AGING

CONCEPTS AND CONTROVERSIES

HARRY R. MOODY

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Harry R. Moody is a graduate of Yale University and received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Columbia University. He has taught philosophy at Columbia University, Hunter College, New York University, and the University of California at Santa Cruz. For the past 15 years he has been at the Brookdale Center on Aging of Hunter College in the City University of New York, where he is Deputy Director. Earlier, at the National Council on Aging in Washington, DC, he served as Co-Director of its National Policy Center. He is the author of over 70 articles and two books: *Abundance of Life: Human Development Policies for an Aging Society* (Columbia University Press, 1988) and *Ethics in an Aging Society* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). He is Co-Editor of the newsletter, *Aging and the Human Spirit,* which is devoted to the search for meaning in later life. He became involved in the field of gerontology in 1971 while teaching humanities in senior centers. He is known for his work in older adult education and he currently serves as Vice-Chairman of the Board of ELDERHOSTEL. He has also been active in the field of biomedical ethics and is an Adjunct Associate of the Hastings Center, Briar Cliff, New York.

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Preface

Becoming acquainted with a new discipline is never an easy task because it requires two elements that do not always easily go together. On the one hand, a good introduction requires learning facts—key ideas, technical terms, and major findings that have stood the test of time. On the other hand, a good introduction requires learning to think in new ways: to evaluate issues and evidence and to recognize the limits of knowledge, and to separate facts from values when it comes to applying what we know to the world around us.

Aging: Concepts and Controversies conveys both these contrasting elements to the introductory student. On the one hand, it presents key ideas from the field of gerontology. But, more important, it aims to strengthen the student's capacity for critical thinking about issues in the study of aging.

For most college students, gerontology will be a brand-new field of study with a special challenge of its own. Unlike history or chemistry, it is not a subject typically studied in secondary school. Moreover, gerontology is a multidisciplinary field. The natural sciences, the social and behavioral sciences, and the humanities are all important for understanding what human aging has been or might become in the future. Thus this book draws on concepts from biology, economics, philosophy, sociology, and psychology as well as many other disciplines.

This interdisciplinary mix can make the study of gerontology intellectually exciting. But the very scale of the enterprise conceals a pitfall. With such a vast range of disciplines and ideas to draw on, the temptation is to try to encompass as much as possible between two covers of a textbook. Then, as the semester begins, we hope that, against all odds, students will assimilate some modest portion of the facts assembled between the covers.

That hope is often disappointed, and the disappointment is keenly felt by faculty who are searching for a better way to interest students in the field of aging. The problem is that fact- and research-oriented approaches to the subject are important for students already committed to gerontological study; however, for many more students who have a more *general* interest in both individual and societal aging, we need a different approach.

Hence *Aging: Concepts and Controversies* is written from an entirely different perspective. It consciously focuses on issues of interest to all of us as citizens and as educated human beings, not just as potential gerontologists

or professional service providers. As we move into a new century, as an increasingly age-conscious society, we all have a stake in better understanding the subject. This book, in short, presents gerontology as central to a good general education.

This book takes a similarly broad view toward what aging is all about. From the opening chapter, students are encouraged to see aging not as a fixed period of life but as a process beginning at birth and extending over the entire life course. This open-ended quality of human aging is a theme woven throughout the book: from biological experiments to extend the life span to difficult choices about allocation of health care resources. The social and economic conditions of an aging society will mean new dilemmas about rights and responsibilities ascribed to old age in a world where we increasingly come to see aging as a social construction rather than a natural or unalterable fact of the human condition.

Because the possibilities for how we might age both as individuals and as a society are multiple, it requires new thinking to grasp the central issues at stake. The fundamental aim of this book is to help students see gerontology as a domain for critical thinking. That aim is what has dictated the basic pedagogical design of the book: namely, its focus on controversies and questions rather than exhorting students to adopt a "correct" view about aging or older people. The readings are selected to accentuate contrast and conflict, to stimulate the student to think more deeply about what is at stake in the debates presented here. In the end, there is no "right answer" to these debates. But there *is* a body of knowledge indispensable for reaching their resolution in theory or in practice.

That is why *Aging: Concepts and Controversies* presents gerontology's most important empirical findings supported by current research. That is the purpose of the three major "essays" around which the book's controversies or "debates" are organized. The "facts" and basic concepts of gerontology are offered in these essays to help students make sense of the controversies, understand their origin, engage in critical thinking, and, finally, develop their own views. As students become engaged in the debates, they will appreciate the justification for having the factual background necessary to make responsible judgments and interpretations. My *introductions* to each controversy and the *questions* I have written to conclude them also reinforce this important link between factual knowledge and interpretation/reflection, which is at the heart of this book.

This book, then, can best be seen as a textbook constructed to provide drama and compelling interest for the reader. It is structured so as to encourage a style of teaching and learning that is more than conveying facts and methods. Other, more specific features of the book reinforce this pedagogical approach: The "Focus on Practice" sections demonstrate the relevance of the *controversies* to care and human services work in our society; the Appendix

offers guidance on researching and writing term papers on aging; and key terms/ideas are glossed in the index.

Whether students reading this book go on to specialized professional work or whether they never take another course in gerontology, my aim is directed squarely at issues of compelling human importance, now and in the future. By returning again and again to those questions of perennial human interest, it is my hope that both teachers and students will find new excitement in questions that properly concern us all at any age.

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Prologue: America as an Aging Society

It is no secret that the number of people over age 65 in the United States is growing rapidly, a phenomenon recognized as the "graying of America." The numbers are staggering. There has been a 30-fold increase in older people in the United States since 1870: from 1 million up to nearly 32 million in 1990—a number now bigger than the entire population of Canada. During the past two decades, the 65+ group has been increasing twice as fast as the rest of the population.

As a result, the U.S. population looks different than it did earlier this century. In 1900 only 4% of the population was over the age of 65. Today, that figure has jumped to 13%. And the pace of growth will continue in the next two decades, as the **baby boom generation** moves into the ranks of senior citizens. The proportion over 65 will increase in the future to 20% by the year 2030. This rate of growth in the older population is unprecedented in human history. When the baby boomers begin to retire, about one in five Americans will be eligible for Social Security and Medicare, as opposed to just over one in eight today.

We usually think of aging as strictly an individual matter. But we can also speak of a whole population "aging" or growing older, although to speak that way is to speak in terms of a metaphor. In literal terms, only organisms, not populations, grow older. Still, metaphorical or not, there's no doubt about a key trend in contemporary society: that is, the rise in the average age of the population or an increase in the proportion of the population made up of people over age 65. This change in the demographic structure of the population can be defined as **population aging.**

For purposes of comparison, we can note that in 1900 the percentage of children and teenagers in the population was 40%—a relatively "young" population. By 1990 that proportion of youth had dropped to 24%. By contrast, seniors increased from 4% in 1900 to 13% in 1990 with larger increases

still to come. In fact, during the next several decades, overall population growth in the United States will be concentrated among middle-aged and older Americans. The number aged 50 or more is projected to increase 76% by the year 2020. Those under age 50 will actually decrease by 1%—in effect, the rate remaining flat for the next few decades.

Population aging also shows up as an increase in the average or median age of the entire population: that is, the age for which half the population is older and half the population is younger. The median age of the U.S. population in 1820 was only 17 years; by 1900 it had risen to 23 and by 1990, to 33 years. It is estimated that by the turn of the century the median age of the American population will be 36; by 2030 it will rise to 42 years. This shift, too, is another measure of the dramatic impact of population aging.

It is clear, then, that populations "age" for reasons different than individuals do, and the reasons have to do with demographic trends. In the first place, population aging can occur because birthrates decline. The result is that there is a smaller proportion of children in the population and so the average age of the population will go up. But population aging can also come about because of improvements in life expectancy: people living longer on average. Finally, the process of population aging can be augmented for a time because of a large group of people—in technical language, a birth **cohort**—who were born during a particular period: for example, the baby boom generation born between 1946 and 1964. Baby boomers are now in middle age and, early in the next century, they will enter old age. At least for a period of time, they will dramatically hasten the aging of the American population.

Thus trends in birthrates, death rates, and the flow of cohorts all contribute to population aging. What makes matters confusing is that *all three trends* can be happening at once, as they have been in America in recent decades (Hauser, 1976). Population aging, then, is more complex than it seems. Casual observers sometimes suggest that the American population is aging just because people are living longer. But that impression isn't quite accurate because it fails to take into account multiple trends defined by demographic factors including birth (fertility), death (mortality), and migration rates.

But a demographic description does not explain the reason these trends happen in the first place. One logical question is this: Why has this process of population aging occurred? The rising proportion of older people in the population can be explained by **demographic transition theory,** which points to the connection between population growth and the economic process of industrialization. In preindustrial societies, there is a generally stable population because both birthrates and death rates remain high. With industrialization, death rates tend to fall while birthrates remain high for a period, and thus the population grows. But at a certain point, at least in advanced industrial societies, birthrates begin to fall in line with death rates. Eventually, when the rate of fertility is exactly balanced by the rate of mortality, we have a condition of stability known as zero population growth.

The industrial revolution of the nineteenth century brought improved agricultural production, improved standards of living, and therefore an increase in population size. At the same time, there came a shift in the age structure of the population, known to demographers as the demographic transition. This was a shift away from a population with high fertility and high mortality to one having low fertility and low mortality. That population pattern is what we see today in America, in Europe, and in Japan. The result in all industrialized societies has been population aging: a change in the age distribution of the population.

Most developing countries in the Third World—in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—still have fertility rates and death rates that are much higher than those in advanced industrialized countries. For the United States in 1800, as for most Third World countries today, that population distribution can be represented as a population pyramid: many births (high fertility) and relatively few people surviving to old age (high mortality). For countries that are approaching zero population growth, that pyramid becomes replaced by a cylinder: Each cohort becomes approximately the same in size.

As we have seen, the increased number of older people is only part of the cause of population aging. It is important to remember that overall population aging has actually been brought about much more by declines in fertility than by reductions in mortality. The trend toward declining fertility in America actually can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, so the process of population aging has causes that date back a long time. Finally, to complete the demographic picture, we would need to point to other factors that influence population size and composition, such as improvements in the chance of survival of people at different ages or the impact of immigration into the United States, largely by younger people. But one conclusion is inescapable. Today's increased proportion of people over 65 springs from causes that are deeply rooted in American society. Population aging is a long-range trend that will characterize our society into the twenty-first century. It is a fact we all will cope with for the rest of our lives.

But how is American society coping with population aging? And how are the major institutions of society—government, the economy, the family—coping with the aging of a large number of individuals? The answer, in simplified terms, is rooted in the basic difference between individual and population aging. As human beings, we are all quite familiar with individual aging. It is therefore not surprising that as a society we have devised many policies and practices to take into account changes that predictably occur in the later years: for example, retirement pensions, medical interventions for chronic illness, and familiar government programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

Whether it involves changes in biological functioning or changes in work roles, individual aging is tangible and undeniable: a pattern we observe well enough in our parents and family members, not to mention in ourselves. But

population aging is more subtle and less easily observed. We have many institutional policies and programs to deal with individual aging. But our society is just beginning to wrestle with the controversies generated by the population aging trends now emerging, with the prospect of even more dramatic debate and change in the decades ahead. The fact that these demographic changes are so significant and are stimulating so much ferment in our society's fundamental institutions is one important reason that this book is organized by *controversies* as well as by the facts and basic concepts that lie behind them.

Our society's response to population aging can best be summed up in the aphorism that generals prepare for the "next" war by fighting the "old" one over again. That is to say, in our individual and our social planning, we tend to do the same thing, to look back to past experience to guide our thinking about the future. Thus, when the railroad was first introduced, it was dubbed "the iron horse." But it wasn't a horse at all, and the changes that rail transport brought to society were revolutionary, beyond anything that could be expected by looking to the past.

The same holds true for population aging. We cannot anticipate the changes that will be brought about by population aging by looking backward because population aging is historically unprecedented among the world's societies. Moreover, we cannot confuse population aging with the process of individual aging. An aging society, after all, is not like an individual with a fixed life span. Why is it that people are so often fearful when they begin to think about America's future as an aging society? Part of the reason is surely that many of us are locked into images of decline that are based on prejudice or simply on outdated impressions of what individual aging entails. Because our social institutions have responded to aging as a problem, we tend to see only losses and to overlook opportunities in the process of aging.

An important fact to remember is that the solutions to yesterday's problems may not give us creative solutions to new challenges we face today. For example, Social Security has proven to be a vital program that protects older Americans from the threat of poverty in old age. But Social Security was never designed to help promote second careers or new forms of productivity among older people. We may need to think in new ways about pensions and retirement in the future. Similarly, Medicare has proved to be an important, though expensive means of guaranteeing access to medical care for older people. But it was never designed to address the problem of long-term care for elderly people who need help to remain in their own homes. Finally, as the sheer number of people over 65 increases, America as a society will need to consider what institutions and policies are best able to provide for the needs of this growing population.

Social gerontologist Matilda Riley has pointed out that our failure to think deeply about population aging is a weakness in gerontology as a discipline. Gerontologists know more about individual aging than about opportunity

structures over the whole life course. A good example is the way the life course itself has been shaped, with transitions between education, work, and retirement. These transitions do not seem to prepare us well for an aging society in the future. In effect, we have a "cultural lag" in facing the future. We know that in this century the age of leaving the workforce to retire has been gradually going down, while the age for leaving schooling has been going up. Riley points out that, if we were to project these trends into the future, sometime in the twenty-first century people would leave college at age 38 and immediately enter retirement! This scenario, of course, is not serious. But it does make a serious point. We must not take current trends and simply project them into the future.

Part of the problem is that we have less knowledge than we ought to have about the interaction between individual lives and the wider society. During the twentieth century, nearly three decades have been added to human life expectancy. Now nearly one third of adult life is spent in retirement. The population of people over 65 is healthier and better educated than ever before. Yet opportunity structures are lacking to integrate this older population into major institutions of society such as education or the workplace. Where will we find a blueprint for what an aging society of the future might look like? The blueprint must be constructed. Today, we grow old very differently compared with our grandparents, so it does little good to look backward as we anticipate the twenty-first century.

The challenge is to change our way of anticipating the future by thinking critically about assumptions we otherwise take for granted. This task of critical thinking may actually be more difficult in gerontology than in other fields, because of the familiarity of aging itself. Revolutionary changes have taken place in the twentieth century, but most of us tend to assume that aging and the human life course have remained the same. In spite of our commonsense perceptions, however, history and social science tell us that the process of aging is not something fixed or given but is a changeable construction and subject to interpretation.

Taking a more critical and thoughtful stance, we know that the basic structures of the life course—the "stages of life"—have been viewed very differently by different societies. Even in our own society, the experience of growing older is not uniform but means very different things to individuals depending on their gender, race, or ethnicity. From this perspective, a societal "given" like retirement turns out to be less than a century old and now is in the process of being reexamined and redefined. And in this century, life expectancy in America has risen from 47 years to 75 years. Even in the biology of aging, scientists are engaged in serious debate about whether it is possible to extend the maximum human life span from what we have known in the past.

In short, wherever we look, in biology, economics, the social and behavioral sciences, or public policy, we see that "aging," despite its familiarity,