

De SENECTUTE

Cicero and Emerson on Old Age

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In 1950, my Latin teacher, Miss Fay, had me read Cicero's essay on old age, *De Senectute*, and then Emerson's essay on the same subject. Both were written at about age 60, which was also about Miss Fay's age at that time. She believed that Emerson plagiarized Cicero, and for the last 64 years I've had lingering reservations about the Sage of Concord. So it was time to reread both essays and make up my own mind. In the process, I rediscovered two remarkable men who were alike in many respects, although living 1900 years apart. Both spent much of their active lives as orators and essay writers, and they developed personal philosophies with many similarities. What follows are biographical notes and summaries of the two essays, from which I offer several excerpts. Both essays are about men, and all referenced authorities are male. Another hundred years beyond Emerson would be needed to challenge that custom.

The English translation of Cicero is by Falconer in 1923, as I've somehow forgotten about 95% of the Latin vocabulary. I'm particularly interested in the authors' thoughts on the end of life for, as Montaigne, another philosopher on the short list of great essayists, wrote around 1575, "To Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die."

Cicero

Marcus Tullius Cicero lived from 106 BCE until 43 BCE, when he was beheaded by two of Mark Antony's thugs as an enemy of the state. *De Senectute* was written in 45 BCE, along with many other essays in a three year period following the death of his beloved daughter after childbirth. His last name or cognomen, Cicero, in the Roman style, means chickpea - perhaps a product grown on his ancestral farms.

He was an orator, scholar, philosopher, and historian who introduced Greek philosophy to Rome. He was an admirer of Pythagoras and the Stoics.

However, Cicero believed his political career was his most important achievement. He was elected Consul of Rome in 63 BCE, the highest office in the Republic, and held many other offices, both political and military, in his life. The Roman Republic lasted from 509 BCE until 40 BCE when Octavian, later known as Augustus, became Emperor. So Cicero's life spanned the last 60 years of the Republic, a time of much civil unrest and war. Throughout these years, he was a strong supporter of the Republic, which caused him to go into exile at least twice.

Scholars give Cicero major credit for improving Latin from a utilitarian language into one that could express complex and abstract thoughts. He was also a very busy letter writer. His letters were rediscovered by Petrarch in the 14th century, an event some call the beginning of the European Renaissance.

Here's a question for you trivia lovers. The first book printed on Gutenberg's printing press was the Bible. What was the second? Answer: *De Officiis* by Cicero, that is "On duties" or "On Obligations". That was written shortly after *De Senectute*.

In today's terms, he could be known for religious toleration and humanist leanings. In the 18th century, Adams and Jefferson, among many others, praised him for concepts of natural law, public rights, common sense, and liberty. On the other hand, like his fellow patricians, he kept slaves, disliked the poor, and opposed popular representation and land reform.

Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson lived from 1803 to 1882. As a young man, he adopted a great-grandfather's family name, Waldo, as his preferred first name. His family had modest means; his father was a Unitarian minister. Emerson also was a minister for a short time after graduation, but he quit ministry in 1832 because he could not agree with Christian doctrines. In fact, he was invited to give the famous Harvard Divinity School address in 1838, where he shocked the assemblage by rejecting the divinity of Jesus and the biblical miracles. He was not invited to speak there again for 30 years.

He made his living for 30 years by giving over 1500 lectures across the United States, many of which became essays. Like Cicero, he also wrote many poems.

He formulated the concept of transcendentalism in the essay "Nature" in 1836 and wrote "The American Scholar" in 1837. He became a strong abolitionist by the mid 1840's, but not earlier. He also grew slowly to appreciate Lincoln and gave a speech in Washington in 1862 calling for emancipation.

He supported Bronson Alcott's utopian community "Fruitlands" and became mentor and a close friend of Thoreau. In 1836 he started the Transcendental Club, which allowed women to join in 1837. Like his views on abolition, he seemed to evolve on women's rights. He helped start the magazine "The Dial" in 1840. Soon after, Margaret Fuller was appointed editor. He published an essay collection in 1841 which included "Self Reliance" which led to considerable international fame. He grew interested in writing about Indian philosophy in the mid 1840's, which led to his essay on "The Over-soul".

He was able to travel to Europe where he had opportunities to meet Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Carlyle, in particular, became a long-time friend. In Paris, Emerson had a strong reaction to a public exhibit on the classification of plants, which influenced his views on natural law. His beliefs about religion might be simplified as all things are connected to God, so all things are divine. Therefore, you do not need revelation, but can experience truth from nature.

Around 1871, when he was 68, Emerson started losing memory and was diagnosed with Aphasia. A few years later, he ceased all public appearances.

Cicero's Essay

He sets the stage, as it were:

Old age is so vexatious to most old men that they declare it to be a load heavier than Etna... to those who have not the means within themselves of a virtuous and happy life every age is burdensome.... I follow nature as the best of guides and obey her as a god; and since she has fitly planned the other acts of life's drama, it is not likely that she has neglected the final act as if she were a careless playwright.

Cicero discusses four reasons old age appears to be unhappy. First, we must withdraw from active pursuits.

Second, it makes the body weaker.

Life's race-course is fixed. Nature has only a single path and that path is run but once, and to each stage of existence has been allotted its own appropriate quality; so that the weakness of childhood, the impetuosity of youth, the seriousness of middle life, the maturity of old age – each bears some of nature's fruit, which must be garnered in its own season.

Our duty is to resist old age, to compensate for its defects by a watchful care.... to adopt a regimen of health, to practice moderate exercise, to take just enough of food and drink to restore our health and not to overburden it... Much greater care is due to the mind and soul for like lamps, they too grow dim with time unless we keep them supplied with oil.

Third, it deprives us of almost all physical pleasures.

Youth's most vicious fault! Carnal pleasure hinders deliberation, is at war with reason, blindfolds the eyes of the mind... and has no fellowship with virtue.

He gives many examples of his preference for fellowship and intellectual pursuits over pleasure seeking. Then he devotes a long section to his love of farming, about which he

wrote an entire book. He uses the example of farming to underline the value of knowledge that can be used to teach others.

The crowning glory of old age is influence. He remarks that old age is respected more in certain societies than others. For example, in Sparta, unlike Athens, when an old man enters an auditorium, those present all rise.

And, his comments on greed: *Some old men are morose, troubled, fretful, and hard to please. Some are misers. These are faults of character, not of age. As it is not every wine, so it is not every disposition that grows sour with age. ... As for avariciousness in the old, what purpose it can serve I do not understand. For can anything be more absurd in the traveler than to increase his luggage as he nears the journey's end?*

Finally, his point number four: Old age is not far removed from death. Here are some excerpts.

Death is negligible, if it utterly annihilates the soul, or even desirable if it conducts the soul to some place where it is to live forever. Surely no other alternative can be found. What then shall I fear if after death I am destined to be either not unhappy or happy?

The soul is celestial, brought down from its most exalted home and buried, as it were, in earth, a place uncongenial to its divine and eternal nature. But I believe that the immortal gods implanted souls in human bodies so as to have beings who would care for the earth and who, while contemplating the celestial order, would imitate it in the moderation and consistency of their lives.

Pythagoras and his disciples never doubted that our souls were emanations of the Universal Divine Mind. This is what I believe – since such is the lightning-like rapidity of the soul, such as its wonderful memory of things that are past, such as its ability to forecast the future, such its mastery of many arts, sciences, and inventions, that its nature, which encompasses all these things, cannot be mortal; and since in its nature the soul is of one substance and has nothing whatever mingled with it unlike or dissimilar to itself, it cannot be divided, and if it cannot be divided it cannot perish... This, in substance, is Plato's teaching.

And Cicero's last point: *My old age sits light upon me, and not only is not burdensome, but is even happy. And if I err in my belief that the souls of men are immortal, I gladly err, nor do I wish this error which gives me pleasure to be wrested from me while I live. But if when dead I am going to be without sensation (as some petty philosophers think), then I have no fear that these seers, when they are dead, will have the laugh on me! Again, if we are not going to be immortal, nevertheless, it is desirable for a man to be blotted out at his proper time. For as nature has marked the bounds of everything else, so she has marked the bounds of life. Moreover, old age is the final scene, as it were, in life's drama, from which we ought to escape when it grows wearisome and, certainly, when we have had our fill.*

Emerson's Essay

Emerson starts by paying respect to Cicero, and then, unlike Cicero, he states:

The essence of age is intellect, even in the young. Wherever there is power, there is age. One cannot tell from outward appearances. And, Popular judgments (of age) are unfavorable. Few envy the consideration enjoyed by the oldest inhabitant. We do not count a man's years, until he has nothing else to count.

But he tends to agree with Cicero in: *We know the value of experience. Life and art are cumulative; and he who has accomplished something in any department alone deserves to be heard on that subject.*

And, (There is) a universal prayer for long life, which is the verdict of nature, and justified by all history. Although we have examples of grand works by young men, these are rare exceptions. Nature, in the main, vindicates her law. Skill to do comes of doing; knowledge comes by eyes always open and working hands, and there is no knowledge that is not power. He gives many examples of long lives of great men.

Then Emerson lists four advantages of old age.

1. The chief evil of life is taken away in removing the grounds for fear.

It were strange, if a man should turn his sixtieth year without a feeling of immense relief from the number of dangers he has escaped.

He reflects on changes over a lifetime: *The passions have answered their purpose: that slight, but dread overweight, with which, in each instance, Nature secures the execution of her aim, drops off. To keep man in the planet, she impresses the terror of death. To perfect the commissariat, she implants in each a little rapacity to get the supply, and a little oversupply, of his wants. To ensure the existence of the race, she reinforces the sexual instinct, at the risk of disorder, grief, and pain. To secure strength, she plants cruel hunger and thirst, which so easily overdo their office, and invite disease. But these temporary stays and shifts for the protection of the young animal are shed as fast as they can be replaced by nobler resources..... Later, the interiors of mind and heart open, and supply grander motives..... Then, one mischief at a time, this riotous, time -destroying crew disappear.*

2. A success, more or less, signifies nothing:

Little by little, (age) has amassed such a fund of merit that it can very well afford to go on its credit when it will.... Everyone is sensible of this cumulative advantage in living. All the good days behind him are sponsors who speak for him when he is silent, pay for him when he has no money, introduce him where he has no letters, and work for him when he sleeps.

3. Age has found expression.

Youth suffers not only from ungratified desires, but from powers untried, and from a picture in his mind of a career which has, as yet, no outward reality. He is tormented with the want of correspondence between things and thoughts..... He wants friends, employment, knowledge, power, house and land, wife and children, honor and fame; he has religious wants, aesthetic wants, domestic, civil, humane wants. One by one, day after day, he learns to coin his wishes into facts. He has his calling, homestead, social connection, and personal power, and thus, at the end of fifty years, his soul is appeased by seeing some sort of correspondence between his wish and his possession.

4. Age sets its house in order, and finishes its works, which to every artist is a supreme pleasure.

Youth has an excess of sensibility, to which every object glitters and attracts. We leave one pursuit for another, and the young man's year is a heap of beginnings. At the end of a twelvemonth, he has nothing to show for it, not one completed work. But the time is not lost.

America is the country of young men, and too full of work hitherto for leisure and tranquility; yet we have had robust centenarians, and examples of dignity and wisdom.

At this point Emerson recounts an interview he had with John Adams on the day his son, John Quincy Adams, was elected President. Adams was 89 and Emerson was 23. Adams remarked that all the Presidents up to that time were about 58 when elected: Washington, himself (Adams), Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and now, John Quincy Adams.

Finally: When life has been well spent, age is a loss of what it can well spare – muscular strength, organic instincts, gross bulk, and works that belong to these. But the central wisdom, which was old in infancy, is young in fourscore years, and, dropping off obstructions, leaves in happy subjects the mind purified and wise... I have heard that whoever loves is in no condition old.

Afterthoughts

Emerson says very little about death itself in this essay, but we know much about his thinking from other writings, especially *The Over-soul* and other pieces on transcendentalism. I find these ideas to relate very closely to Cicero's remarks on the "Universal Divine Mind", which he attributed to Plato's teachings. The general concept of an interconnection of souls is not only a very old idea, but also a modern one. It fits well with current findings and theories about quantum entanglement and a unified information field. We might use a modern phrase to describe the two men, "spiritual but not religious". It would not be far off.

Cicero says the crowning glory of old age is influence, by which he means experience and wisdom gained from life's pursuits, which can be applied to current issues. Emerson says the essence of age is intellect. I take that to mean wisdom as opposed to accumulation of things and honors. Personally, I believe the essence of age is a growth in understanding the nature of things. This is the sum total of all we experience and contemplate, much like gradually assembling a jigsaw puzzle of life, one that is well over 1000 pieces, one we never quite finish.

Are they similar? Both led public lives despite considerable personal losses. Both were accomplished orators and writers of both poetry and essays. Both had humanist tendencies in the context of their very different societies. Both were fascinated with botany and agriculture, interests that played a significant role in their philosophies.

As to lesser similarities, both were twice married, and both made clear their respect for authorities of earlier ages.

A small but interesting question may occur to the listener: when is age "old age"? Both our authors felt it was appropriate to write of old age at 60, and Emerson recorded the remark of John Adams that all Presidents up to that day were about 58 when elected, presumably the last achievement of their lives. Our perspective has changed in the last generation or two, mostly through progress in health care. We now see serious suggestions about raising the start of retirement income to 70 or more. It is not likely that future essays on old age will be written at age 60.

Finally, with all due respect to Miss Fay, I do not see any plagiarism in Emerson's work. Instead, I am delighted to get reacquainted with these two masters of thinking and writing.