

Greg Bognar and Axel Gosseries (eds.): Ageing without ageism? Conceptual puzzles and policy proposals

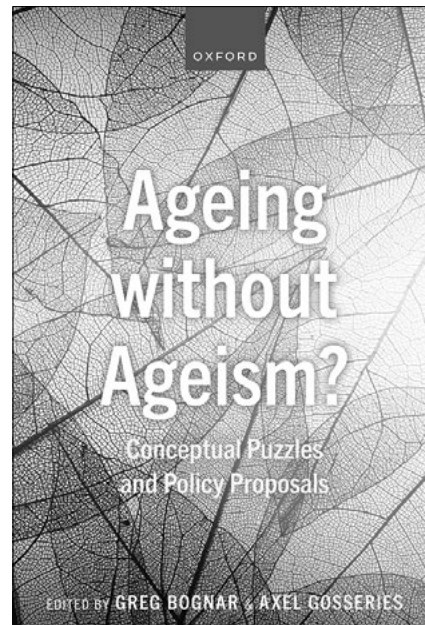
Reviewed by Grace Clover

In recent years, academic and public debates from parliamentary discussions to social media have increasingly analysed society through the lens of markers of identity such as race, gender, and disability. ‘Age’, however, remains comparatively neglected, a gap the editors of this anthology seek to address in this volume. Furthermore, they are enticed by the unprecedented demographic ageing of many populations worldwide, which will challenge health and social-care systems, pensions, labour markets, and social and political institutions.

This anthology continues the work of Axel Gosseries, research professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, on intergenerational and climate justice and institutional design, and Greg Bognar, professor of practical philosophy at Stockholm University, on public health ethics and moral relativism. Building on earlier contributions by Norman Daniels, Dennis McKerlie, and Juliana Bidadanure on age-group justice, it combines philosophical reflection with empirical analysis and policy proposals, offering a multidisciplinary discussion of intergenerational ethics and institutional design.

In addition to the two editors, 19 authors from disciplines ranging from philosophy to law and future studies have contributed to this volume. The first eight chapters discuss the philosophical assumptions underlying theories of age-group justice. A few key questions emerge: Does age discrimination differ from other forms of discrimination? Is paternalism defensible? Is complete lives egalitarianism sufficient? Should we compensate those who die young for their short longevity? The remaining ten chapters offer policy proposals informed by the questions posed in part one. Three chapters focus on voting rights and political engagement, four on health and welfare systems, and three on age-sensitive taxation. In the following, most of the chapters are quickly summarised (these summaries are grouped by topic, rather than by their order in the volume).

In chapter 1, 2, and 6 the authors pose two key conceptual questions: Does age-based discrimination differ from other kinds of discrimination? And is ‘age’ special? In chapter 1, Katharina Berndt Rasmussen finds there is a *prima facie* reason against group discrimination such as age discrimination, but the ‘specialness’ of age gives good reasons to suggest that age-based treatment is acceptable or even advisable in some contexts. In chapter 2, Kasper Lipper-Rasmussen considers whether the ‘mere-difference view’ of the disadvantages of which come with disability can be applied to ageing. In chapter 6, Axel Gosseries returns to these



questions, considering whether ‘entire life egalitarianism’ can account for the normative specialness of age. He introduces us to the kind of questions that egalitarians must ask (Equality among whom? Equality of what? Equality at a snapshot or across an entire life?).

Chapters 3 and 12 both consider the ethics of paternalism. In chapter 3, Viki Pedersen defends age-differentiated paternalism, exploring both ‘competency’ and ‘the good promoted’ justifications. She concludes that “justification of paternalism generally weakens as the people interfered with advance in age”, as older people have a shorter life expectancy and a greater understanding of their own preferences (50). Chapter 12 returns to the topic of paternalism, as Francesca Minerva argues against the paternalistic arguments used to prevent older women from accessing

assistive reproductive technologies.

Chapters 4, 5, 7 and 11 all engage with the ethical considerations underpinning the allocation of (scarce) welfare resources. In chapter 4, Matthew Adler considers how three policy-assessment frameworks value risk reduction in light of age, using the COVID-19 vaccination roll-out as an example. In chapter 5, Paul Bou-Habib focuses on welfare states spending disproportionately on the young and the very old. While this is necessary in some cases, he notes that some egalitarians (and utilitarians) struggle to justify very high-cost, low-value care, such as for patients with Alzheimer’s disease. Bou-Habib uses Gosseries’ principle of ‘time specific sufficiency’ and Bidadanure’s account of relational egalitarianism as a starting point for justifying a focus on hardship in a specific segment of one’s life (as opposed to focusing exclusively on the complete lives view). He offers three considerations to complete the justification.

In chapter 7, Simon Birnbaum and Kenneth Nelson seek to prove their hypothesis that social welfare programmes tend to achieve their “redistributive objectives far more effectively when they are embedded in a wider, universalist system of belief” (94). Beginning with Daniels’ ‘prudential lifespan approach’ and applying it to empirical data from 17 countries, the authors demonstrate that welfare states which provide equal levels of income replacement for the risks associated with different life stages are associated with higher levels of public trust in spending, lower levels of poverty across all age groups, and improved welfare. They conclude that, paradoxically, the more we target income replacement to the risks associated with one specific age group, the less we improve the living conditions for that group overall.

Finally, in chapter 11, Greg Bogнар uses the example of resource rationing during the COVID-19 pandemic to explore using age as a criterium in a 'triage' process. While traditionally triage procedures only consider the chance of the patient's short-term survival when allocating medical resources, Bogнар argues for using the patient's remaining life expectancy as a key criterium. This leads us to the question whether we should also consider the 'quality' of life preserved – but this is beyond the scope of Bogнар's study. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 all focus on voting and political engagement. In chapter 8, Anca Gheaus compares different interpretations of childhood and their implications for youth enfranchisement proposals. Gheaus notes that most arguments for or against enfranchising adolescents and (older) children focus on the assumption that children have insufficient agential powers, competency, or political awareness to vote. She proposes instead an account which finds a unique value in childhood which is enriching to one's overall wellbeing. Accordingly, we may have reason to 'protect' younger people from the responsibility of voting, even if they do possess the relevant capacities.

In chapter 9, Alexandru Volacu considers proposals for voting 'ceilings', the controversial counterpart to minimum age thresholds. To explore their tenability, Volacu employs an analogical argument which compares driving rights for older people with voting rights. He focuses on the question whether older people exercise their voting rights in "a manner which would lead to more harmful outcomes for others" (132), as is assumed with driving. On balance, however, he rejects the analogy, as the skills required for voting and driving are very different. Moreover, there is a high moral cost to denying voting rights to senior citizens, as it would deny a key means of ensuring their own welfare and autonomy.

Concluding the section on voting and political power, in chapter 10 Tyler John considers the issue of 'short-termism' in political systems, which leads to the neglect of long-term issues such as disaster preparation, climate change, and preventative healthcare. John argues against a commonly held belief that young people are more likely to vote for long-term policies than old people, an argument often given as a reason to lower the voting age or weight voting towards young people. Instead, he proposes a forward-looking, retrospectively rewarded, citizen's assembly as a means of harnessing young people's political energy to the benefit of future generations.

Chapter 13 focuses on education. In this chapter, Andrée-Anne Cormier and Harry Brighouse argue for the abolishment of compulsory schooling past the age of 16. This would be accompanied by the introduction of an 'education resource account (ERA)' for those who leave school at 16 or 17 without graduating, giving them a right to ear-marked funding to complete schooling or work training later in life.

In chapter 14, Vincent Vandenberg considers arguments for using age-differentiated retirement policies to equalise health outcomes at the time of retirement across socio-demographic groups and European countries. He finds that this would require extreme differentiation, seeing low-educated women in Hungary retiring at 40 and well-educated men in the Netherlands retiring at almost 83. This system would also still allow a large amount of over and under compensation, and as such, is rejected by the author.

Chapter 15 moves from health systems to housing. Building upon the idea that people have a morally significant interest in personal autonomy, the age-friendly urban planning initiative seeks to enable elderly people to age well 'in place' by making their built and social environment more accessible. However, Kim Angell

suggests that the needs of the young may well outstrip those of the elderly in cases of scarcity. Young people today struggle disproportionately compared with previous cohorts to buy property. Angell argues that we should instead pursue planning initiatives which create favourable conditions for all generations (e.g. intergenerational housing models which offer young people discounted rent to provide companionship and care for the elderly).

Chapters 16, 17 and 18 all consider age-differentiated tax proposals. In chapter 16, Daniel Halliday elaborates further on the idea that young people today have poorer prospects on the housing market compared with older cohorts at the same age, while at the same time funding services disproportionately consumed by the elderly. He proposes an age-based delayed housing wealth tax which would shift the tax burden onto (wealthy) homeowners past a specific age threshold, whilst giving them a tax incentive to downsize and free up housing for young people.

In chapter 17, Vincent Valente discusses proposals for cumulative income taxation and age-differentiated taxation, weighing up which policy would benefit both the young and the elderly at the expense of the middle-aged. Valente is particularly concerned about maximising the benefits for those who are resource-poor and those who are longevity poor (e.g. those who die young); two groups whose interests are often in tension with one another.

Concluding the section on tax, in chapter 18 Pierre Pestieau and Gregory Ponthier defend an age-differentiated tax on bequests, with tax rates increasing with the age of the deceased. The authors hope to posthumously compensate those who die prematurely by allowing their 'accidental savings' (that is, unused savings for later life such as pensions) to be passed onto their offspring.

Overall, the volume is extremely successful in fulfilling the editors' aim to "bridge the distance between academia and public life by putting into dialogue fresh philosophical analyses and new specific policy proposals" (1). Although the editors conclude that a "unified view of the normative relevance of age" is likely not possible, one finishes the anthology convinced of the relevance of using age and age-differentiated policy for a range of purposes, from eliminating socio-economic and welfare inequalities to promoting long-termism. The anthology is of its time, as the authors have clearly learnt from recent challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Viewed critically, one should note that the focus on demographic ageing does necessarily limit the anthology's global scope to those countries with ageing populations. While an anthology cannot cover every geographic location, the volume neglects to comment upon countries with very young populations which nonetheless demonstrate ageist and gerontocratic tendencies.

Some readers may also be unconvinced by the frequent focus on compensating those who die prematurely for their short longevity. One might argue that dying young is a misfortune, and sometimes the result of one's chosen lifestyle, but not an injustice unless its due to a social structure or policy which unnecessarily exposed them to risk.

These criticisms aside, the anthology is extremely illuminating and accessible, building upon and improving familiar philosophical questions to offer concrete, novel and innovative policy proposals. As the editors suggest, it encourages the reader and the policy maker alike to reflect upon what kind of society is desirable, not just what is feasible.

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