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Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar

Travels
with
Epicurus

*A Journey to a Greek Island
in Search of an Authentic Old Age*





Chapter Three

Tasso's Rain-Spattered Photographs

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ON SOLITARY REFLECTION
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Making my way back from Dimitri's to my room, I again see Tasso on his highest terrace and, minutes later, from the desk window of my room, I gaze over at him again. I now see that there is a small table beside him, on it some old notebooks and what appears to be a box of postcards and photographs. His craggy face seems both pensive and content. It is a day for solitary reflection.

Back in my room, I hear rain beginning to fall, pattering lightly on the tile roof over my head. I feel chilly, a bit lonely,

and, well, particularly old. Executing a few exultant dance steps does not seem like the ticket at this particular moment. I retire to my narrow bed to read some more about the philosophies of boredom and play, my interim strategy for warding off the old-man rainy day blues. It feels like a good *kairós* for playing with ideas.

ON IDLE THOUGHTS

Svendsen points out that many early thinkers tied the idle life to the production of superior ideas and a deeper understanding of life. He cites the Roman poet Lucan, who wrote, “Leisure ever creates varied thought,” and Montaigne, in his essay “Of Idleness,” agrees wholeheartedly, adding that “like a horse that has broken from its rider,” idle thought is far more adventurous than regimented thought. Svendsen also mentions the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Hamann, who believed that the idle have a better perspective on philosophical ideas than academics do, in part because they are less likely to get caught up in minutiae. He would get no argument from me on that. Apparently, Hamann could get a tad defensive on the subject of idleness: when a friend criticized him for loafing, he is said to have retorted that work is easy, but true idleness takes courage and fortitude.

True idleness also requires patience, which, in a sense, is the antidote for boredom. An authentic old man can be a master of patience for the simple reason that he is in no hurry for time to

pass. I remember one long-ago evening, on an overcrowded train to Philadelphia, hearing a young woman moan to her mother, "God, I wish we were there already!" Her white-haired mother replied eloquently, "Darling, never wish away a minute of your life."

Even old age's lack of new experiences can be considered a boon. We've done "new" already, and usually found it wanting. Writes Svendsen, "Existential boredom . . . must fundamentally be understood on the basis of a concept of a dearth of accumulated experience. The problem is that we try to get beyond this boredom by piling on increasingly new and more potent sensations and impressions, instead of allowing ourselves to accumulate experience."

Yes, *accumulated experience*—that is precisely what an old person has available to him in abundance. The trick is to slow down enough that this accumulated experience can be contemplated and even, hopefully, savored.

ON THE SUPERIORITY OF MENTAL PLEASURES

Epicurus was convinced that mental pleasures surpass physical pleasures, largely because the mind has the advantage of being able to contemplate pleasures of the past and anticipate pleasures of the future. According to an explication by the Roman philosopher Cicero, a late-in-life Epicurean convert, this permitted "a continuous and interconnected [set of] pleasures."

From a modern psychological perspective, this Epicurean

ability of the mind to feel pleasure simply by remembering pleasant sensations seems exaggerated and overly optimistic. But nonetheless, Epicurus's enthusiasm for the joys of thought—particularly for solitary contemplation and enlightening conversation—remains worth thinking about.

Both Epicurus and Plato believed that old age provided a unique chance for unbounded, wide-ranging thought. In the *Republic*, Plato basically attributed this window of opportunity to the fact that we aren't that horny anymore: "Old age has a great sense of calm and freedom; when the passions relax their hold, then . . . we are freed from the grasp of not one mad master only but of many."

And Epicurus saw this opportunity of old age as one more benefit from leaving the world of commerce and politics behind us; it frees us to focus our brainpower on other matters, often more intimate and philosophical matters. Being immersed in the commercial world constrains the mind, limiting it to conventional, acceptable thought; it is hard to close a sale if we pause in the proceedings to meditate at length about man's relation to the cosmos. Furthermore, without a business schedule, we simply have the time to ruminate unhurriedly, to pursue a thought for as long and as far as it takes us. In a letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus noted that an old man is in an ideal position to open his mind to new ideas "in consequence of his absence of fear for the future." An old man does not have to fret about his next move

because the chess game is over. He is free to think about any damned thing he chooses.

Contemporary brain research contributes a synaptic angle on Plato's observation that in old age we are in better shape for thinking philosophical thoughts. A study done at the Université de Montréal found that older minds are more efficient than younger ones. Writes the principal researcher of the study, Dr. Oury Monchi, "We now have neurobiological evidence showing that with age comes wisdom and that as the brain gets older, it learns to better allocate its resources." And research undertaken at the University of California, San Diego, found that "a slower brain may be a wiser brain" because in old age those parts of the brain identified with abstract, philosophical thought and with perceptual anticipation are freed from the distracting effects of the neurotransmitter dopamine. "The elderly brain is less dopamine-dependent, making people less impulsive and controlled by emotion," the study concluded. Aha! So dopamine is Plato's "mad master"!

I am not completely comfortable with letting scientists define what we mean by "wiser," yet I do remain convinced that old people have the capacity to think from a perspective that is substantially *different* from that of their younger selves. This may be because topics more suited to slow thinking come along with thinking slowly, or because an old person simply has more time for contemplation, or because—who knows?—he has been

liberated from his dopamine addiction. Whatever the root of his new ways of thinking, he now has the opportunity to think about some fascinating things.

ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL URGE

We old people often like to think about the accumulated experiences of our lives. In that same deathbed letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus wrote, “When a man is old, he may be young in good things through the pleasing recollection of the past.” It reminds me of an expression I heard a neighbor use when I was a child: “That woman’s so old she can be any age she wants to be.”

But sometimes an old person wants to do more than just randomly recollect things past; he (or she) wants to search for a thread in his life, something that holds it together as his.

ON AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AUTHENTIC OLD AGE

The autobiographical impulse comes in two models. The first is the currently surging urge to pass along the story of our lives to others: the recent bulge in the over-sixty-five population has yielded an abundance of published memoirs. The second model is simply to get the story of our lives straight for *ourselves*. These often turn out to be conflicting impulses. An inherent problem in writing one’s memoirs for others to read is the temptation to indulge in literary nips and tucks. After all, who really wants to be remembered as, say, a man who spent an inordinate amount

of time watching *Law & Order*? Not for publication! But just possibly the fact that a man spent many an hour intrigued by *Law & Order* does figure in an honest attempt to make thematic sense of the life he lived. For the philosophically minded, the venture of constructing one's life story for oneself alone figures prominently in the making of an authentic old age.

But some philosophers disapprove. In the second book of his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle, a dedicated curmudgeon on the subject of old folks, wrote: "They live by memory rather than by hope; for what is left to them of life is but little as compared with the long past; and hope is of the future, memory of the past. This, again, is the cause of their loquacity; they are continually talking of the past, because they enjoy remembering it."

To say the least, this is not a rousing recommendation to follow the autobiographical urge.

Bertrand Russell takes up Aristotle's argument more tellingly. Russell, a precocious forever youngster who lived to the age of ninety-eight (he attributed his longevity to having chosen his ancestors carefully), wrote in his 1975 essay "How to Grow Old": "Psychologically there are two dangers to be guarded against in old age. One of these is undue absorption in the past. It does not do to live in memories, in regrets for the good old days, or in sadness about friends who are dead. One's thoughts must be directed to the future, and to things about which there is something to be done."

And in the poem "Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?"

William Butler Yeats describes what he saw as the inevitable product of dwelling on the past—a personal docudrama of failed expectations:

*Why should not old men be mad?
Some have known a likely lad
That had a sound fly fisher's wrist
Turn to a drunken journalist;
A girl that knew all Dante once
Live to bear children to a dunce;
.....
No single story would they find
Of an unbroken happy mind,
A finish worthy of the start.
Young men know nothing of this sort,
Observant old men know it well;
And when they know what old books tell
And that no better can be had,
Know why an old man should be mad.*

But I find myself more persuaded by the psychologist and existentialist philosopher Erik Erikson, who was convinced that memories laced with regret and despair are not our only option. On the contrary, Erikson says, mature and wise ways of reminiscing are precisely what we need in an authentic old age.

ON THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IMPERATIVE

One of Erikson's most highly regarded contributions to modern psychology was his formulation of stages of personal evolution that go beyond the traditional Freudian stages of early childhood development to include all of life, including old age. This last, he encouragingly called "maturity."

In each stage, Erikson posited a polar tension that needs to be resolved to get successfully through it. For example, in young adulthood the primary tension is between intimacy and isolation. A successful resolution follows from forming loving relationships with others, while an unsuccessful outcome is loneliness and alienation. In maturity Erikson sees the tension between what he calls "ego integrity" and despair. The fundamental task of this stage is *to reflect back on one's life*.

For Erikson, a successful resolution of the tension between ego integrity and despair is a wise and considered sense of fulfillment, a philosophical acceptance of oneself in spite of serious mistakes and stumbles along the way. Erickson believed that a philosophical acceptance of one's life in old age stemmed directly from a matured capacity for love. He wrote that the key personal relationship in a successful navigation through old age is with, of all people, mankind—which he dubs "my kind"—the ultimate family relationship. An unsuccessful outcome of reflecting back on one's life is unmitigated regret and bitterness.

So in Erikson's philosophy it turns out that this old-age impulse to find a narrative thread to our lives is more than just an indulgence in ruefulness or idle daydreaming—it is critical stuff. This is what Svendsen is suggesting when he writes that “accumulated experience” is the opposite of, and quite possibly the best relief from, the boredom of living one isolated and unconnected experience after another. Tying our experiences together in a personal history is a way we find meaning in our lives.