Summary: Philosophy of Aging session III

This session we focused primarily on Daniel Klein’s little book, *Travels with Epicurus*, discussed Epicurean (Epicurus) vs. Stoic (Cicero, Seneca) philosophies, and Existentialism as it pertains to conscious aging. Attached slides discussed in class point out some similarities and differences. The class also briefly discussed the slide on elements of a philosophy of aging with some thoughtful ideas brought forward, e.g., on the importance of reflection and relationships. The idea that reflection was a superior mode of spending one’s older years and that happiness was the goal is a common belief of the Epicurean and the Stoics. Cicero’s *de Senectute* reflects the Stoic viewpoint but both philosophies are pertinent to a philosophy on aging one might adopt. The Stoics, governed by a logical process in the universe (logos) were concerned with acceptance of world events (fatalism), self-protection, and lack of fear of the natural outcomes that affect their lives. Contrasted to the Epicureans, they were more dependent on rational behavior and sustained an agnostic belief in the gods and the afterlife. The Epicureans maintained the goal in life is pleasure and that the fear of death and anxiety were a waste of time since there was no threat from the gods and that this life was the only one. Both philosophies sustained the belief that happiness is the goal.

The Epicureans were persecuted much earlier than the Stoics due to the juxtaposed positions of the Catholic Church, i.e., suffering in life and avoiding pleasure (sin) in order to gain reward in the afterlife, and the much exaggerated materialistic behavior of the Epicureans. The Stoics, unlike the Epicureans, believed tentatively in the after-life and had more altruistic principles allowing them to survive longer under the aegis of the Christian church (they were banned in the Fifth Century, CE). Some Stoic principles were carried over into Christian theology, as similarly, Plato’s theology of the “Forms” was translated into Eastern Christian theology by Augustine (and later, Aristotle’s logic and philosophy to Roman Catholic theology by Thomas Aquinas.) The aspect of life after death was raised by the class as an issue, especially as an older adult when religious beliefs or rejection of them are a consideration in the integration of the individual’s views toward a philosophy of aging, wisdom and authenticity. Intention and “conscious aging” to define a philosophy of aging as an older adult (OA) would seem to be critical in enjoying a happy life at this stage. The philosophical approach of Existentialism (Sartre, Camus, de Bouvoir, Heidegger) of determining our own essence as humans to arrive at authenticity is a thread that runs through our entire consideration of conscious aging.

The class discussion on Klein’s book was stimulating with many comments. There seemed to be general agreement that the book reflected most of the content covered in class so far. The dilemma of “old-old–age” was discussed with no obvious resolution offered by Klein. The issue of the morality of suicide (assisted) in a suffering old person was discussed and agreed upon by some members in the class. It was suggested that developing a philosophy of aging with recognition that “old-old-age” might be a difficult time could possibly help one’s attitude toward a better mental attitude.

The development of the brain on aging was discussed briefly (good news here) and the general approach of the geriatric psychiatrist, Gene Cohen, who will be discussed next session.
Assignments: Since next week is our final class please consider some aspects of “An Authentic Life: Philosophies of Aging” that could benefit from class discussion.

Elements of a Philosophy of Aging

1. Be conscious of the "life stage" you’re at and don’t "fall back."
2. Take time to reflect on your life so far.
3. Increase the time dedicated to solitude and reflection.
4. Be more selective in your choice of relationships.
5. Pursue wisdom deliberately relating to one or the models we presented.
6. Drop any former "persona" that made more appropriate for earlier stages of life; seek authenticity.
7. Reach out and find ways to apply wisdom and knowledge to other individuals and groups.
8. Decrease your interest in material things and focus more on intellectual pursuits.
9. Take up any remaining hobbies, e.g., amateur theater, bridge, hiking, stamp collecting, golf, etc.
10. Try to be less at the center of attention and seek to contribute as a "helper."
11. Use a narrative or autobiography to sort out your philosophy of aging.
12. Deliberately examine what kind of activities will make you happy as an older adult.
13. Reach out to counsel and guide young people.

Elements of a Philosophy of Aging

15. Seek a more vigorous spiritual life either alone or through organized religion.
16. Rebalance your perspectives on life and the world by re-evaluating your opinions and beliefs.
17. Seek to feel more a part of the eternal universe rather than only an individual.
18. Take up a serious interest, e.g., art, music or research, to gain personal growth.
19. Take on an adventurous activity or travel as a way to pursue personal development and growth.
20. Summarize your life and assess how you’ve done and where you’ll go (grow) next.
21. Seek deliberately to find balance in your life that will make you happy.
22. Increase your attention to physical health and do your body.
23. Reach out to build new relationships by involving yourself in group activities or by other means.
24. Strike out to satisfy a major goal, e.g., publish a book, write poetry, sell your crafts, etc.
25. Dedicate yourself to helping others, e.g., through involvement in a non-profit or church.
Epicurus: Living the Good Life

- A license for debauchery and dissolution: a sure-fire road to Hell?
- No such thing proposed
- Happiness found in peace and moderation
- The pleasures of life are to be enjoyed – food, drink, sex, gifts of the earth – seek pleasure and avoid pain

...BUT...

- Self-indulgence is a recipe for discontent
- Old age is the pinnacle of life
- Friendship is of high value: “...Go dancing around the world to wake us up to happiness...”
- There can be no punishment after death, nor should there be any regrets of a life
- The virtues are the only means to happiness
- A life free of mental anxiety, open to enjoyment of pleasures is equal to that of the gods

The important arguments in the Senecate (Essay on Aging) against:

- Old age takes us away from active work!
- Old age weakens the body and makes it useless!
- Old age deprives us of nearly all pleasures!
- Death is to be hated in old age!

A Stoic view drawing a new perspective for aging:

- Universal dignity for all humans regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, age, or class.
- The care of oneself.
- The value of friendship and community.
- The accountability of wisdom.
- Living the good life through self-knowledge.
Some Facts About the Brain

- The brain cannot grow new brain cells.
- Older adults can't learn as well as young people.
- Connections between neurons are relatively fixed throughout life.
- Intelligence is a matter of how many neurons you have and how fast they work.

Research focused on age-related problems.

Some Recently Discovered Facts About the Brain

- The brain is continually re-sculpting itself.
- New brain cells do form throughout life.
- The brain's emotional circuitry matures and becomes more balanced with age.
- The brain's two hemispheres are more equally used by older adults.
- Healthy older brains are often as good as or better young brains for a variety of tasks.

Some Brain Science References

- Marian Diamond, UC Berkeley (Dendritic growth age independent) – 1965
- Elizabeth Gould, Princeton University (Growth of new neurons) – 1995
- Gerd Kemperman, Humboldt University (Neurogenesis in the aging brain) – 2000
- Fred Gage, Salk Institute (Neurogenesis in the aging brain) – 2010
- Martha Carr, UC Santa Cruz (Dendritic maturation and synapse formation in older people) – 2013
- Roberta Cabeza, Duke University (Reorganization of neural networks in older adults) – 2014

Summary Conclusion: In a more stimulating environment, the brain of the older adult can develop brain mass by increased neuron growth.
Gene Cohen’s Developmental Stages of Maturity

I. MID-LIFE REEVALUATION (40-70)  
   SERIOUS QUESTIONS OF MY LIFE
   Where have I been? Where am I now?
   Where am I going?

II. LIBERATION (70-80)  
    FREE SELF FROM EARLIER LIMITATIONS
    Desire to innovate: "If not now, when?"

III. SUMMING UP (late 60's-80's)  
     TIME OF REVIEW AND RECAPITULATION
     Giving back to family; Reaching out; Friendship

IV. ENCORE (Continuing)  
   RENAISSANCE
   Desire to grow and remain vital, shift to creativity
   and increased social engagement