

Helen Small, *The Long Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, hbk

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*The Long Life* is a major study of old age in Western philosophy and literature. It consists of eight interconnected essays which aim to sharpen thinking about old age by discussing how longevity affects major questions of moral philosophy. Each chapter probes a particular set of questions, first through the texts of a philosopher and then through those of a literary figure. Helen Small is not so much interested in the philosophy of old age as in probing the significance of old age for philosophy. Hence she does not address the question most commonly addressed by philosophers of aging: how should one respond to the changing conditions of life experienced in old age? Instead she asks: what is “the relation between a long life and a good life?” What does it mean to be a person? Does identity persist and for how long? And what is the place of old age in various conceptions of “goods and values and justice and knowledge?” (4)

Chapter One begins with Plato’s claim that philosophy is best practiced in old age and then probes the rationale for and the rhetorical uses of that claim. Small then shows how Thomas Mann reworks Plato to support his definition of a literary artist. Chapter Two looks at the place of old age in Aristotle’s virtue ethics and argues that Aristotle concedes too little to loss of capacity in the criteria he uses for final judgement of a good life. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is then interpreted to analyze similar questions. Chapter Three uses Alasdair MacIntyre’s narrative view of lives to press further her case against Aristotle for failing to separate teleology from chronology in moral thinking about old age. She questions whether the widespread analogy between lives and narratives is a useful means of pointing us toward a good life since its underlying assumptions of continuity and moral progress often break apart on the rocks of incapacity, dementia, or overwhelming external forces. Saul Bellow’s late work *Ravelstein* (2004) is read as a story of two protagonists who resist seeing their lives as personal, self-contained narratives.

Chapter Four shifts to the realm of ethics and policy, discussing Norman Daniels’ Rawlsian scheme for allocating resources across the span of life, while noting McKerlie’s fear that prudence alone would not be sufficient to protect the most vulnerable. Small reads poems by Philip Larkin and Stevie Smith to extend her discussion of justice and choice. Chapter Five reads Derek Parfit against Balzac’s *Le Pere Goriot* to think about Parfit’s notion that if we were less biased toward the future, “we would be less worried by ageing and death.” (20) Next Small interprets Theodore Adorno’s claims about old age in his late lectures as a window onto metaphysics and counterpoints them with treatments of old age in Dickens and Beckett. Chapter Seven looks at Bernard Williams’s brief remarks on old age in the context of his argument from boredom about why we should not desire immortality. In her final chapter, Small examines current the evolutionary theory of senescence; she concludes with a reading of Michael Ignatieff’s novel *Scar Tissue*.

*Long Life* is a landmark book and deserves to be widely read by all serious scholars of aging. It is erudite, eclectic, carefully argued, ambitious in scope and modest in its claims. I suspect that it will be read less by gerontologists than by philosophers and literary critics (though neither group shows much interest in ageing). Small shows very little familiarity with gerontological literature, except for some writing in the evolutionary biology of aging. Though she is aware of certain authors in humanistic gerontology—or age studies—Small never engages contemporary philosophical writers on aging such as

Jan Baars, Martha Holstein, Ronald Manheimer, Harry R. Moody, Laurence McCullough or Margaret Urban Walker.

Since Helen Small's book is written from within the epistemological foundationalism of modern philosophy, it intersects with most discourse in the humanistic and social gerontology at an oblique angle. Her key questions about the *The Long Life* do not touch existential issues inherent in the lived life. In my view, Small's book is a powerful search light which can help us illuminate contemporary moral questions that call out for theoretical reflection, social and cultural study, and practical engagement: how should we live as we get older? What are reasonable standards of virtue and conduct in sickness and in health? What do older people owe future generations? What responsibility do aging individuals have for their own moral and spiritual development? Addressing these questions will require more attention to religion, spirituality, and community, to love, loneliness, intimacy and preparation for death in various populations that differ by culture, race, ethnicity, class and gender. Nevertheless, *The Long Life* is a superb contribution to philosophy and literary criticism and will become an indispensable landmark for understanding longevity in those disciplines as well as in humanistic gerontology.