway over the editing of that piece, I explicitly addressed the personal significance of my argument for me.

Far from minimising the importance of my own age, I think now, as I did then, that it was integral to my perceptions at the time. Not only was I approaching the supposedly momentous occasion of my 40th birthday, but more significantly for me, I developed the core of the argument while on maternity leave with our second child. A woman who gives birth as she is entering the fifth decade of her life is, in Western society, bound to experience a particular consciousness of her chronological age, and I was no exception.

So if my age was so important to the argument I was constructing, why then didn't I mention it in the article? Despite Bytheway's commendable acknowledgement of the importance of reflexivity in research and writing, the fact is that one reviewer of my article stated that my style of writing differed from *Ageing and Society's* house style in so far as it erred on the side of being informal and on occasion chatty. I can only imagine what this reviewer's reaction would have been had I included my reflections on late motherhood, and approaching birthdays.

Incidentally, I think that middle age and mid-life are terms from which – like old age – many choose to distance themselves. I surprised someone the other day by saying that I was past middle age – which, if my life is in line with the statistics, is true. I am 41 and, unless I am fortunate, I will expire before reaching the grand age of 82. Once again, of course, it is all relative; for someone unlucky enough to die in their teen-age years, middle age may come before one has entered into double-digits.

Many of Bytheway's suggested edits I agree with: 'I'm growing older, you are growing older, let's talk about what it's like' is particularly thoughtful, but it does sit in tension with his insistence on age-boundaries implicitly restated (in the distinctions he makes between 'within old age' and 'at its outset') earlier in the very same paragraph. Similarly, I am in sympathy with his comments about 'elderly'. However, while we both dislike this word, I think we do so for different, perhaps contradictory, reasons. For Bytheway, it is indicative of absolutist vocabulary, while for me it represents the euphemistic tendency of many when addressing old age. It sounds like the very polite appellation of an earnest speaker trying not to offend on a topic which they quite possibly find offensive.

The third point raised by Bytheway, regarding the self/body dualism, is more complicated than it is presented here. I would have thought that the very opening lines of my original article – 'you are not only as old as you feel, you are also as old as you are' (Andrews 1999:301) – would be evidence that I do not believe in 'a simple and

unproblematic link between individual and age'. With that said, it is not obvious to me why it is absurd to insist that [chronological] age should be part of our identity. Age, like other aspects of identity, comprises both an objective and a subjective dimension. For instance, the fact that I am a woman might mean a number of different things to me. But my subjective experience of this aspect of my identity does not mitigate against the objective fact of its existence. Many have argued strongly for the importance of this category as an organising principle of identity (as opposed to, for instance, eye colour), regardless of any particular individual's or group of individuals' perceptions of its significance in their lives. Where I differ most strongly with Bytheway is that I do not see chronological age as an empty container. The example I use in my article is that of a husband describing his wife as *una anciana*, a word that tells you she has grown with all those years...to grow, to become not only older but a bigger person (Coles 1991: 90–91). I have come to question the meaning of the phrase 'mere chronological age', for it seems to discount the time out of which our lives are made: there is nothing 'mere' about it.

I continue to believe that advocating agelessness is a form of ageism, though not because I regard gerontologists as thinking of themselves as ageless – a proposition I must admit I find interesting. While I applaud Bytheway's plea to work towards a better understanding of how we age, how we make sense of our experience of ageing, and how we relate to and work with people who may be older (and who may be younger) than ourselves, I do not see this as synonymous with embracing agelessness, but rather as an expression of sensitivity for the importance of intra- and inter-generational dialogue. Agelessness research (such as Kaufman 1986), which ignores the importance of social context in framing respondents' narratives, operates on the principle of exceptionalism: these old people are not like most old people, they are engaged with life, vibrant, etc. and therefore we, and they, shall call them ageless. But such a stance fails to challenge, and perhaps even promotes, existing stereotypes.

Surely, how one sees and interprets one's own body is not only (or perhaps even primarily) an individual affair. One must ask oneself where the distaste for the image of old bodies comes from. Personally, I would choose such images as a target for rehabilitation, rather than terms like elderly. A dramatic example of such body image rehabilitation is that of pregnant women, epitomised by the nude photographs of Demi Moore in her ninth month of pregnancy that were splashed over the front cover of *Vanity Fair*: pregnant has become sexy. Is it the ageing body's turn next?

References

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