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“With Length of Days I Will Gratify Him”

Augustine, the Psalms, and Old Age

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Abstract

The Bible has a variety of perspectives on old age. On the one hand, as exemplified in Ps 91(90):16 and 92(91):15, old age is a sign of God's blessing and the elderly are held in high regard as valuable, while on the other, as exemplified in Ps 39(38):5; 71(70):9; and 90(89):10, life is seen as fleeting and length of days as insignificant and the elderly fear neglect. The psalms held a high place in Augustine's Christian identity. This paper explores Augustine's use of these verses to consider the extent to which his religious outlook shaped his perspectives on ageing, as well as addressing the question of whether or not he was aware of the conflict between the two perspectives. It will be argued that Augustine was not interested in the contradictions presented by the psalmist, and that he interpreted all the verses through an eschatological framework, such that an evaluation of the meaning and value of life is to be found only through a perception of eternity.

Keywords

Augustine of Hippo – Psalms – *Enarrationes in Psalmos* – ageing

Old age was viewed from a variety of stances in antiquity and late antiquity. Most famously, we find reflection on this in Cicero's *Cato Maior de senectute*, written in 44 BC, probably just before the assassination of Caesar and the start of the death throes of the Roman republic. Composed in the form of a dialogue between Cato the censor, Scipio Aemilianus, and Laelius, members of the so-called Scipionic circle, we find full expression of Cicero's Stoic outlook on life. On the one hand, any stage of life, since it is an inevitability of nature, ought

not cause any upset to one’s achievement of happiness and goodness.¹ Old age could be the time to enjoy a life in which the virtues had long been cultivated.² It was the age of wisdom.³ Yet, Cicero was well aware that old age could be looked upon disparagingly because it disengaged the elderly from participation in an active social or political life, enfeebled the body, deprived it of pleasure, and was the next step before death.⁴ While Cicero has Cato counter these arguments (downplaying dementia and the burden of youthful passion, associating febleness with illness or unsound character rather than age, emphasising being young at heart and the pleasures of the mind, etc.), he did admit that age can make one can grow weary of this life.⁵ As a Stoic, though, he believed in the immortality of the soul,⁶ and therefore, encouraged by this belief, he postulated that the wise (i.e. the old) die happy because they realise the truth of this immortality.⁷

In a similar vein, ancient monotheistic religions, like Judaism and Christianity, had a mixed view about old age. On the one hand, old age could be a sign of God’s blessings and favour, while, on the other hand, old age often brought about feelings of uselessness, abandonment, and futility. We see this mixture in the psalms, to take but one convenient example. Psalm 91(90):16 says: “with length of days I will gratify him and will show him my salvation.”⁸ Psalm 92(91):15, comparing the just man with the palm tree (*phoenix dactylifera*) and the cedars of Lebanon (*cedrus libani*), says: “They shall bear fruit even in old age; vigorous and sturdy shall they be”. Both these verses illustrate a rather positive evaluation of old age. On the other hand, Psalm 39(38): 5-6 states: “Let me know, O Lord, my end and what is the number of my days, that I may learn how frail I am. A short span you have made my days, and my life is as nought

1 Cicero, *De senec.* 2.4: “...qui autem omnia bona a se ipsi petunt, eis nihil malum potest uideri quod naturae necessitas adferat.”

2 Cicero, *De senec.* 3.9: “...arma senectutis artes exercitationesque uirtutum, quae in omni aetate cultae, cum diu multumque uixeris, mirificos eferunt fructus, non solum quia numquam deserunt, ne extremo quidem tempore aetatis quamquam id quidem maximum est, uerum etiam quia conscientia bene actae uitae multorumque bene factorum recordatio iucundissima est.”

3 Cicero, *De senec.* 10.34: “...senectutis maturitas naturale...”

4 Cicero, *De senec.* 5.15.

5 Cicero, *De senec.* 20.75-76.

6 Cicero, *De senec.* 21.77-78.

7 Cicero, *De senec.* 23.83: “Quid, quod sapientissimus quisque aequissimo animo moritur, stultissimus iniquissimo, nonne uobis uidetur is animus qui plus cernat et longius, uidere se ad meliora proficisci, ille autem cuius obtusior sit acies, non uidere?”

8 Biblical translations in English are from the New American Bible (1990 edition). I am following the Masoretic rather than LXX or Vulgate numbering, by which Augustine’s references are numbered.

before you." In a similar vein, we read in Psalm 71(70):9: "Cast me not off in my old age; as my strength fails, forsake me not." Psalm 90(89):10 says: "Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty if we are strong, and most of them are fruitless toil, for they pass quickly and we drift away."

I am not proposing any influence of these psalms on Stoic thinking. Such contrasting attitudes to old age, I would suggest, are to be found in every culture in every age. While Cicero, as a Stoic, wanted to emphasise the positive over the negative attitude, what interests me here today is how these two views, as exemplified in the psalm verses just quoted, shaped Christian thinking or whose interpretation was shaped by Christian thinking. In particular, I am interested in their presence in the thought of Augustine of Annaba (ancient Hippo Regius in the province of Numidia).

Using these psalm verses was not the only occasion when Augustine reflected on the ageing process. While we can see the influence of the six ages of humankind as a parallel to the six days of creation operating in the structure of *Confessiones*,⁹ they are not referred to again after the start of book 7 when he moves from spiritual adolescence to youth. In *De uera religione* Augustine expanded on these stages of human life as shaped by sin. Of the last age he says, "From there old age, with health deteriorating and fading, more liable to diseases and enfeebled, leads on up to death."¹⁰ By contrast, taking Romans 6:6 and Ephesians 4:22-24, Augustine looked to the seven stages of the new person, which are calculated not in terms of age but of progress and perfection in the spiritual life. The seventh stage is eternal life, and before it, in the sixth stage, the person "passes from every kind of change into eternal life, to the extent of forgetting the life of time, now that he has been perfected in the form and shape which was made to the image and likeness of God."¹¹ The older one gets, the sooner one can leave the undesirable state of continuous change and reach true fulfilment.

Of course, this is based upon Augustine's reading of Genesis rather than Psalms. In this eschatological reading, as one advances closer to eternal life one ought to become closer to perfection, if God's grace is at work, not simply become more decrepit. The weakness of physical old age is ignored in favour of

9 Augustine, *Conf.* 1.6.8-9; 1.8.13; 2.1.1; and 7.1.1; NBA 1.10, 16, 38, and 178.

10 Augustine, *De uera rel.* 26.48; NBA 6/1.: "Inde usque ad mortem deterior aetas ac decolour, et morbis subiectior debilisque perducit." English translation is from Augustine, *On Christian Belief*, trans. by M. O'Connell, intro. by M. Fiedrowicz (The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, 1.8), Hyde Park, 2005, pp. 15-104.

11 Augustine, *De uera rel.* 26.49; NBA 6/1.80: "...omnimodae mutationis in aeternam uitam et usque ad totam obliuionem uitae temporalis transeuntem perfecta forma, quae facta est ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei."

seeing the strength of spiritual maturity. This also is what we shall find as we read through Augustine’s comments when he turns to Psalms to reflect on ageing across his literary output.

After some general comments about how Augustine used Psalms in his writings, I shall examine how he used these five passages to see whether or not he was aware of the apparent contradiction in outlook, how, if at all, he reconciled those outlooks, and what his perspective on old age was. Finally, I shall conclude with some thoughts about the relevance of Augustine’s thinking for contemporary assessments of getting old.

1 Augustine and the Psalms

While we know how important reading Paul, especially Romans 7, was in Augustine’s conversion to Christianity through his discovery of the centrality of divine grace,¹² equally as important in Augustine’s formation were Psalms. As he writes in *Confessiones*: “How loudly I began to cry out to you in those psalms, how I was inflamed by them with love for you and fired to recite them to the whole world, were I able, as a remedy against human pride!”¹³ From the biography of Augustine by Possidius of Guelma (ancient Calama in the province of Numidia) we know that the dying Augustine had the shortest penitential psalm (Ps 130[129] – *De profundis*) written out and attached to the wall next to his bed so he could read it.¹⁴ As Jeffrey Lehman writes, “...it is not hyperbole to say that Augustine spent his converted life in the psalms: reading them, ruminating on them, and ultimately embodying them through prayer.”¹⁵ The psalms featured prominently in liturgical practice and Augustine’s largest work, that took him decades to complete, was his homiletic commentary on Psalms, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. Bardy noted in 1940 that there are more than 10,000 citations of Psalms throughout Augustine’s vast output.¹⁶

Rowan, Lord Williams of Oystermouth, former archbishop of Canterbury (2002-2012), sees Augustine using the psalms as a history of the soul in conver-

12 Augustine, *Conf.* 7.21.27; NBA 1.210-212.

13 Augustine, *Conf.* 9.4.8; NBA 1.262: “Quas tibi uoce dabam in psalmis illis et quomodo in te inflammabar ex eis et accendebar eos recitare, si possem, toto orbi terrarum aduersus typhum generis humani!”

14 Possidius, v. s. *Aug.* 31.

15 J.S. Lehman, “‘As I read, I was set on fire’: On the Psalms in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *Logos* 16 (2013), pp. 160-184, at p. 161.

16 G. Bardy, *Saint Augustin. L’homme et l’œuvre*, Paris, 1940, p. 350.

sation with God that gives wholeness to human lives. He says that through the person praying the psalms, Augustine believed that the psalmist's voice:

unseals deep places, emotions otherwise buried, and it provides an analogy for the unity or intelligibility of a human life lived in faith. Here is a conversation with God that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And in the course of that conversation, the human speaker is radically changed and enabled to express what is otherwise hidden from him or her.¹⁷

In Augustine's estimation, the psalms are the "unifying of the divine and human voice in Christ."¹⁸ This makes them more than just a prefiguring or foreshadowing of Christ; they are Christ facilitating the dialogue between God and humankind. Christ, of course, is not only Jesus but the whole body, the church. Human anguish and repentance are taken up by Jesus and presented to the Father. The union of Son and Father means that our words are heard by God and what is alien from God becomes part of the divine truth. Mary Clark asserts that for Augustine, even in those psalms that Christ prays alone,¹⁹ "by virtue of the close union between Christ and his members, it is Christ who always prays with us to the Father whenever we make a psalm our prayer."²⁰ The psalms are a statement not only of human statements to God but of God's statements to humanity. As Lord Williams reflects, "It is not only that Christ accompanies the sufferer, sharing his or her pain; the sufferer is drawn into the action of Christ that ultimately overcomes all sin and grief."²¹ Through the psalms as the prayers of Christ, humanity is enabled to accept the human condition with all its limitations and incompleteness and to make the life of Jesus our own. At the start of Maria Boulding's six-volume English translation of

17 R. Williams, "Augustine and the Psalms," *Interpretation* 58 (2004), pp. 17-27, at p. 18.

18 Williams, "Augustine and the Psalms," p. 18.

19 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 90/2.1; NBA 27/1.158, one of the psalms we shall examine in this paper, makes that point explicitly.

20 M.T. Clark, "St Augustine's Use of the Psalms," *The Way Supplement* 87 (1996), pp. 91-101, at p. 92.

21 Williams, "Augustine and the Psalms," p. 20. See also H.-J. Sieben, "Der Psalter und die Bekehrung der Voces und Affectus. Zu Augustinus, *Confessiones* IX, 4.6 und X, 33," *Theologie und Philosophie* 52 (1977), pp. 481-497; P. Burns, "Augustine's Distinctive Use of the Psalms in the Confessions: The Role of Music and Recitation," *Augustinian Studies* 24 (1993), pp. 133-146; G. Bader, *Psalterium affectuum palaestra. Prolegomena zu einer Theologie des Psalters* (Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie, 33), Tübingen, 1996; and G. Clark, "Psallite sapienter: Augustine on Psalmody," in: *Meditations of the Heart: Psalms in Early Christian Thought and Practice. Essays in Honour of Andrew Louth*, ed. by A. Andreopoulos, A. Casiday, and C. Harrison (Studia Traditionis Theologiae, 8), Turnhout, 2011, pp. 161-180.

Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Michael Fiedrowicz considers in some detail the ways in which Augustine interpreted the psalms with this christological notion of the divine-human dialogue being central to their proper exegesis.²²

2 Augustine and the Psalms on Ageing

The most obvious place to begin this investigation is with Augustine’s extensive *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, that mixed collection of exegetical notes and liturgical homilies on the psalms, whose production occupied most of Augustine’s literary career.²³ We shall look at how he understood the verses mentioned above in their respective psalm contexts of the individual dedicated homilies. Beyond that, this research then will examine how frequently these verses were employed in other places in *Enarrationes* and in other works in order to assess one measure of their importance in Augustine’s thinking and whether or not they shaped his thinking or were simply employed to support what he believed already.

One can say at the outset when we look beyond *Enarrationes* that we find that these psalm verses do not feature in any of Augustine’s anti-Arian, anti-Manichaean or anti-Donatist works. As well, they are not to be found in his letters. They are not a regular feature of his theological paradigm. Looking at where Augustine commented on the particular verses apart from what he had to say in the appropriate place in the homiletic commentaries enables us to evaluate how consistent or flexible he was in his interpretation.

2.1 *Psalm 91(90)*

We may begin with Psalms 91(90) and 92(91), which offer the more positive idea about getting old. Augustine preached on Psalm 91(90) in a liturgical setting over two days in the context of the gospel story about the temptations of Jesus. The point of the entire psalm was about trust in God in all situations, for

22 Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, vol. 1: 1-32, trans. by M. Boulding, intro. by M. Fiedrowicz (The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, 3.15), Hyde Park, 2000, pp. 13-66. All English translations of *Enarr. In Ps.* have been taken from these volumes.

23 See A.-M. La Bonnardière, “Les *Enarrationes in Psalmos* prêchées par saint Augustin à l’occasion de fêtes de martyrs,” *Recherches Augustiniennes* 7 (1971), pp. 73-103.; and A.-M. La Bonnardière, “La prédication d’Augustin sur les Psaumes à Hippone,” *Annuaire de l’École Pratique des Hautes Études. Section des Sciences Religieuses* 86 (1977/1978), pp. 337-341.

which God will provide protection in return.²⁴ The length of days mentioned in the psalm is taken by Augustine not as referring to a long life but to eternal life, which he describes as “life without end”.²⁵ So, Augustine has spiritualised the meaning and removed from it any sense of long life leading to old age.

Further, even the notion of eternal life as life in the next world is absent here. Death is not alluded to. While Augustine’s exhortation, “Yearn for the life that has no end” can be interpreted as referring to the life that comes after death, the way it is presented here one could almost be forgiven for thinking that Augustine was talking of the continuation of human existence into infinity.²⁶ It is only in commenting upon the end of the verse, where Augustine equates salvation with Christ, that the contrast between seeing Christ in the lowliness of his flesh and seeing him in glory indicates that eternal life is not to be found in this world but in heaven.²⁷ Thus, when we look at this verse in Augustine’s treatment, it is not about ageing as a reward or the benefits of growing old; it has become “the mighty reward for all our labors” in heaven (a strong hint that this homily was preached in Augustine’s pre-Pelagian years).²⁸

Elsewhere, in the homily expounding on Psalm 121(120):5 about the Lord being at the right hand, Augustine takes the LXX version of Proverbs 3:16 where the right hand is associated with length of days and years of life and the left with riches and fame. What is in the right hand is to be sought, what is in the left to be avoided (one is reminded of Matt 25:31-46). Again, length of days is eternity, but in this instance he is clearer that he is talking about the next life not this one.

After all, what does a long life in this world entail? Arriving at old age! Our span of life here may seem long, but when it is complete we see how short it was, because it has ended. Moreover, there are many who speak ill of their parents and yet grow old on this earth, whereas many others who are dutiful toward their parents go quickly to the Lord. The promise of long life is hardly fulfilled, is it, if it refers to the present life?²⁹

24 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 90/2.2; NBA 27/1.160-164.

25 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 90/2.12; NBA 27/1.182: “...in diebus longis.”

26 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 90/2.12; NBA 27/1.182: “...talem uitam desiderate, quae non habet finem..”

27 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 90/2.13; NBA 27/1.184.

28 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 90/2.13; NBA 27/1.182: “...in magno praemio omnium laborum nostrorum.”

29 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 120.10; NBA 27/2.: “Nam hic esse longaeuum quid est, nisi ad senectutem peruenerit? Etsi longa uidetur aetas, cum peruenerit, breuis conuincitur, quia finitur. Et multi maledicentes parentibus, senescent in hac terra; multi autem obsequentes

This exact same understanding of length of days is found in *De Trinitate*.³⁰ Long life is not that long after all, and it is eternal life rather than extended human existence that is the true blessing from God. The positive note in the psalm has been transformed in Augustine’s treatment.

2.2 *Psalm 92(91)*

Psalm 92 mentions old age explicitly. Augustine’s homily on this psalm is about the endurance and patience of faith, hope, and love in the trials of this life with a focus on the life to come.³¹ In commenting upon verse 11 Augustine quotes: “Mercy will render my old age fertile.”³² Augustine sees old age as the last age of the church, when all the trials and struggles of the church’s youth, in which time he locates himself, will have given way to joy. The dark hair of youth is equated with sin, and the grey hair of old age with purity.

You must understand, beloved, that though the psalm spoke of old age, you are not to think of it as the approach to death. An individual grows old in body and tends toward death; but the Church’s old age will be hoary with the shining whiteness of good deeds; it will not crumble into death. Our actions correspond to an elderly person’s head. You are familiar with the way the head turns hoary and white with advancing age. When someone well on in years is in typical condition you may look for a dark hair on his head and fail to find a single one; and so it is with us, once our life has reached the stage where the blackness of sins can no longer be found. That old age is youthfulness, that old age is fresh and vigorous, and it will be freshly green for ever.³³

parentibus, cito eunt ad Dominum. Numquid ergo impletur, ut longaeuus sit secundum hanc uitam?”

30 Augustine, *De Trin.* 1.8.17; NBA 4.34.

31 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 91.1; NBA 27/1.186-188.

32 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 91.11; NBA 27/1.206: “Et senectus mea in misericordia pingui”. This is following the LXX of verse 10: καὶ τὸ γῆράς μου ἐν ἐλαίῳ πίνον...

33 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 91.11; NBA 27/1.206: “Et intendat caritas uestra, quia dixit senectutem, ne puteris et mortem: homo enim in carne ideo senescit, ut moriatur. Senecta ecclesiae candida erit recte factis, morte autem non corrumpetur. Quod est caput senis, hoc erunt opera nostra. Videtis quemadmodum canescat caput, et inalbescat, quantumcumque senectus accredit. Qui bene senescit ordine suo, quaeris illi aliquando in capite capillum nigrum, et non inuenis; sic cum fuerit uita nostra talis, ut quaeratur nigrigudo peccatorum, et non inueniatur; senecta ista iuuenilis est, senecta ista uiridis est, semper uirebit.”

There is a spiritualising of old age here as well, but it is very much located in the present age. There is much more positivity here than in any of his comments on Psalm 91 (90). Old age, for the individual as much as for the church, is an experience not of deterioration but of purification, tranquillity not distress.

When we come to the verse comparing the fruitfulness of the elderly with that of palm and cedar in contrast with sinners that sprout up like grass (verse 7), Augustine takes εὐπαθοῦντες of verse 14 (verse 15 in the LXX) as *tranquilli* and states that even though the greenery of grass is attractive (which is the love of this life), those who are planted in the Lord (which is the love of the next life) will survive the storm, while the grass will be scorched in the sun. Happiness in this life is transitory, while those able to remain calm during tribulation will enjoy eternal life.³⁴ The contrast Augustine makes is between good and bad in this life, and the notion of fruitfulness in old age is entirely overlooked, except for a brief statement a little earlier that the mature palm tree is the more beautiful.³⁵ While the benefit of tranquillity will be fruitfulness, the connection with old age is weakened and underplayed.

Elsewhere, in the homily on Psalm 54(53), Augustine will refer to Psalm 92(91):13 and distinguish those who bloom for a brief while and then fade from those who flower for eternity.³⁶ Old age has become simply eternity, and the idea of growing old or being old has disappeared. In the third homily on Psalm 37(36), Augustine does refer to Psalm 92(91):15 about bringing forth fruit in old age, and observes that the church is “now at the end of time flourishing in sleek old age”.³⁷ Following the LXX πληθυνθήσονται, however, the idea is not so much about the church bringing forth fruit, as the church being multiplied throughout the world.

Sermo 216 was addressed to the elect, those catechumens in the days of Lent just before their baptism, instructing them on how to overcome the world. Towards the end of the homily he urged his listeners to set their hearts on good things. He wanted them to be young and renewed, but also old and mature, in terms of faith and good works, not in terms of the decrepitude of the body. This is how he understood Psalm 92(91):15 about fruitful old age.³⁸

From these two psalms we can see that Augustine’s positive assessment of ageing taken from Psalms 91 and 92 are not as positive as the psalms themselves suggest. He has reinterpreted growing old and long life as referring not to the

34 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 91.14; NBA 27/1.208.

35 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 91.13; NBA 27/1.208.

36 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 53.4; NBA 26.64.

37 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 36/3.4; NBA 25.816: “...iam in fine saeculi est in senecta pingui...”

38 Augustine, *Sermo* 216.9; NBA 32/1.260.

present life but to eternal life. He is aware of the ultimate shortness of life and of its arbitrariness in association with virtue. At the same time, he does endorse the idea that physical maturity is (or ought to be) a sign of spiritual maturity and the elimination of sin.

2.3 *Psalm 39(38)*

We may turn now to the three psalm verses that in themselves provide a more negative assessment of ageing and old age. The most extensive comment made by Augustine in any of the five passages under consideration occurs in the homily preached on Psalm 39(38) in Carthage at the basilica built over the site of Cyprian’s martyrdom, possibly on the anniversary of his execution. This was a psalm for him about people who leap across the earth to heaven.³⁹ When he came to consider verses 5 and 6, Augustine honed in on mention of the end (*finis*). This immediately made him think, not of death or of old age, but of “the goal still far away, not the race immediately in front of me.”⁴⁰ This goal is the prize of God’s heavenly call in Christ, as Philippians 3:12-14 says.⁴¹ This destiny is an eschatological positive, a “good desire, a holy desire” as Augustine says.⁴² He was aware that not everyone in his congregation had this desire as fully as they ought, but he hoped that they would leap beyond their sluggishness and embrace it completely.

Turning to the second half of the verse, Augustine reads καὶ τὸν ἀριθμὸν τῶν ἡμερῶν μου τίς ἐστὶν as “et numerum dierum meorum qui est” where he reads *qui est* in apposition to *numerum* rather than as introducing *numerum* as a complement.⁴³ The idea of the number of days, in terms of length of life, and the obvious intention of the psalmist to speak of the shortness of life is neglected and instead Augustine offered some philosophical reflection on the reality of worldly existence: “If I shake myself free of earthly things to contemplate the things of heaven, if I compare transient things with those that abide, I see what has true being, and what has more the appearance of being than true existence.”⁴⁴ The days that truly exist are the days without end (*sine fine est*); the only thing that may truly exist now is the present moment, not

39 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 38.1; NBA 25.882.

40 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 38.5; NBA 25.892: “...finem qui mihi deest, non cursum qui mihi adest.”

41 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 38.6; NBA 25.894.

42 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 38.6; NBA 25.894: “Bonum desiderium, sanctum desiderium.”

43 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 38.7; NBA 25.896: “Numerum dierum meorum mihi notum fac, sed qui est.”

44 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 38.7; NBA 25.896: “...si ab istis me excutiens superna contempler, si transeuntia manentibus comparem, uideo quid uerum sit: quid autem magis uideatur esse, quam sit?”

even the present day or the present hour, but even that present moment is gone in that moment.⁴⁵ Augustine's attention is very much on a world of Platonic ideas in which eternity is an eternal present. This world is flux in contrast with the being or constancy of heaven. The unceasing change in the experience of existence and its fleetingness allow Augustine to urge his community to leap over this world into the next.

This is how he understood the last part of the verse: ἵνα γινῶ τί ὑστερῶ ἐγώ ("Vt sciam quid desit mihi"). ἁλι is not taken in the sense of "fragility", something associated with old age, but as "lacking" (ὑστερῶ = *desit*). Lives can be lacking no matter what our age. For Augustine, what we lack is the prize that comes at the end of the race. The sense of life's brevity and frailty is transformed by Augustine into comments about the desire for eternal life.

With verse 6 of the psalm, however, Augustine cannot avoid these issues. Talk about days growing old (παλαιστὰς ἔθου τὰς ἡμέρας μου) does suggest old age and impending death and implies a realisation of the shortness of life. Yet, even here, Augustine contrasts old with new (from 2 Cor 5:17), where the new day never grows old. The old is Adam, the new is Christ. The new is reality, while the old is hope for the reality. Note here that even in talking about this life, Augustine ignores any notion of despair about the human lifespan. He does acknowledge old age, but his attention is fixed upon the joy of the next life.

As we regard our sin, our mortality, our fleeting seasons, our groaning and toil and sweat, the stages of our life that succeed one another and will not stand still, but slip by imperceptibly from infancy to old age as we regard all these, let us see in them the old self, the old day, the old song, the Old Covenant. But when we turn to our inner being, to all that is destined to be renewed in us and replace the things subject to change, let us find there the new self, the new day, the new song, the New Covenant, and let us love this newness so dearly that the oldness we meet there does not frighten us.⁴⁶

45 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 38.7; NBA 25.8968: "Iste ergo dies non sunt; ante abeunt paene, quam ueniant; et cum uenerint, stare non possunt..."

46 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 38.9; NBA 25.900: "Ergo ad peccatum, ad mortalitatem, ad praeteruolantia tempora, ad gemitum et laborem et sudorem, ad aetates succedentes, non manentes, ab infantia usque ad senectutem sine sensu transeuntes, ad haec adtendentes, uideamus hic ueterem hominem, ueterem diem, uetus canticum, Vetus Testamentum; conuersi autem ad interiorem, ad ea quae innouanda sunt, pro his quae immutabuntur, inueniamus hominem nouum, diem nouum, canticum nouum, Testamentum Nouum; et sic amemus istam nouitatem, ut non ibi timeamus uetustatem."

The idea that life is nothing before God, with which verse 6 continues, is taken by Augustine to mean that we will only discover the truth of our insignificance when we are in the presence of God.⁴⁷ All of these comments support Augustine's initial comments about this psalm, that we are invited to leap over or leave behind this present life for the glory of eternal life. The value of this life is depreciated by Augustine.

In *Confessiones*, Augustine quotes verse 6 about the days growing old, in a wider reflection on the nature of time itself. We find the same ideas as in *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 38 that time, which is fleeting, is not reality, which is unchanging.⁴⁸ The psalm here is added to what precedes it without a great deal of explicit relevance, but he does note that the days growing old means that life is slipping away and he is unable to explain it because time is a mystery.⁴⁹ In *De Trinitate* Augustine contrasts the life of the flesh with the life of the spirit, which will only be found in heaven, without mentioning Psalm 39.⁵⁰

In *Sermo* 16A (Denis 20) Augustine was preaching in Carthage and it would appear that this psalm, as well as the story of the women caught in adultery in John 8:1-11. He comments about the verses discussed above. He makes the same point in this homily as in the other homily: our end (*finis*), which is the heavenly Jerusalem. To get there we have Jesus himself as guide.⁵¹ We reach that end by living and dying in imitation of Jesus.⁵² The number of days invites us to ask about how much longer we have left to live, but that is only so that each today we can be aware of what is still lacking in our lives. To reach that end and to make up for what is lacking we need faith and works (Gal 5:6). We do not know how much longer we have to live, in order that we do not become careless about how we live (putting off until tomorrow).⁵³ There is no hint at all of anything to do with ageing and old age in this presentation of the psalm. In *Sermo* 77B (Morin 16) on the Canaanite woman of Matthew 15:21-28, it would seem that Psalm 39(38) had again been used in the liturgy. The last words in which we have been interested (“my life is as nought before you”) are taken by Augustine to mean that our mortal life is not what we shall take before God, only our immortal substance, and he urges the congregation to desire that immortality.⁵⁴ The transience of life is not the point developed by Augustine.

47 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 38.9; NBA 25.900.

48 Augustine, *Conf.* 11.14.17; NBA 1.380.

49 Augustine, *Conf.* 11.22.28; NBA 1.390.

50 Augustine, *De Trin.* 2.17.28; NBA 4.112-114.

51 Augustine, *Sermo* 16A.9; NBA 29.310-312.

52 Augustine, *Sermo* 16A.10; NBA 29.314.

53 Augustine, *Sermo* 16A.11; NBA 29.316.

54 Augustine, *Sermo* 77B.5; NBA 30/1.558.

In *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, where he sought in 420 to reconcile the idea of original sin with marriage being a good against Julian of Eclanum, Augustine used Psalm 39(38):5, as one of several scriptural passages that show how life has been affected by original sin.⁵⁵ This passage is linked with Psalm 144(143):4 and Romans 8:20 because of the presence of the word *uanitas*. In *Contra Iulianum* Augustine defended the idea that he had been a supporter from his conversion of the notion of original sin. Psalm 39(38):5 is again linked with Psalm 144(143):4 because of the use of *uanitas* and how it is linked with death, which came into the world through the sin of Adam.⁵⁶ It is because of the wrath of God (Rom 5:9) that people grow old and die (Sir 14:17), such that life is vanity (Eccl 1:2-3). This gives the opportunity for another mention of Psalm 39(38):5 to show that death is the result of sin, which is vanity.⁵⁷ In *Opus imperfectum* Augustine again linked Psalm 144(143):4 with 39(38):5 for the same purpose.⁵⁸

2.4 *Psalm 71(70)*

In the first of his two homilies on Psalm 71(70) Augustine announces that the focus of the psalm is about how free God's grace is.⁵⁹ While the psalmist's statement in verse 9 expresses fear that when he is old he will be abandoned by God, in Augustine's hands this is turned into a much more positive statement. Augustine's concern at this point is not with being old, although it is mentioned several times, but with the failing strength mentioned in the second half of the verse. Human weakness is the opportunity for God's strength to fill the believer, following 2 Corinthians 12:10. The crucifixion is the moment when Jesus embraced weakness and endured insults. Such weakness, transformed by God's strength, leads to resurrection.

Augustine posits an equivalence between the crucifixion of Jesus and his old age (i.e. his weakness), on the basis of Romans 6:6. Here Augustine wants to interpret *uetus homo* in the sense of "old" rather than "former" (cf. *De uera rel.* 26.49 mentioned above where he contrasts old with new, hence giving "old" the sense of "former") in order to make the most of the link between old age and weakness, when he writes, "If our old self was there, the weakness of old age was there."⁶⁰ The fear present in the psalm verse has been transformed

55 Augustine, *De nup. et con.* 2.29.50; NBA 18.154.

56 Augustine, *C. Iul.* 6.12.39; NBA 18.910.

57 Augustine, *C. Iul.* 6.24.78; NBA 18.970-972.

58 Augustine, *C. Iul op. imp.* 1.63; NBA 19/1.72; 2.178; NBA 19/1.372; and 6.7; NBA 19/2.1036.

59 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 70/1.1; NBA 26.718-720.

60 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 70/1.11; NBA 26.734-736: "Si ibi erat uetus homo noster, senectus ibi erat; quia uetus, senectus."

into a confident statement of God's grace. “Why be afraid that he may desert you, that he may toss you aside in your old age, when your strength has failed? That is precisely the time when his strength will be in you, when your own is gone.”⁶¹

This psalm verse does not appear to be used elsewhere in Augustine's writings.

2.5 *Psalm 90(89)*

The focus of the commentary on Psalm 90(89) is the law given through Moses as a refuge.⁶² When he comes to verses 9 and 10 Augustine observes that mortality is a punishment. There is nothing surprising in this, since it is the explanation offered in Genesis 3:19. The length of life allotted to humankind, seventy or eighty years, describes not only the brevity of this life, but its wretchedness as well in Augustine's estimation. Anyone who lives beyond eighty must be unhappy because of the increasing frailty of old age, the “struggle under the burden of manifold ailments” as Augustine described it.⁶³ We can notice the contrast with the comments made about Psalm 92(91) with the sinless white hair of the elderly.

In addition, there are those younger than seventy who are burdened by premature ageing and those over eighty who seem remarkably spritely. With that in mind, Augustine searches for a spiritual meaning to the numbers. Seventy represents the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures in this life, while eighty represents the promises of the New Testament for eternal life. While the LXX for verse 10 has τὸ πλεῖον αὐτῶν, Augustine reads it not as “much of them” but “more than them” (*amplius eorum*) are fruitless toil (or “labor and sorrow” as Boulding translates it from Augustine's *labor et dolor*). In Augustine's understanding, this means that if we go beyond the faith of the New Testament we find nothing good, or it means that during life on earth we suffer until our adoption into glory is finalised. He takes the last part of the verse not as referring to the speed at which life passes and our ultimate disappearance from the earth, but, following the LXX's ὅτι ἐπῆλθε πραῦτης ἐφ' ἡμᾶς, καὶ παιδεύθησόμεθα, as a reference to God's gentleness in correcting us or instructing us (noting a textual variation).⁶⁴ This spiritualised reading takes us away from too much reflection on the emptiness of life. Even here Augustine manages to turn our attention to a positive reading that involves looking forward to the

61 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. 70/1.11*; NBA 26.736: “Quid times ne derelinquat te, ne abiciat in tempus senectutis, cum defecerit uirtus tua? Immo tunc in te erit uirtus eius, quando defecerit uirtus tua.”

62 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. 89.1*; NBA 27/1.108.

63 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. 89.9*; NBA 27/1.116: “...multiplicatis labore doloribus uiuunt.”

64 Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. 89.10*; NBA 27/1.118.

next life. The meaning of life, including anything to do with ageing and getting old, is not to be found in itself, but only in the light of salvation and heaven.

Elsewhere, we find reference to the “labour and sorrow” from this psalm in *Confessiones*, but without any reference to length of life or ageing.⁶⁵ In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine was concerned to explain how the inordinately long lives of figures in the antediluvian period narrated in the Hebrew Scriptures were to be understood. He rejected the idea that ten years then equalled one year in his own time, arguing that they were to be counted just the same way, thereby making Noah’s 600 years a real 600 years. He also rejected the idea that this was a textual problem in either the Hebrew or the LXX, even though there are some variations.⁶⁶ Why lives became shorter sometime after the Flood, which would seem to be the obvious question to address, is not something Augustine explained here and he has no comment to make about how short life was in his own time.⁶⁷

2.6 Conclusion

What we can conclude from this examination of these verses from five psalms as presented by Augustine is that he was not really that interested in the dilemma of old age and ageing. He was not interested in the apparent contradiction found in the psalms between old age as a blessing from God and old age as incapacity and decay. In his treatment, Augustine views all these verses through an eschatological lens. Taking up the Pauline contrast between the old and new person, Augustine could argue that life in this world, corrupted by the sin of Adam, was of little significance when compared with the life of the next world, brought about through the free gift of the Father in the death and resurrection of the Son. It is not old age or getting old and frail that concerned Augustine, but how human weakness brought about by sin could be overcome by God’s grace. Old age was a metaphor for eternal life. The one positive he said about growing old was that it was a metaphor for gaining the wisdom to know that human effort was futile and for a person having been purified of sin and ready for the joys of heaven. Thus old age is either, like every stage of life in this world, associated with sin or spiritualised to refer to eternal life. It is our destiny, our life as new people, that Augustine wanted to promote rather than our present condition.

65 Augustine, *Conf.* 10.28.39; NBA 1.332.

66 Augustine, *De civ. Dei* 15.14.1; NBA 5/2.412.

67 This is true for the whole discussion on these remarkably long lives. See *De civ. Dei* 15.9.

3 Modern Implications

Augustine’s religious views of other-worldly reality are out of favour in a world still influenced by the Enlightenment revisionism about the importance of religion. People are left to find meaning in death, and value in old age, just as the psalmist did. Augustine’s words sound to the modern ear very much like those criticised by Joe Hill in his 1911 song against the Salvation (‘Starvation’) Army, “You’ll get pie in the sky when you die” (to which Hill’s call and response answer was: “That’s a lie”). Augustine did not see pie in the sky as hoping in something that was unlikely to happen, for he did believe that there was a pie to be had. He took it more in the sense that there is no need to improve conditions in this life because it is only the next life that matters; at least this is what he could be accused of on the basis simply of his comments on these psalm verses. For people who deny the existence of heaven, Augustine’s reinterpretation of the psalmist’s statements hold no relevance at all.

This conflict of perception about the value of old age found in the psalmist should not surprise us today, who live in the awareness of Eric Erikson’s eighth stage of psychosocial development in old age, where the conflict in looking back over one’s whole life is between a sense of pride in one’s achievement or a sense of failure and regret, which he summed up as the conflict between integrity and despair.⁶⁸ Indeed, Erikson’s wife, Joan, added a ninth stage in which despair could or would give way to disdain and disgust at the ever-present sense of life’s end and a person’s loss of hope in the face of increasing difficulties in daily life.⁶⁹ Yet, even among post-Erikson scholars, like Daniel Levinson, ideas about old age are poorly sketched out.⁷⁰ Such a view could never have been Augustine’s and, I am sure he would argue, could never be any Christian’s.

In recent studies, not only is the idea of health an important aspect of gerontological studies, but so too is well-being. Quality of life and how to measure it have become increasingly significant in assessing old age, given the dramatic increase in life expectancy over the past century. As Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone point out in their 2015 article, “Studies of older people indicate that evaluations of quality of life are affected by the person’s state of health, but the frequent finding that average self-reported life evaluation in the population

68 E.H. Erikson, “Reflections on Dr. Borg’s Life Cycle,” in: *Adulthood*, ed. by E.H. Erikson, New York, 1978, pp. 1-32; and E.H. Erikson, J.M. Erikson, and H.Q. Kivnick, *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, New York, 1986.

69 E.H. Erikson and J.M. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, New York, 1997.

70 D.J. Levinson, C.N. Darrow, E.B. Klein, M.H. Levinson, and B. McKee, *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, New York, 1978; and M.E. Agronin, “From Cicero to Cohen: Developmental Theories of Aging, From Antiquity to the Present,” *The Gerontologist*, 54 (2014), 30-39.

increases with age suggests that psychological wellbeing is affected by many factors other than health.”⁷¹ They classify three approaches to measuring well-being: evaluative well-being (quality or goodness of life), hedonic well-being (feelings or moods about life), and eudemonic well-being (judgements about the meaning and purpose of life). Factors such as socioeconomic conditions influence whether one’s evaluative well-being increases or decreases in old age.

One of their findings is that in advanced, western countries there is often a U-shape in self-assessment of well-being, and that part of the explanation for why older people generally have a greater sense of their own well-being is that “despite factors such as the death of loved ones, loss of status associated with retirement, deteriorating health and reduced income – though perhaps also reduced material needs – older people maintain and even increase reported wellbeing by focusing on a more limited set of social contacts and experiences.”⁷² This can be true even in the face of increasing health worries. In other words, older people may be less healthy and less productive but are more satisfied when contrasted with middle-aged people who have more stress and worry. However, in the Middle East, former Soviet countries, and sub-Saharan Africa, life evaluation declines steadily with age and does not reverse.⁷³ In addition, declining psychological well-being is associated with increasing risk of physical illness and they find that chronic illness at whatever age is associated with reduced levels of hedonic and eudemonic well-being.⁷⁴ Their conclusions are “that positive hedonic states, life evaluation, and eudemonic wellbeing are relevant to health and quality of life as people age” and that “[h]ealth care systems should be concerned not only with illness and disability, but with supporting methods of improving positive psychological states.”⁷⁵ Again, we may note that Augustine, while he accepted the reality of old age bringing on a decline in health, did not see that as a problem needing to be addressed. In fact, for him, well-being and health in this life were of little importance. In a spiritualised and eschatological understanding, the Christian should have a eudemonic perspective, because this life does have a purpose, and its purpose comes ever closer to realisation the older one gets, but it is a purpose that will not be fulfilled in this life.

Gene Cohen, the American psychiatrist, has done much to develop the psychology and psychiatry of ageing from his work in neuroplasticity. He found

71 A. Steptoe, A. Deaton, and A.A. Stone, “Psychological Wellbeing, Health and Ageing,” *The Lancet*, 14 February 2015, pp. 640-648, at p. 640.

72 Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone, “Psychological Wellbeing,” p. 641.

73 Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone, “Psychological Wellbeing,” p. 642.

74 Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone, “Psychological Wellbeing,” pp. 643-644.

75 Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone, “Psychological Wellbeing,” p. 645.

that as people age they continue to have potential for growth and developmental intelligence. Ageing brings about maturity and integration in critical and emotive skills.⁷⁶ He believed that a person’s capacity for creativity continued to increase even into old age because of the richness of life experience. This enabled the elderly to make new relationships, cope with setback, and think more of the common good.⁷⁷

No doubt, these findings vary from individual to individual, and finding out how and why some elderly people are more resilient than others is a key discovery requiring further research. Even though we can find some resonance with Augustine in Cohen’s work, like the maturity spoken about in his comments on Psalm 92(91), there are differences. Cohen’s late-life phases of liberation, summing-up, and encore, seem to be about making meaning of one’s life as a legacy in the face of personal extinction, whereas Augustine, as we have noted, is completely focused on an eschatological, post-worldly reality.

4 Conclusion

Attitudes towards growing old have always varied. The authors of various psalms contained within the Hebrew Scriptures could see old age as a divine blessing and yet realise that it was often a frustrating time of incapacity and decline. Life’s meaning was all to be understood within one’s understanding of death. For a Christian like Augustine, imbued with a belief in resurrection and life after death, old age and human fragility became much less of a concern. In Augustine’s treatment of the five psalm verses we have been examining, we see him transcending and transforming the existential depth of human emotion shown by the psalmist with an eschatological perspective. With these particular psalm verses, Augustine imposed his own attitudes and was not shaped by them, but bent them to serve his own purposes. A ripe old age is not the Christian’s objective, which instead is eternal life. The trials and tribulations of this life, especially for people as they age and face issues about the value of their existence in the face of approaching death, are the proving ground for allowing virtue to shine and hope in heaven to take over. Human limitation was simply an opportunity for ever greater reliance upon God. For Augustine, only eternal life mattered, and any frustration expressed by the psalmist was brushed aside. The older one gets the closer one comes to being a new creation, and for this Augustine could not wait.

⁷⁶ G.D. Cohen, *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*, New York, 2005, p. 35.

⁷⁷ G.D. Cohen, *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*, New York, 2000.