

Jen Opoku, Aging

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Announcer 2: Okay, let's get on it.

Alex: Hello?

Jennifer: Hi.

Alex: My name's Alex Mayhew, I'm a second year PhD student here at the University of Western Ontario, also known as Western University because of rebranding.

Jennifer: Hi, I'm Jennifer Opoku. I am also a second year PhD student at the University of Western Ontario because I'm a curmudgeon and I like the original name better.

Alex: I think it's a better name.

Jennifer: I agree.

Alex: How many things are called UWO? Some apparently, oh well. Okay, so I've tried to bring us here together so that we can have a free-form conversation, see where it goes, specifically about aging and death, but mostly aging.

First of all I understand you actually have some background, studying aging. Give me the elevator pitch for what you work on?

Jennifer: Okay, so the elevator pitch is that I'm coming to aging studies primarily as a demographic for setting my research interests in sexuality and information practices. I picked aging in part because of the work that I've seen done here at Western in aging studies, and also because of previous colleagues that I know who have done some really cool work with aging.

Alex: So as a point of comparison, point of contact maybe, my encounter with aging as a field of study has often been, it's the last acceptable taboo. Well maybe not the last, but it's an acceptable type, but we don't want

to talk about aging, we don't want to acknowledge it. Old people should be not part of society as much; they no longer have anything to contribute. That's the sort of narrative that I've been exposed to and everything is either promoting that or fighting against that. That seems to be the dominant discourse I've seen either promulgated or reacted to. Has that been your experience as well?

Jennifer: Yeah, I'm going to agree with that. The terms that I come across as a scholar, actually the primary term I come across is ageism and I have friends who have described that as a fear of our future selves. The reading that I've done, certainly when they're talking more about the concept of aging really do touch on that is that we have this fear that as we get older we're going to lose everything, you know in increasing amounts.

Alex: In a certain, practical sense?

Jennifer: Sure, sure, but it's almost this hyper-fear. So I'll get really blunt. I'm studying sexuality information practices, so for men, one of those ages fears is that I'm not going to be able become erect and orgasm like I normally did when I was in my twenties. So there's this concept sort of, "Am I still performing the way that I feel I should be as a man?"

And the flip for women is, "Am I still becoming lubricated the way that I thought I was supposed to be when I'm becoming aroused?" The fears of those things not happening the way that we think we should be able to predict them, again this is just one arena, but it keeps us all really afraid.

So what I find interesting about ageism is that sometimes those things come about as a result of another medical condition we may be dealing with, hypertension or something like that. But if those things happen, say we're in our mid-thirties or our late thirties, suddenly we're telling ourselves, "I'm too old, I'm becoming old".

So there's a lot of really interesting fear, and yeah, the narrative that you speak of is definitely out there.

Alex: The common response I've encountered is something along the lines of the biological realities that humans inevitably face, if you don't die of this, you'll die of that. It means that those fears are in some sense justified.

Jennifer: I would agree with that, yeah.

Alex: My background encountering this is much more in the philosophy section of it as opposed to anything practical let's say.

Jennifer: That's cool though, yeah.

Alex: They tend to have a very pro-death perspective. The common refrain is death gives meaning to life and, as a result, aging is simultaneously put

on a pedestal of this is the natural process and it should be honoured and respected and it's also, because it's part of the same sort of cultural zeitgeist that everything is, it's still relegated to the corners. We don't really want to talk about it. It's still in the shadows.

So there's that very interesting tension that exists, from the philosophical discourses around death that I've encountered. The dominant ones, I've found a couple that are really quite interesting in that they try to make a distinction between biological aging and chronological aging.

Jennifer: Oh, okay.

Alex: So the fact that we get chronologically older, so we get more experience, we learn more things, the more experiences, that's part of our chronological age. When people say age brings wisdom, that's the sort of thing that they mean, that chronological age.

Jennifer: Okay, yeah I can see that

Alex: Whereas biological age, after a certain point, is simply the degradation of the biological machine. The fact that these two are, at present, tightly correlated is simply happenstance.

Imagine if you will that there was, hypothetically, a planet, some other place, where people stopped getting biologically older at say the age of 20 or something like that, and someone came along and said, "Hey, I've got this great idea. We're going to introduce a time-limit so that after about 60 to 80 years after you reach maturity, everything is just going to start getting slower and not work very well, and then you'll die, and you'll never exist ever again. How about we institute that?" That idea would probably not go over so well.

Jennifer: True.

Alex: So that's the sort of distinction, that specific line of thought is, what do they call themselves, trans-humanists?

Jennifer: Yes, okay.

Alex: Does that distinction between biological and chronological aging, does that make sense to you?

Jennifer: It does make sense and I would say it underlies a lot of that fear that I was talking about.

Alex: It seems that the specific concerns that you were bringing up were more about the biological than the chronological?

Jennifer: Absolutely, yeah.

- Alex: Have you, this is just me kind of guessing here, but it seems like a chronological age, additional experience, could actually make things better in a lot of ways?
- Jennifer: That's where I was thinking of going if you didn't already go there. So I do think it's interesting that we do see these two ways of thinking about aging, and I like the idea of biological and chronological, I think that's a really good way of putting it. A lot of the things that I've talked about --a lot of the fears that we have, and when I say "we" certainly I'm basing it on my bit of reading.
- Alex: Oh, that's all we can do.
- Jennifer: But those fears are very much about the biological process of aging. Despite the advances that we have in our society, and despite the . . .
- Alex: Some of them are impressive, but.
- Jennifer: Yes absolutely. You know, they're not 100% but we certainly have ways of helping to sustain someone's biological life for longer periods. The chronological aging is something that I think has reverred as long as humans have been around and when you hear people talk positively about aging, I would say that it's the chronological aging that we're talking about.
- Alex: Unless the person's confused.
- Jennifer: Unless the person's confused, sure, but then we can't seem to put the two together and recognize that for many people the two might happen in tandem.
- Alex: Most likely will at this point.
- Jennifer: Well yeah, except again, going back to the certain health conditions, someone may physically manifest what looks like biological aging, right, and doing it a much younger age, but the chronological may not be there. Or, some people may through trauma, experience greater chronological aging at a younger age, right?
- Alex: Ah, that's true.
- Jennifer: And yet biologically they're not there. As long as we create so much of a distinction between the two that we can't ever see how they could work together, as long as we keep doing that, that's as long as we're going to keep dealing with these fears of the biological taking over.
- Alex: Actually, that's kind of the direction I was going to push you in for a second there.
- Jennifer: Oh really?
- Alex: Yeah.

- Jennifer: Ha, I got there first.
- Alex: It was something along the lines of, going back to the trans-humanists again, their agenda is to break that connection between biological and chronological to make it so that as you get chronologically older, you no longer get biologically older.
- Jennifer: Okay.
- Alex: So whether or not they succeed is another matter all together. There's actually some decent evidence that substantial increases in health span are likely in the next century, but that aside, would that be a program you would support or would you prefer to just try and resolve or deal with the tension that currently exists?
- Jennifer: I can definitely see the appeal of breaking them apart, and then I think about some of the Sci-Fi radio dramas that I listen to and love, and episodes of Black Mirror.
- Alex: It is kind of a science fiction-y topic.
- Jennifer: Oh absolutely. As someone who grew up as a biological scientist, I certainly have an appreciation for taking advances that far. All that being said though, I would rather that we learn how to resolve the debate. I wouldn't have said that years ago, but I'm sitting here at 42 thinking that my body is doing things a little differently than it did 20 years ago but my mind, by and large, is a little deeper, a little calmer, a little more resolved than it was.
- Alex: The chronological versus biological divide?
- Jennifer: Yes. That chronological aging, soothe is not quite the right word, but it helps you put the biological aging into a better perspective. It's like it's just part of.
- Alex: But why not have both they would ask?
- Jennifer: Why not have both, meaning?
- Alex: Continue to have your chronological age increase and gain your experience, but still have the biological youthfulness. So the body does work the way it used to.
- Jennifer: So maybe I'm not understanding because I thought you said break them apart?
- Alex: Exactly, so the program is to make it so the biological age is whatever you want it to be.
- Jennifer: Oh, okay, all right.
- Alex: So that it's no longer the case that it is tied to chronological age.

Jennifer: Okay, well now that's interesting. That's really interesting. That's making me think of the San Junipero episode of Black Mirror.

Alex: I've not seen it, but I've heard of it.

Jennifer: It's an episode where people essentially are allowed to pick an era where they want to live.

Alex: That sounds terrifying.

Jennifer: Yeah, well you know, you get to be younger. You get to enjoy life at a younger spot.

Alex: Who would assume that if we were ever to actually implement it, we would be a little smarter than that?

Jennifer: I mean one would hope so.

Alex: Indeed.

Jennifer: My all means. It is just fiction after all, we hope. I mean I definitely see the appeal of that. I do see the appeal of that and yet, I'm not, and this may be because of older strengths of upbringing, but I don't think that there's anything wrong in letting a body die when it's time for it to die.

Alex: So I want to take a very different tact for moment here.

Jennifer: Okay.

Alex: The common refrain that I hear about those sorts of proposed interventions is that it's unnatural, it's messing with God's design a very common one. Which is a very interesting objection considering many of the people who put that forward are imagining after death an eternal life of youthfulness.

Jennifer: True.

Alex: It's an interesting leap to make. At what point does it become natural?

Jennifer: Well it's particularly interesting depending on how literally you take the bible because one could argue that when God created Adam and Eve that they were absolutely perfect.

Alex: And lived in 900 if I recall correctly?

Jennifer: They did, however, because of the introduction of sin into the world, one has to wonder the perfection with which they were created. Based on the biblical story, there's no way they could have maintained that after sin entered the world. So it's interesting that when you're talking about messing with the natural order, are they talking pre-entrance of sin in the world or post-entrance of sin in the world? Are they talking

about post-entrance of sin in the world and after the flood when the ages starting to go down according to biblical record?

So I find that very interesting because that's where I would start to try to pick that apart because I do happen to believe, very much still believe in the biblical narrative, but I think my belief is more nuanced now.

Alex: Well, experience.

Jennifer: Exactly, it's like chronological aging. And so when people talk about, you it sort of goes against the natural order of God's design, and my question starts to be, "Okay, well let's pick apart that biblical narrative even further because if we're paying attention, that natural design was already messed with. So which part of this are you objecting to?"

Alex: Well thank you for indulging my segue here.

Jennifer: You're welcome, I do find that fascinating. I do like the approach. It's funny when we originally sort of talked about this, it's like, "What is he going to do?" But the truth is, here, you're not taking me down a road that I haven't already sort of considered. While it has nothing directly to do with my research, I know that it's underlying this ageism that I talked about and the sort of discomfort that society has with --I would say our discomfort primarily is with biological aging.

Alex: I would agree with that for sure.

Jennifer: We all want to get super wise and know how to run shit.

Alex: There's an old phrase, "Everyone wants to get old. No one wants to be old".

Jennifer: Yes, exactly. The one that I'm starting to enjoy right now is, "Youth is wasted on the young".

Alex: Yes.

Jennifer: Yeah, I like that a lot, which could easily fit into some of the arguments we were talking about.

Alex: Yeah.

Jennifer: No, but I do think it's useful to think about aging in these ways because the second we start to get uncomfortable, then we can really start to interrogate for ourselves or for our research what are the assumptions that I'm operating from? And are those assumptions stable or do they need to be shifted, and I think that's always a useful venture?

Alex: Going back to my philosophy background, one of the great traditions in philosophy is humanism, basically summed up as "we're all in this boat together, so let's try and get along". Trans-humanists describe

themselves as, “While we’re all in this boat together trying to get along, let’s build better boats for everyone”.

Jennifer: I like that.

Alex: Them aside, one of the great failings of humanism in my experience is actually ageism. It has built into its practice, if not into its principles, an idea of diminishing returns of human worth as time goes on.

Jennifer: Interesting.

Alex: You ought to save young people before old people. When you phrase it that way, it’s like, “Oh yeah, that kind of makes sense”, but it still is a certain type of ageism. The challenges to conventionally practice humanism tend to be so simplistic that they’re not counter-intuitive enough to be interesting and since they’re not interesting, they don’t get much attention. So, for example, if you saw someone tied up on a railroad track would you save them?

Jennifer: I would want to, I would try.

Alex: Assuming that you can see the train, it’s going to be 10-minutes, you can easily move them out of time.

Jennifer: Then yes, I would.

Alex: No one would be called a great moral philosopher for saying such a thing, but it’s still true, right? Like that’s the right thing to do.

Jennifer: Of course.

Alex: Just like if you had the ability to cure someone’s Alzheimer’s, it would be the right thing to do.

Jennifer: Yes.

Alex: This is what’s generally called simplified humanism. So it’s humanism without all the special cases and I prefer it over trans-humanism, because trans-humanism has all these political things attached to it that I find uncomfortable.

So from that perspective, I think it’s attempting to address ageism isn’t the only problem inherent to humanism as currently practiced, but it’s definitely one of the big ones.

Jennifer: Yeah, I would agree. So I think, for me, the question then becomes what is it about humans that makes us want to perfect things and preserve things indefinitely? I think there’s probably better ways of saying what I’m trying to say, but trying to change biological aging so that the body never dies so to speak or trying to preserve a conscientiousness that it never leaves, despite whatever you believe about after death.

- Alex: That might be like, just egoism there, I'm not sure, but?
- Jennifer: Well, actually, that might be it and maybe that's at play when it comes to discussing ageism in either one of those sectors. I would certainly say that it's at play in society in general that it doesn't know a lot about philosophy, we just can't let things go but we somehow feel as if we failed if we don't preserve them in a perfect state. That's something that I find interesting. I'm not completely against it, don't get me wrong, but I find that interesting that we can't let those things go.
- Alex: It is interesting. I'm trying to imagine a world in which we have successfully decoupled chronological from biological aging?
- Jennifer: That would be interesting.
- Alex: So you'd have your 150 year old chronologically, their 25 year-old biological body. Would that question make sense in that situation? It would be like, well, "Yeah, you're only biologically 25, but your 150, maybe it's time to let go?" --I think that would probably not fly, but that would just be my prediction.
- Jennifer: Well, I guess, in a couple of generations it probably wouldn't fly, but right now it probably would because it would be kind of weird to have a 150-something year old person in a 25-year old body.
- Alex: It would, but I don't think it would be right to ask them to let go.
- Jennifer: No, of course not, but that's why I'm saying in a couple generations down the road it wouldn't be a thing at all.
- Alex: That's true. I mean we're not going to have to worry about 150 year olds for at least another 50 years.
- Jennifer: Exactly. It's a great question, I just think, and I'm certainly leaning back on old science fiction when I think about this.
- Alex: Actually, I have not encountered all that much science fiction that deals with extended health spans. Most of the time I see it if there's extended life spans, the health degrades quite poorly or they just don't deal with it at all. Star Trek never deals with it. Not entirely true, they have some aliens that live a long time, but that's considered natural because that's the way they are.
- Jennifer: So I'm thinking of a few stories I've heard from shows like X Minus One and Dimension X, which were back in the 50s I believe.
- Alex: Okay, I don't know those ones.
- Jennifer: Where the society was structured in such a way that once you hit the age of 60 the expectation was that you would die.
- Alex: Oh, sort of like, Logan's Run?

Jennifer: I'm not familiar.

Alex: Okay, I think I was age of 30 in that one.

Jennifer: Okay, fair enough.

Alex: But something like that.

Jennifer: And then anyone who sort of lived past that was some sort of a subversive rebel?

Alex: Yeah.

Jennifer: And all of the reasons that they present for why this is a normal thing and why people who live beyond that are being selfish were always really fascinating to me.

Alex: I mean, the arguments I always hear are, "What about over-population?"

Jennifer: Exactly, the resources.

Alex: "How will we pay the pensions?" Those are actually separate issues that are potentially addressable.

Jennifer: Yeah, absolutely, yeah.

Alex: Especially considering birth rates seem to drastically decline with the life span or life expectancy.

Jennifer: Exactly.

Alex: Those are separate issues.

Jennifer: Yes they are, but it's a bit of sands thrown to the works of people who are --because that big narrative does need picking apart. I mean, the big narrative causes us problems and it's not a bad thing to throw bits of sand into that and say, "That's not quite right, so what do we do now?"

Alex: You've got to interrogate the big ideas that's for sure.

Jennifer: Absolutely.

Alex: You have to interrogate all the ideas.

Alex: Well all the ideas, yeah.

Jennifer: Yes, all the ideas right now.

Alex: All the ideas right now. Not sex today because I want to be better prepared for interrogating that idea.

Jennifer: I would probably be the wrong person for that anyway, yeah.

Alex: This was fun though.

Jennifer: Yeah, I enjoyed that.

Announcer 2: This has been another episode of So What?.

Announcer 1: The podcast about library and information science research and why it matters.

Announcer 2: So What? is created and produced by students at the faculty of information and media studies at Western University in London, Ontario.

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