

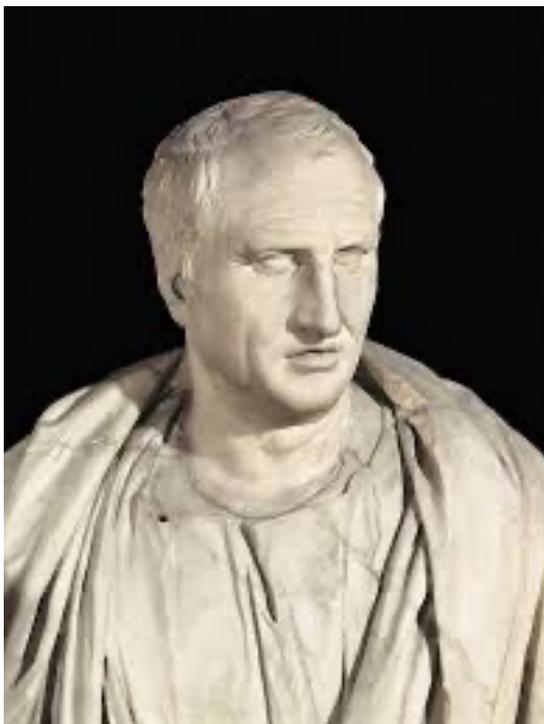
# ON OLD AGE: A RELATIONAL ACCOUNT OF MEANING AND AGENCY IN LATER LIFE

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## Overview

- Introduction
- Defining Later Life
- A Relational Account of Meaning and Agency in Later Life





# Defining Later Life

## Defining Later Life

- There are different periods or stages in the course of a typical human life which have their own unique moral and existential significance.
- These stages are defined by a range of factors, including raw biological facts about aging as well as a range of social and cultural factors that condition the roles that people occupy.
- The terminology surrounding life stages and related concepts like “life course” and “life cycle” is notoriously ambiguous across the social sciences (Alwin 2012). But there is a common commitment across frameworks to distinguishing stages of human life and identifying the unique biological, economic, social and cultural factors that characterize these distinct stages.



## Social variation in threshold for ‘older persons’

- There is remarkable sociological variation to how societies conceive of what it means to be old (Jecker 2022, 16).
- The United Nations variously defines older persons as those aged over 60 or 65 (United Nations 2019), while some European Union authorities fix the starting age for this category at 65 (Eurostat 2019).
- Discussions of older age are often indexed to retirement age and pension eligibility, the threshold for which in developed countries is somewhere between 60 - 67 years of age.



Australian Government  
Department of Social Services

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### Older Australians

There are a range of supports available to help you when you retire.

## Later life as a continuum

- We should, however, distinguish different subgroups of people who may be considered old but whose circumstances and life experiences differ dramatically.
- People who are in their 60s and still active have a very different life experience from people who have entered their 80s and 90s and whose activity may be significantly reduced.
- Some gerontologists conceive of old as a spectral concept ranging from the young old (55-64), mid old (65-74), old old (75-84), and oldest old ( $\geq 85$ ) (Byers et al 2010).



## Later life as distinct from the ‘end of life’

- Even at the upper echelons of later life, however, we must avoid collapsing “old age” into the end-of-life. The category of end of life is itself quite vague and culturally variable.
- Carr and Juth (2019, 516) note that *“the end of life differs from other life course stages in that scholars and practitioners have not established a consensus definition nor a definitive demarcation of when this stage starts”*.
- **The end of life is characterized by a predominant feature of a close and rapidly advancing time horizon to one’s life and the presence of chronic or terminal illness.**



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**ANNUAL REVIEW OF SOCIOLOGY**, Volume 45, 2019

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### Well-Being at the End of Life

[Deborah Carr](#)<sup>1</sup>, and [Elizabeth A. Luth](#)<sup>2</sup>

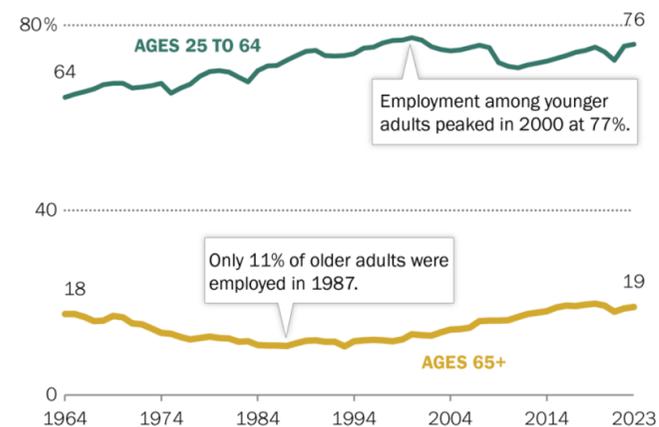
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## Later life as distinct from the ‘end of life’

- Later life, in contrast, can be a time of relative vitality and highly meaningful personal, social, and professional activity.
- The blurring of later life with a grim end of life discourse overlooks the fact that, for example, some 19% of adults aged 65 and older in the United States are still employed, the majority of whom are in full time employment (Pew Research Center 2023). The other 80% may be vigorously pursuing post-retirement life projects, caring for grandchildren, or volunteering in the community.

### Since the early 1990s, a rising share of older Americans are working

% of population who are employed



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (IPUMS).

“Older Workers Are Growing in Numbers and Earning Higher Wages”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## I want to resist this

- *“...living too long is also a loss. It renders many of us, if not disabled, then faltering and declining, a state that may not be worse than death but is nonetheless deprived. It robs us of our creativity and ability to contribute to work, society, the world”.*
- — Ezekiel Emanuel
- This is a massive generalisation.

»st Newsletters

*The Atlantic*

### WHY I HOPE TO DIE AT 75

An argument that society and families—and you—will be better off if nature takes its course swiftly and promptly

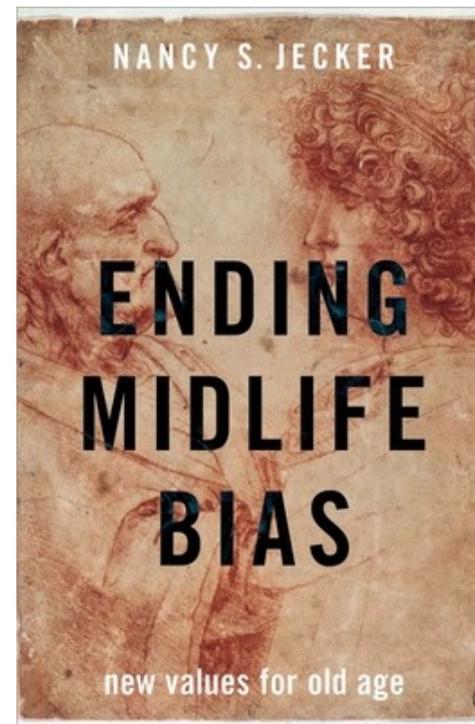
By Ezekiel J. Emanuel

OCTOBER 2014 ISSUE

SHARE  SAVE 

## And also this

- *“...[A]ging shifts the values we hold highest. Autonomy and self-determination may once have taken center stage, when, as young adults, we had to figure out our path and chart a plan for our lives. While these concerns do not go away, they are no longer focal. Instead, in old age we become more focused on maintaining human dignity because we are more at risk of losing basic human capabilities.”*
- It seems as if Jecker is missing a whole life stage in her argument.





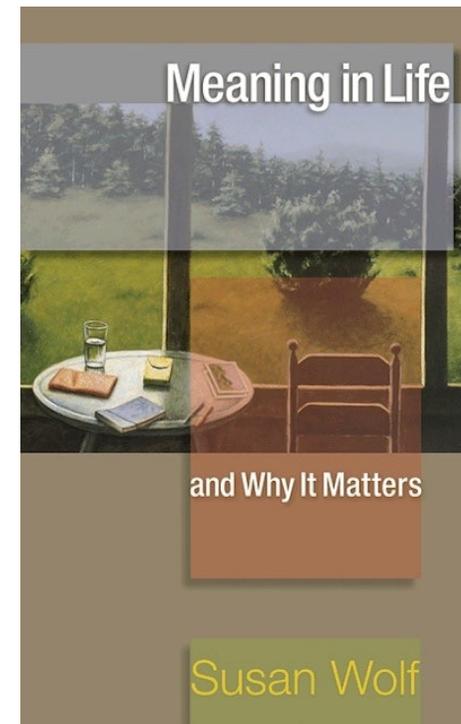
# Agency and Meaning in Later Life

## Thesis

- The remainder of this presentation will illustrate how **having agency to realise meaning** is vital to flourishing in later life, and how when this is undermined, a person's wellbeing greatly diminishes.
- But agency must be supported through relationships and social policy if older people are to be able to create and sustain meaning.
- With this in view, we ought to recognise the heightened **relational dimension of agency in later life** and seek to promote later life agency through relationships and social policy.

## Meaning = Objective Value + Subjective Valuing

- By meaning, we have in mind that which is **objectively valuable** and **subjectively valued**.
- “[A] person’s life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some thing or things, only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged, or . . . if she loves something. Even a person who is so engaged, however, will not live a meaningful life if the objects or activities with which she is so occupied are worthless”. (Susan Wolf)
- **E.g.:** Goldfish example.



## Agency = the Capacity to Realise Meaning in Life

- By agency, we have in mind the capability that one has, based on internal and external factors, to realise meaning in life.
- Agency, on this account, is being able to realise that which has objective value and is subjectively engaging.
- Thus, we might say that an older person who values lifelong education has agency to realise this source of meaning if they are still lucid and have a university nearby with free courses for mature age students.
- Someone who is suffering from cognitive decline, however, or who lives in an isolated location, or cannot afford education, does not have agency to realise this potential source of meaning in their life.

**Our agency to realise meaning is threatened in various ways  
in later life**

## Challenges to Agency and Meaning in Later Life: Health

- The very nature of aging and later life – where health risks are, for example, more common – make community conditions especially important for maintenance of meaning, purpose, and vital engagement. That is to say, the potential for flourishing in later life is particularly dependent on one's social condition and relationships especially when someone has significant health problems.
- Consider Lena: At 70, Lena pictured herself joining community choirs and volunteering. But early signs of hearing loss make group settings overwhelming. She smiles and nods through conversations, missing half of what's said. Embarrassed, she starts turning down invitations. Her days grow quieter, not by choice but by retreat. She still craves connection — but the effort feels exhausting.

## Challenges to Agency and Meaning in Later Life: Social factors

- But other social factors can be just as limiting of agency:
  - Loneliness
  - Ageist bias when attempting to remain in or (re)enter workforce or volunteer
  - Bereavement or sickness of a partner
  - Relocation
  - Relationship breakdown
- A 'later life crisis' might be characterised as an event where several of these factors (and also perhaps personal health issues) combine to create not just stress in an older person's life but a global loss of meaning.

J Adult Dev (2015) 22:38–49  
DOI 10.1007/s10804-014-9199-5

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### **Later-Life Crisis: Towards a Holistic Model**

**Oliver C. Robinson · Alexander J. Stell**

## The ‘Later Life Crisis’

- Perhaps the most common feature of a later life crisis is a sense of purposelessness when retiring from full time work.
- A 2015 qualitative study sought to explore later life crises by interviewing 21 older adults in the UK who say themselves as having experienced a recent life crisis episode.
- One respondent noted that **“there are things you lose”** when retiring from full time work, **“and what you do lose are your routines, your friends, those sort of things. And that’s not good”**.
- Another interviewee in the same study noted that **“It was a strange time for me because I’ve always been busy, I’ve always had a project on the go, and now I was able to sort of sit back, go down to the allotment, enjoy doing a bit of weeding”**.

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### **Later-Life Crisis: Towards a Holistic Model**

**Oliver C. Robinson · Alexander J. Stell**

## Mental health and existential dimensions of later life

- “Got miserable, upset, was waking up at four in the morning and felt totally got at”.
- “Yes, I felt down a lot of the time, yes. It’s difficult to stay optimistic when something like that is going on”.
- “I’ve just had five fairly miserable years”.
- “I couldn’t go out so much and then loneliness started creeping in and I started getting depressed”.
- “I think rather than ‘lonely’ its lack of company, any company, never mind a kindred spirit. Yes, so actually isolated? It’s the isolation that’s so awful”.
- “It also makes you recognise your own mortality a bit more. The other worry I had was what if anything happened to me, if I become ill or have an accident, who would look after him?”.



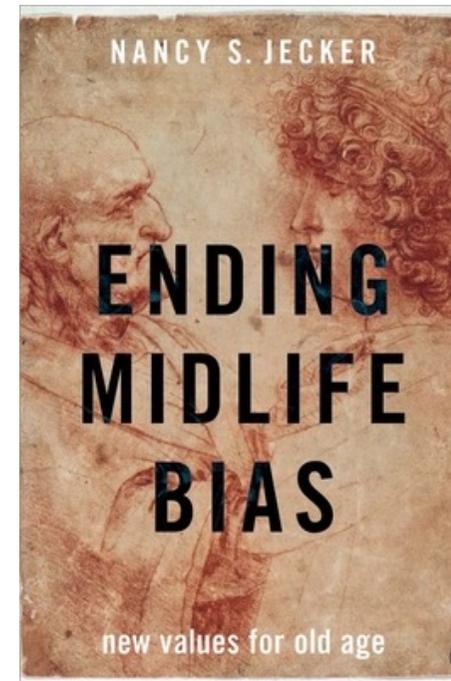
## Helping older members of the community find and sustain meaning through increasing agency

- Meaning also has a social dimension in which communities provide older members of the community with both *security* and *opportunities* – security, so that the structures of their life are not radically threatened, but also opportunities so that older people can actively grapple with challenges arising in their lives in such a way that they find new sources of meaning and engagement.
- We mustn't ignore the role of family and friends. Security and opportunity plausibly are created, among other things, by family and friends – one is typically more reliant on others in later life.
- Whereas the challenge in midlife is to be comfortable with the closing of doors, the challenge in later life is not to despairingly assume that all doors are closed. It is also to create the right kind of social network.



## Helping older members of the community find and sustain meaning through increasing agency

- As we have argued, we must resist impulses to elide later life with midlife on the one hand and a state defined by chronic illness or significant functional impairment on the other.
- Rather, agency seems to come to the fore as a vital value to promote in later life – the ability to do and be the sorts of things that one wants to do and be in this transitional stage, notwithstanding a more pronounced expression of the aging process.
- But we also need to create new social networks that give the opportunities for flourishing and that support and buttress individual agency at a time of vulnerability and decline.



## Increasing agency in later life: policy recommendations

- It is clear, then, that agency concerning when and how one retires (Damman and Henkens 2017), secure and flexible housing arrangements for older members of the community, sufficient pension allowances, and funding for clubs, societies, and churches that have a sizable older membership are all important features of a decent society that enables the flourishing of its older members.
- Policy makers should think about ways to give older people the opportunity to stay in the workforce or easily access volunteering opportunities.
- We should also seek to support housing flexibility for older members of the community so that they have the opportunity live close to loved ones if they wish.
- In sum, a relational agential account of agency and meaning in later life ought to inform social policy.



Australian Government

Department of Health and Aged Care



NSW Health



# Conclusion