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What Moral Obligations Do Older Adults Have To Their Society?*

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By

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What moral obligations do older adults have to their society? This question may strike you as strange. It is commonplace to think about what society ought to do for old people, but the converse Kennedyesque question is rarely raised. Not what does society owe to older people? But what do older people owe to their society?

I think that ageism is the main reason this question is so rarely raised. There's an assumption that old people need help. Their presumed disabilities seem to release them from moral obligations we take for granted for younger people.

Clearly, that is the wrong presumption. Most old people are not disabled and in need of help for basic functions. Yes, most have chronic health conditions, and some of these conditions limit what they are able to do. But fewer than 15% of people 65 and older have activity limitations that require routine help with basic activities. This increases with age, but even at 85 fewer than half have limitations that require help with basic activities of life.¹

In fact, most old people are quite capable and can be extremely helpful to their society. And, come to think of it, even old people with disabilities who need help can be helpful. Can't an old person in a wheelchair write letters of protest or support, make financial contributions, attend a rally, or even go from apartment to apartment in a building with an elevator to advocate for the political candidate of their choice?

So, from the standpoint of ability, being old does not let people off the moral hook. Old people may owe their societies something. But what?

One type of answer draws from heroic images. I think of great moral leaders during my lifetime like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Great moral leaders often risk their own lives in the name of social justice. They also are able to recruit followers, generally far more ordinary people— young, middle-aged, and old—who sacrifice comfort, safety or even their lives because they believe that their cause is not only just but morally and historically essential. Their souls and the soul of their society are at stake.

In my eyes, the ordinary people, who followed famous leaders, were also moral heroes. And frankly I find them more interesting because very few people have the right stuff for great moral leadership, but most of us can make a morally meaningful contribution.

But what? King sometimes said that the “hottest place in Hell is reserved for those people who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict.” He found it unacceptable for people to remain on the sidelines while others fought the (non-violent) battles that had to be fought, risking their lives and livelihoods.

Clearly, this is a time of great moral conflict. Poverty, disparity, lingering racism and discrimination, and a growing threat to democratic values call out for social action in the United States. Disparity between developed countries and so-called “developing” countries is also very troubling. That hundreds of millions of people scrub out a subsistence living of less than \$2 a day is awful. So is the plight of millions of refugees fleeing their homes in the hopes that they and their children will survive and ultimately make lives for themselves. The rise in the size and power of groups of religious fundamentalists prepared to slaughter others for their beliefs threatens to bring about a major moral regression in the history of humanity. And there are frightening threats to the survival of the human species—climate change, nuclear warfare, depleted water supply, collapse of an economy that increasingly exists only in computers, and more.

I think of these issues and know that, except for clever conversation, I and most people I know are effectively on the sidelines. Am I, are we all, headed, as King would have it, to the hottest place in Hell? Or are we forgiven moral lassitude and preference for a restful retirement because we are old and have “paid our dues”?

Lately, I have made harsh and angry self-judgments while watching the horrors of human life on TV. I am loathe to make the same harsh judgement of others who, like me, have chosen comfortable retirements instead of intense social advocacy. I don't want to be judgmental, though maybe I should be.

But wait a minute. Not all of our obligations are to society. There are also obligations to our families and to ourselves. Think of the older people who

are consumed taking care of their own parents. Think about grandparents who are providing care for their grandchildren, ranging from occasional babysitting to substitute parenting, some joyously, some at great costs to themselves. Think of older people who volunteer some of their time for a cause they care about. Think of older people who have returned to school or become artists of one kind or another—people who are working to cultivate their abilities. They may never be among the world’s moral leaders or important scholars, writers, painters, or musicians, but they are fulfilling a fundamental obligation to achieve their personal potential.

Alexander Hamilton aside, it is not possible to do it all. Heroic social action, taking responsibility for one’s family, and cultivating personal excellence cannot each be fully done. We must choose among and balance fulfilling our various obligations. Isn’t it morally permissible to be a devoted grandparent or a serious student or an aspiring artist while sitting on the sidelines of the great moral issues of our time?

After retirement from a career as a social worker and social advocate, the life choice I made was to withdraw from social action. Instead, I work at music, photography, and writing. I teach. I travel. And I enjoy my family—well, most of the time. Lately, I’ve added some volunteer work, but not a lot. I am on the sidelines, and it troubles me to be, like *Candide*, cultivating myself rather than working to repair a world very much in need of improvement.

Again I ask, does my choice to pull back from a career of social advocacy condemn me to the hottest place in Hell? That’s too harsh, I think.

It seems to me that being morally heroic is not the only way to fulfill my obligations to society. There is a minimalist answer as well as a heroic answer to the question of what our obligations are. A minimalist answer would identify limited but important moral obligations of citizenship such as voting, contributing money to important causes and to admired political candidates, signing a petition from time to time, perhaps volunteering for a charitable or political organization, and so forth. These are things that almost all of us can do without disrupting our lives, without reducing our creature comforts. These are things that we can do even if we are caregivers for disabled family members, even if we are devoted grandparents, even if we have gone back to school, even if we have chosen to pursue an art, or even if we have chosen to lay back in old age and rest on our past achievements.

And these minimal moral activities are important. If everyone voted, gave money, and participated in a bit of advocacy, it would be a vast improvement in the American democracy.

But is it enough? Moral heroism may be too much to expect, but moral minimalism may, in truth, be too little. Something more is required. Something between moral heroism and moral minimalism—a kind of moral Goldilocksism that I hope we will discuss later.

I am quite sure that I have not convinced all of you that we old people have moral obligations to our society. My wife, for example, believes that she—and I she insists—have paid our dues. We should do what makes us happy. For her that includes co-chairing the Advocacy Council of Citizen's Committee for Children, but she assures me that she does this because she enjoys doing it, not because it is her way of fulfilling an obligation to society.

She's not alone. Last year I did a similar presentation at the Ethical Culture Society and about half the participants were more than a little annoyed by my talk about "obligations". Several said that they had fulfilled all their obligations when they were younger—working, raising children, taking care of parents, marching on Washington and so forth—and that now they were free to live a life without being burdened by obligations, duties, or responsibilities. These moralistic words really annoyed them.

So, let me approach the question of the moral obligations older people have to their society from a totally different perspective. What can working to improve society contribute to well-being in old age? Can working on behalf of society help us to age well?

Philosophically, this fundamentally changes the question I have raised about obligation. By definition, obligations are actions we are morally required to take whether we want to or not, whether they make us happy or not, whether they give us satisfaction or not, whether they contribute to our well-being or not. Now I'm asking a very different question: what can acting on behalf of our society contribute to our personal happiness or well-being in old age?

First, let's get rid of the ageist idea that aging well is an oxymoron. Clearly some people do fare well in old age.

It is common to note that there are physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions to achieving well-being in old age. I think that there is also a moral dimension. Older people who are filled with regret about a life poorly lived are not likely to feel satisfied with their lives, and those who turn a

blind eye to obligations they consciously or unconsciously feel they have are likely to live with a sense of underlying guilt, which is not conducive to well-being at any age. Conversely, believing that you have fulfilled your obligations and are fulfilling them now contributes to a sense of well-being.

A sense of meaning is also an important component of well-being for most of us. This is far more complicated than it sounds; but, for the sake of simplicity, I will characterize it as believing that your life is more than YOUR life. It is a sense of having a purpose beyond yourself, of being part of something beyond yourself, of belonging to something greater than yourself. For some, meaning is found in a sense of transcendence. For others it is found:

- in leaving a legacy or
- in their relationships with the next generations of their families or
- in art or
- in cultivating personal excellence or
- in making contributions their communities, nations, or the world.

Recently researchers in New Zealand explored the contributions that active voluntary work for the benefit of society makes to well-being.² They talked with old people about their experience as volunteers including direct help to others in need, working for social change (“activism”), representing the interests of groups with which they identify and of people in need of help (“advocacy”), and working on projects to improve conditions in the community in which they live (“nurturing”). They found that older adults who engaged in these activities gained:

- A sense of worth
- A new sense of identity
- A sense of belonging
- A sense of community
- A sense of pride
- A sense of purpose
- A sense of meaningfulness
- New relationships
- Committed engagement in meaningful activities
- A sense of overall satisfaction with their lives.

Strong reasons for working on behalf of your society, no? Apparently, making commitments to others, pursuing causes, and accepting obligations to work to make the world a better place contribute to well-being in old age.

I personally believe that we all, even those of us who are old, have an obligation to make a contribution to the world we live in—whether we like it or not. But, as I've said, many people—most importantly my wife—disagree with me. They don't believe that they owe society anything once they retire.

I think they are wrong. But I also think that many people who do not accept obligations to work to improve the world do so anyway and that their well-being is enhanced in the process.

There is more to life than happiness, a deeper and ultimately more satisfying state of being that can only be achieved by getting beyond ourselves and our personal satisfaction. Making and fulfilling commitments to our society is one very important way to get there.

That said, I am still struggling to figure out what I need to do to confront the deep troubles of the human world. Have you figured it out for yourself? I'd love to hear your thoughts.

¹ Drabek, J and Marton W. (2015) "Measuring The Need for Long-Term Services and Supports: Research Brief". Office of the HHS Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. July 1, 2015.

² Wiles, JL and Jayasinha, R (2013). "Care for place: The contributions older people make to their communities" in *Journal of Aging Studies*, January 2013.