

Aegis and Agency of Age

The silent, indomitable force, felt in the awe of ancient trees, seen as a poignant promise of hope in the unfurling of a new leaf, tasted in the thrill of antiquity with every archaeological discovery – AGE. Age is more than ‘just a number’, it is a mirror and a lens that reveals the depth of what has gone and the promise of what is to come. The present essay aims to argue that age does matter – it permeates historical, developmental, social, biological, technological, and individual facets of the framework of our life and society.

Age has played a diverse and evolving role throughout the history of humanity, shaping civilizations which in turn have been categorized into distinct ‘ages’. Each age helped to define and further our understanding and appreciation of our place in the world. Born in a digital age, the youth of today feel like they have been a part of the ages that brought humanity to present day. In ancient and medieval societies age was seen as a sign of wisdom and therefore of power and prominence over younger people. For example, it was common practice for men to take on leadership roles when they reached a certain age, in their forties or fifties as they were seen as more experienced and by extension more reliable and trustworthy. We have come a long way since. With people leading longer and healthier lives and with an increased emphasis on personal achievement, ability and talent, the influence of age is becoming nuanced. An advancing age is no longer the determinant of social status or power. While elders are still, by varying degrees across cultures, seen as keepers of tradition and knowledge, youth are also valued for their adaptability and responsiveness. Our individual roles as elders or youth must not be side-lined by a refusal to accept that age does matter.

Moreover, early years, adulthood and old age all leave their mark on who we ultimately become. In this respect, while no life milestone is less important than the others, the peculiarities of each have implications. According to developmental psychology people undergo significant cognitive changes from one stage of life to another. This affects how an individual relates to the world and other people, and how he can contribute to society. The most significant developmental advantages of older people are accumulated knowledge, expertise, and wisdom. Mental faculties, however, may become less reliable in the late sixties or early seventies with declines in processing speed, working memory and executive functions. Compensatory strategies and emotional regulation skills not only mitigate these, but also enable contributions in workforce and civic engagement in caregiving roles to foster intergeneration solidarity and resilience. The recognition of this promotes social cohesion. Young people, in tune with their own age-related development, have an innate curiosity, a desire for exploration and experimentation and a keenness to develop new skills. This age matters greatly, so that education policies and social structures can be redefined to empower youth. As a young person, I believe my age should matter so my insights into the issues of today can be approached with the enthusiasm they deserve and so I can avail of the support and guidance my age needs to navigate safely the unfolding of life. Age does more than fray our bodies, it augurs shifts that define identities.

It is also valuable to consider the impact of different life stages on the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of a country. Population comprising of a significant percentage of elderly individuals might show and impaired workforce that brings forth repercussions such as sluggish economic growth, potential strain on families, depleting resources in a community and the shifting dynamics of international relations (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe). The lower fertility associated with an aging population further changes favourable economic age distributions impacting income inequality indirectly affecting Kuznets curve. A prevalence of elderly people causes a proportionate demand for healthcare services. It has tangible consequences for social care systems, labour markets, public finances, and pension entitlements. Such a population, though, may garner an increased commitment from the youth to work towards improving quality of life in view of the enhanced longevity they witness. Research shows a declining trend in the number of college age students in both the US and China. Age matters as having a younger population potentially offers

advantages of a dynamic workforce, increased innovation, greater collective energy aimed at economic growth. Younger populations adapt to new technologies and utilize the benefits towards social and political policies. Age demographics and the happiness index of nations are also closely linked as studies suggest that countries with a higher percentage of young adults tend to have higher levels of happiness, such as Denmark and Switzerland. Countries like India and Nigeria have a large youth population which could be a significant driver of their future economic growth. Understanding these connections can inform policies aimed at investing in education other social structures to ensure well-being in the country.

In addition, soft baby skin, sprint of sinews, aching bones, cracking voice, thinner hair, all bear testament to the fact that biology has the final word. Age matters to every cell in the human body as it bears witness to mutations in RNA transcriptions. Age matters to muscles of our skeletal system and muscles of our heart as they try to find a balance between DNA dictated decline, dietary and lifestyle choices and fitness decision affecting them. Age matters to healing and repair mechanisms that strive to preserve the integrity of our tissues. Biology favours the young. Biological processes are extensively studied to provide evidence for the potential of age reversal. The aim of gene editing and biohacking techniques is to simulate youth for tissue rejuvenation, better immune function, increased resistance to diseases and thus not only extend lifespan but have greater number of productive and healthy years. The concept of biological age which reflects the state of an individual's health and ageing process is more relevant now than ever before. Use of bioinformatics, which integrates genomic, epigenomic and environmental data in health and fitness tracking to predict biological age in an important step that recognizes that age matters and therefore promotes targeted interventions, to reduce healthcare costs and provide longer enjoyment of youth.

Furthermore, the introduction of Ameca, the most advanced humanoid robot with human like expressions, prompts us to consider what will differentiate humanity from machines. One trait that makes us truly human is the fact that driven by our internal clock, we age. The marking of life with age is a human tradition which serves as a reminder of our special capacity to take something as abstract as time and give it meaning. Advances in technology are breaking down boundaries between machine and human. Researchers have been trying to replicate the physical effects of age on robots and are exploring how microcontrollers can be programmed to store events and memories at regular intervals. This quest to replicate age shows that it does indeed matter. Experiments are being conducted to explore the concept of storing consciousness on a computer beyond mortality. Humanoid robots being given access to humanity's collective knowledge would allow them to experience lifetimes spanning generation. If they develop and understanding of coming into being and ceasing to exist, the distinction between man and machine will be blurred. Its important to take pride in the individualism that our ability to age gives us. Age matters in how it equips us to develop perspectives through different lenses at different points in time and reflect in a way that robots haven't yet caught up with.

Finally, our social contexts remain greatly influenced by age. Growing up in an Indian household, I have witnessed my culture that venerates its elderly. However, my exposure and experiences as a member of the global community have taught me to respect the brilliance of youth and their unwavering commitment to progress. They promote an open-mindedness and acceptance through their fresh perspectives, untainted by traditional doctrines and biases. I find it remarkable that my peers all over the world can celebrate our ancestry while challenging conventions that no longer serve us. It fills me with pride to be part of this ground-breaking generation, our age matters. This is especially inspiring to me as a student getting ready for undergraduate studies carrying lasting impressions of the global crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic while entering a world of ever-expanding machine learning and artificial intelligence. We are guided by our empathy, our ethics, connectedness, and social conscience as we look at advancing these technologies towards a

prosperous and equitable future. Our youth brings an unrivalled clarity to our goal of fostering a global community – One planet, One people.

In conclusion, it is in embracing the power of the nuanced nexus of the past and present that we will discover our evolved vision for the future.

(Kuznets Curve refers to economic inequality brought on in the initial phase of economic growth.)

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