University of Groningen

Age-adapted wellbeing in a Consolation for Old Age

Jedan, Christoph

Published in:

NTT: Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion

DOI:

[10.5117/NTT2021.1.007.JEDA](https://doi.org/10.5117/NTT2021.1.007.JEDA)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jedan, C. (2021). Age-adapted wellbeing in a Consolation for Old Age: Re-reading Cicero's Cato Maior De Senectute. *NTT: Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion*, 75(1), 121-132.

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NTT2021.1.007.JEDA>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

KEY TEXT

Age-Adapted Wellbeing in a Consolation for Old Age

Re-Reading Cicero's Cato Maior De Senectute (44 BCE)

Christoph Jedan

NTT 75 (1): 121–132

DOI: 10.5117/NTT2021.1.007.JEDA

Abstract

As part of NTT JTSR's series on Key Texts, the present article discusses Cicero's dialogue *Cato Maior De Senectute* (44 BCE). Over the *longue durée* of western cultural history, the dialogue has been a key cultural reference. Even today, after the rise of modern gerontology, it is frequently cited. However, prevailing interpretations are hard-pressed to offer an even-handed and plausible view of the text. On the one hand, Cicero is presented uncritically as having anticipated all the latest results of today's gerontological research. On the other hand, he is ridiculed as spokesman for a male Roman elite, drawing an unrealistically positive picture of old age. In this article a fresh interpretation is proposed, to contextualize and mitigate such extreme readings. *De Senectute* is primarily a consolation for old age, which uses themes and stratagems of the consolatory genre. It offers a more realistic view of old age than current ideas of 'successful ageing' and can contribute to a concept of age-adapted wellbeing.

Keywords: senescence, healthy ageing, successful ageing, consolation, wellbeing, age-adapted wellbeing, medical humanities, cultural gerontology, narrative gerontology, narrative foreclosure, death, Cicero

Introduction

In a thematic issue on religion, health and wellbeing we hardly need an excuse to revisit Cicero's dialogue *Cato Maior De Senectute*.¹ *De Senectute* has long been a staple of western culture: admired by Albertus Magnus, Dante Alighieri, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Michel de Montaigne, it was among the first classical texts to be translated and printed in America (in 1744, when the publisher was none other than Benjamin Franklin).²

In recent decades, *De Senectute* has again been cited frequently; this is no doubt connected to the invention and rise of the disciplines of geriatrics and gerontology, and to the rise of interest in the topic of ageing more broadly.³ Yet, for all the references to it, it would be a mistake to think that we have 'exhausted' the text. Far from it: *De Senectute* has been subjected to two diametrically opposed and separately implausible readings. On the one hand, we sometimes find commentators naively applauding Cicero as inventor or precursor of the latest gerontological trends. Cicero, they claim, is 'the first gerontologist', the author of 'the most famous literary work on old age' that conforms to nearly all of the standards set by modern psychology, in particular by promoting an important life-cycle theory that can rival modern equivalents.⁴ Cicero is presented as precursor of a concept of successful ageing; he is hailed as the prophet of a 'novogerontic' society⁵ and is valued as a teacher of the 'art of ageing'.⁶ Perhaps the most contentiously optimistic commentator is Dean Rodeheaver, who credits Cicero with

1 In what follows, I use Falconer's text and translation. See Cicero, *On Old Age. On Friendship. On Divination*. Translated by W.A. Falconer (Loeb Classical Library 154), Cambridge MA 1923. References are to the paragraph numbers in text and translation. There is a wide range of excellent recent translations, e.g. M.T. Cicero, *How to Grow Old: Ancient Wisdom for the Second Half of Life*. Translated and with an introduction by Philip Freeman, Princeton/Oxford 2016.

2 As stated by P. Freeman in Cicero, *How to Grow Old*, xvi-xvii. See also J. Baars, *Aging and the Art of Living*, Baltimore 2012, 113.

3 The term 'gerontology' was coined as late as 1903 by immunologist Élie Metchnikoff; serious work on the topic started in the 1940s; and the first dedicated degree programmes were set up in the 1970s. See the Wikipedia article on Gerontology, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerontology> (last accessed 23th of November 2020).

4 See, e.g., A.R. Chandler, 'Cicero's Ideal Old Man', *Journal of Gerontology* 3 (1948), 285-289, 289; M.E. Agronin, 'From Cicero to Cohen: Developmental Theories of Aging, from Antiquity to the Present', *The Gerontologist* 54 (2013), 30-39, 30.

5 A. Marcoen, 'De novogeront, Cicero, en het nieuwe en beter ouder worden', *Tijdschrift voor Gerontologie en Geriatrie* 39 (2008), 130-132.

6 Baars, *Aging and the Art of Living*, 123.

accurately ‘predicting’ key results of the scientific study of ageing.⁷ And, if Cicero was optimistic about memory retention among the elderly, there is good reason to follow him in this regard and to be critical of today’s exaggerated fear of Alzheimer’s disease (‘Alzism’).⁸

On the other hand, *De Senectute* has been interpreted (and attacked) as a wilful misrepresentation of the realities of old age in ancient Rome. Some commentators allege that for most people old age was actually quite miserable; if Cicero speaks positively about old age, there must be a self-interested, political and status-related motive behind the text. In the recent discussion, this trend in interpretation begins with Simone de Beauvoir and her book *La vieillesse* (1970). De Beauvoir alleges that Cicero wanted to revive male privileges and the authority of the senate, which had eroded over time.⁹ This perspective, often charging Cicero with conceit, has been quite frequently echoed.¹⁰

What is underdeveloped between jubilant and dismissive interpretations is a plausible middle ground, which views Cicero’s depictions of old age as an idealization, without dismissing them for that reason, and which at the same time allows the ancient text to take a perspective outside our customary present-day scientific discussion. Only if we do this will Cicero’s text have a chance to exert a critical influence that allows us to see (and where necessary to correct) today’s preoccupations and biases. It would be beyond the scope of this short article to defend such an interpretation in any detail, but I want at least to offer the outlines of such an interpretation and to explore its potential benefits for medical humanities and religious studies.

In what follows, I shall first offer an overview of the context, structure and content of *De Senectute*. I shall then suggest a fresh interpretation of the text that can help contextualize and partly vindicate the extreme interpretations. Finally, I will reflect on key lessons to be drawn from the text.

7 D. Rodeheaver, ‘Psychological Adaptation and Virtue: Geropsychological Perspectives on Cicero’s *De Senectute*’, *Journal of Aging Studies* 7 (1993), 353–59, 353.

8 Rodeheaver, ‘Psychological Adaptation and Virtue’, 356.

9 See, e.g., S. de Beauvoir, *La vieillesse*, Paris 1970 (reprint 2020), 171: ‘une défense de la vieillesse pour prouver que l’autorité du Sénat depuis longtemps ébranlée doit être renforcée’.

10 See, e.g., M.I. Finley, ‘Introduction’, in Th.M. Falkner, J. de Luce (ed.), *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature*, Albany NY 1989, 1–20. He attacks Cicero – ‘never was he more disingenuous’ – and contrasts Cicero’s recommendation of gardening with a decided lack of expressed pleasure in his writings when discussing the supervision of his estates (15). Other examples include J. Hendricks, ‘Cicero and Social Gerontology: Context and Interpretation of a Classic’, *Journal of Aging Studies* 7 (1993), 339–351, who deplores Cicero’s elitism and sees Cicero’s processing of his own marginalization as the main purpose of the text.

Context, structure and content

The Roman statesman, orator and writer Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) was a lifelong defender of the Roman republican system against up-and-coming political heavyweights who sought to overturn it. With the success of Caesar (49 BCE), Cicero's influence waned and his public role was finished; he found himself marginalized and threatened. Around 45 BCE, after the death of his daughter and an acrimonious divorce, Cicero changed tack and intensified his literary activities. He did not have much time left. After the assassination of Caesar in 44 BCE – in spite of not being directly involved – Cicero was put on a 'death list'; he was on the run, and was eventually hunted down and killed in 43 BCE. Yet, regardless of those precarious circumstances, nearly all of the works for which Cicero is known today stem from the last two years of his life. *De Senectute* is no exception. The work was written in 44 BCE. It was dedicated to his friend Atticus and, in his dedicatory introduction, Cicero gives us an important hint as to how the text should be understood. He says that he suspects Atticus to suffer from the same (political) circumstances as he himself does, but that a consolation for *them* 'is too difficult a task to be undertaken now and must be deferred until another time' (9). In other words, *De Senectute* was meant to be a consolation for *age-related* losses that were felt acutely by author and addressee. Whilst Cicero felt the political loss to be too great, and perhaps irremediable, he could at least try to find and give comfort for the losses of old age. I will return to the interpretation of *De Senectute* as a consolation below.

In terms of its literary form, *De Senectute* is a dialogue in the same sense as in Plato: ostensibly a dialogue, with sometimes humorous characterizations, it gives ample space for the main speaker to expound his point of view. The interlocutors are Laelius and Scipio, who visit the house of Cato the Elder (234-149 BCE), the famous general, statesman and author. They express their astonishment at how well he bears his advanced age: 'old age is never burdensome to you, though it is so vexatious to most old men that they declare it to be a load heavier than Aetna' (4). Thus prompted, Cato responds with a largely uninterrupted discourse spanning more than forty pages in modern printed editions. The choice of Cato, a historical person of legendary reputation, does a lot, of course, to add authority to Cicero's words. At the same time, it allows him to sketch some of the idiosyncrasies to which old age is prone. Cato, *inter alia* the author of a treatise on agriculture, is depicted as rambling on about his favourite occupation, quite

heedless of the lack of interest shown by his interlocutors, before he stops short – with a self-deprecating smile, as it were – and steers the conversation to other topics.

The first pages offer an exposition of the two main ideas that Cato will expound: (a) A virtuous and happy life is never a burden (4). Even if non-moral goods such as a person's financial situation are wont to have some influence, the key attribute is good character, the possession of virtue (8). Good ageing thus begins in youth, giving old age the satisfaction of looking back on a life well spent: 'it is most delightful to have the consciousness of a life well spent and the memory of many deeds worthily performed' (9). (b) It is necessary to attune one's perspective to Nature – writ large, the divine principle of Stoic philosophy – whom one should follow 'as a god' (*tamquam deum*, 5).

According to Cato, the negative depictions of old age that prevail in society are founded on erroneous judgments (*falsum putare*, 4). The remainder of *De Senectute* is dedicated to the refutation of those errors. Cato highlights four such misrepresentations or misunderstandings ('four reasons why old age appears to be unhappy', 15):

(1) Old age withdraws us from those activities which we found supremely important when we were young (15-26). Cato argues that we need to re-adjust our view of important activities. Truly important are the activities that involve reflection, the giving of advice and the making of decisions. The ageing person should not underrate their importance. On a ship, the helmsman 'sits quietly in the stern and simply holds the tiller' (17), but this is by no means less important than climbing the mast. Against worries that one's memory and intellect are blunted by age, Cato recommends constant intellectual activity: 'Old men retain their mental faculties, provided their interest and application continue' (22). By way of illustration, Cato states proudly that in his old age he learned 'Greek, which I seized upon as eagerly as if I had been desirous of satisfying a long-continued thirst, with the result that I have acquired first-hand the information which you see me using in this discussion' (26).¹¹

(2) Old age reduces our physical strength (27-38). Again, Cato counsels a realistic reappraisal of the strength needed for activities at that stage of life. Strength and activities should be in balance and one does not need

¹¹ The passage also functions as an additional anchor for the obvious intertextuality of Cicero's text (see more on this in the next section). The fact that Cato/Cicero borrows from ancient Greek sources, is additional proof of Cato's intellectual abilities, and further increases the authority of his recommendations in *De Senectute*.

athletic prowess to pursue the worthwhile activities of later life. In this context Cato unfolds a view of life as a series of stages, which has reminded commentators so much of modern 'life cycle theories'. According to Cato, each stage has its 'own appropriate quality; so that the weakness of childhood, the impetuosity of youth, the seriousness of middle life, the maturity of old age – each bears some of Nature's fruit, which must be garnered in its own season' (33). In spite of the distinctness of the different stages, Cato suggests a healthy lifestyle that should be pursued at any age (35-36).

(3) Old age is condemned because it reduces our sensual desires and pleasures (39-66). Again, Cato counsels a change of perspective. Considered carefully, the reduction of aggressive 'bodily' desires is a good thing: they are the root causes of much bad and outright criminal behaviour, and cause more trouble than they are worth. Older citizens should be happy that when those desires recede the quieter pleasures of conviviality and the enjoyment of nature intensify. This realization should enable older citizens to be generous with their property, since they do not need (to hold on to) so much 'luggage' (66).

(4) Finally, old age is feared because of the proximity of death. In what for readers today is probably the most provocative part of *De Senectute* (66-85), Cato argues – in line with ancient consolations – that death is no evil; from early on in their lives, people should educate themselves about death, learning that there is no reason to fear it. He makes absolutely clear that without such a background of spiritual stability, one cannot live one's life successfully (66, 74, 81). Whether or not death provides an opportunity to be reunited with one's loved ones (as Cato himself hopes, 84), the right attitude towards one's life is to hold on to it in a moderate, merely conditional way (72): a life well-lived is always complete; one is ready to go whenever necessary. Should it become impossible to continue with the activities that are characteristic of later life, 'man has his fill of life and the time is ripe for him to go' (76).

A fresh interpretation

In my attempt to provide a fresh interpretation I take my cue from Cicero's hint that *De Senectute* is intended as a consolation for old age.¹² This

12 Various earlier interpretations have seen that *De Senectute* has consolatory functions: see, e.g., Chandler, 'Cicero's Ideal Old Man', and S. Jarcho, 'Cicero's Essay on Old Age', *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 47 (1971), 1440-1445. To my knowledge, however, this

perspective of reading *De Senectute* as a consolation can help us better understand a number of key features in the text. It also allows us to integrate the competing interpretations into a broader framework, with a more nuanced view of the specific profile and critical perspective that we can derive from the text for discussions on ageing today.

Combatting errors about loss was a key ingredient of ancient consolations for death. Consolers were convinced that correcting the consoland's erroneous assumptions would take away, or at least greatly reduce, the latter's fear and suffering. At the same time, consolers did not simply make the individual consoland responsible for his or her grief. On the contrary, the consolers readily acknowledged that the consoland's errors enjoyed wide currency in their society; they represent a common but harmful misapprehension, and it was therefore always the wider society that was intended as ultimate addressee of the consolatory critique.¹³ This feature of ancient consolations makes them an excellent forerunner of (post)modern 'narrative' approaches to gerontology. However, the narrative emphasis comes with another characteristic twist. Whereas (post)modern narrative approaches perceive a power struggle between a dominant 'master narrative' and an oppressed, marginalized 'counter-narrative' – it requires 'joining individual forces of resistance in order to boost the potential to challenge and transform social imaginaries about marginalized groups'¹⁴ – ancient consolers have a less antagonistic view. Consolations underscore our recognition that the positions they advocate represent a venerable strand in cultural discourse. The obvious intertextuality in *De Senectute* is a case in point. As commentators have noted, Cicero takes over almost verbatim, without ever mentioning it, a defence of old age from Plato's *Republic*.¹⁵ The purpose is not, as modern academics might suppose, to plagiarize for want

has never been extended into reading the whole of *De Senectute* as a consolation, against the background of ancient consolations for death.

13 See e.g. C. Jedan, 'Troost door argumenten: Herwaardering van een filosofische en christelijke traditie', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 68 (2014), 7–22; C. Jedan, 'Cruciale teksten: De Grieks-Romeinse Consolatio', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 68 (2014), 165–173.

14 H. Laceulle, J. Baars, 'Self-Realization and Cultural Narratives about Later Life', *Journal of Aging Studies* 31 (2014), 34–44, 37. See further: H. Laceulle, *Aging and Self-Realization: Cultural Narratives about Later Life*, Bielefeld 2018, esp. ch. 3; N.P.M. Fortuin, J.B.A.M. Schilderman, E. Venbrux, 'The Search for Meaning in Later Life: On the Connection between Religious Narratives and Narratives of Aging', *Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging* 32 (2020), 3–24; and Nienke Fortuin in the present issue.

15 See e.g. W. Stull, 'On Encountering Cephalus in *De Senectute*', *The American Journal of Philology* 134 (2013), 37–47.

of inspiration on the writer's part; rather, it is to give a clear signal to the educated reader that Cato's consolatory message stands in continuity with the most important intellectual tradition of antiquity, namely Platonism.¹⁶

In opposing two cultural strands with the intention that one is clearly better suited to guide the reader's views about ageing, Cicero argues as a modern cultural critic would argue, by taking stock of major cultural trends. If we wished to attach a modern label to him, it would have to be that of a 'cultural gerontologist', whose work demonstrates that the 'cultural turn' is not an invention of the twentieth century.¹⁷

The position that Cicero advocated – or re-iterated – recommends a modification of those convictions that lead to suffering or, preferably, the wholesale adoption of more helpful convictions that permit a constructive engagement with the facts of ageing. Again, it should be noted how much all of this is in line with ancient consolations for death: just as the ancient consolers did not have to convince their audience that the deceased had really departed¹⁸ – the realities of ancient Roman funerals prevented such illusions in every way – so Cicero does not have to remind Atticus of the realities of ageing in the ancient world. Cicero's consolation is no exercise in denialism; it is an attempt to change the consoland's perspective on old age in order to achieve constructive engagement.

If *De Senectute* should be read as a consolation for old age, there should also be parallels beyond the general argumentative thrust, including the obvious but limited parallel between the refutation of the fourth error about old age and the consolations for death (see above). There should be clear parallels between main motifs. This is in fact the case.

In a recent publication I have identified five key themes in ancient consolations: (1) they explore resources of inner strength that the consoland might have and, ideally, has shown to possess; (2) they regulate emotions by establishing an ideal of experiencing and expressing emotions; (3) in the course of narrative they 'preserve' the life of the deceased and show how it continues to matter; (4) they appeal to a 'healing' world-view in which

16 Cicero himself indicates in his *Tusculan Disputations* 3.76 that borrowing from earlier philosophy is normal practice in consolations (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*. With an English translation by J.E. King [Loeb Classical Library 141], Cambridge MA 1971).

17 On cultural gerontology and the cultural turn as a modern invention, see J. Twigg, W. Martin 'The Field of Cultural Gerontology', in J. Twigg, W. Martin (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, Abingdon/New York 2015, 1-15.

18 By contrast, modern grief therapists see denial of the loved one's death as an important issue that can prevent successful coping; e.g. J.W. Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, fifth edition, New York 2018.

death and loss have a 'legitimate' place; and finally (5) they highlight connectedness to community at the different levels of family, of society, and in some cases of humanity as a whole.¹⁹

With the minuscule adaptations required to address old age as the loss in question, those five themes are key to *De Senectute*, too. In what follows I shall restrict myself to a few pointers: (1) The example of the blind consul and senator Appius Claudius illustrates the importance of resilience: 'old age is honoured only on condition that it defends itself, maintains its rights, is subservient to no one, and to the last breath rules over its own domain' (38). (2) Cicero lays down an ideal of old age that is characterized by intellectual and advisory activities. This ideal is supremely useful for society and is honoured accordingly. Physical desires and personal ambitions have become less important. The aged person lives in the here and now, but is still committed to the future, for the sake of future generations. (3) It is important that the life of the ageing person is 'preserved' and thus continues to matter. This explains Cicero's emphasis on the importance of being able to look back over one's life. A good life matters since it is 'the memory of abundant blessings previously acquired' (71). (4) Cicero establishes a 'healing world-view' by arguing that one's character is the most important thing in old age and in life as a whole. Compared to it, non-moral goods are unimportant. Cicero also emphasizes the importance of spiritual harmony with nature and how important it is not to be afraid of death. (5) Finally, Cicero underscores how much he conceives of old age as a supremely connected stage of life, in which the old person is important to society, cares for the community, and sees in its future the most important inspiration for his or her activities.

Main conclusions

If I am correct in claiming that *De Senectute* argues according to the standards of an ancient consolation for death and should be read as ancient consolation for old age that tries to influence our attitudes towards its undeniable disadvantages, we should try to evaluate its contribution to today's gerontological discourse from this perspective. I note four points:

(1) In contrast to much optimistic talk about 'healthy', 'successful' or 'optimal' ageing, Cicero is realistic about the disadvantages of old age. He

19 See C. Jedan, 'A New Model of Consolation', *Religions* 11 (2020), 631.

is convinced that moderate physical exercise and intensified cognitive activities can do a lot to keep dementia at bay, but he recognizes that one can outlive even a well-spent old age. To locate his position on a modern conceptual map: Cicero is not simply an advocate of 'successful ageing', i.e. 'an experience of ageing where health, activity and role fulfilment are better than that found within the population generally'.²⁰ Cicero shows ample recognition of the fact that adversity is a component of life and that resilience is therefore key to any well-lived (later) life – a realization that has been missing from (many) modern conceptualizations.²¹

(2) Cicero is particularly interesting in his contribution to what might be called *a concept of age-adapted wellbeing*. Synthesizing our discussion of *De Senectute* so far, the following elements appear central to such a concept: (a) autonomy, (b) age-adapted desires, (c) age-adapted activities, (d) physical health suited to those age-adapted desires and pursuits, (e) an acceptance of the finality of life and, lastly, (f) connectedness to a wider community, which at the same time provides a goal for activities and prevents autonomy from degenerating into egoism. The key advantage of such a concept is that it rejects temptations to measure the old against the yardstick of the young. Cicero is careful to avoid making this a shallow comfort; he is convinced that age-adapted wellbeing reveals what was – or should have been – important in earlier life.

(3) Recent gerontological research sees identity development as a 'life-long process', the continuous re-reading and re-evaluation of one's life. Narrative development is, therefore, 'a potentially *infinite* process'. 'Narrative foreclosure', the sense that one's life is in a certain sense fixed and complete, is seen as a 'problematic phenomenon': one's capacity to make sense of one's life 'falters'; one lives in 'epilogue time'.²² This concept of narrative foreclosure is simplistic in identifying change with success and in identifying sameness with failure. In my view, Bohlmeijer et al.'s passing remark in a later paper, that narrative foreclosure should not be confounded with

20 P.G. Coleman, A. O'Hanlon, 'Ageing and adaptation', in B. Woods, L. Clare (ed.), *Handbook of the Clinical Psychology of Ageing*, second edition, Chichester 2008, 17-32, 18.

21 See T.D. Cosco, K. Howse, C. Brayne, 'Healthy ageing, resilience and wellbeing', *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 26 (2017), 579-583.

22 Characterizations are taken from E.T. Bohlmeijer, G.J. Westerhof, W. Randall, T. Tromp, G. Kenyon, 'Narrative Foreclosure in Later Life: Preliminary Considerations for a New Sensitizing Concept', *Journal of Aging Studies* 25 (2011), 364-370, 365, who synthesize earlier literature.

'closure as a form of resolution of a potentially traumatic event', amounts to an implicit admission that the concept of foreclosure requires refinement.²³ We need better ways of interpreting the interaction of continuity and change, and *De Senectute* can help us here. According to *De Senectute*, a certain sense of narrative (fore)closure, the realization that one's life is 'complete' and does not *need* temporal additions, is key to successful living. This is continuity without negative stasis; and only on the basis of this continuity is the ageing person able to engage fully, actively and adequately with their surroundings and take an undistorted interest in the future, more for the sake of others than for themselves. (Incidentally, this agrees with an important element of Christian and other religious perspectives on the narrative shape of life)

(4) With the previous point I have already broached the subject of religion. To scholars in the field of religion and theology, *De Senectute* is specifically interesting, because Cicero wrote in an historical context in which 'religion' did not function as a well-delineated, separate domain. Analysing *De Senectute* means tracing how aspects of the text that we might want to call 'spiritual' or 'religious' work in its original context. Existential trust, narrative (fore)closure, death/afterlife and the role of nature are cases in point. It is because of his cultural context that Cicero holds up an important mirror to us today. With religion being increasingly problematized as a well-delineated societal domain we might gain new appreciation for, and insights from, an author who wrote, to all intents and purposes, before the invention of religion as an analytical category. A key realization might be that labels such as 'religion and health' or 'religion's positive impact on health' are too lacking in specificity to be of value. Analysing the connection between 'religion, health and wellbeing' might be a more piecemeal affair than suggested by the juxtaposition of those terms.²⁴

Questioning the very title of this special issue? There are worse notes to end on.

23 E.T. Bohlmeijer, G.J. Westerhof, S.M.A. Lamers, 'The Development and Initial Validation of the Narrative Foreclosure Scale', *Aging and Mental Health* 18 (2014), 879-888, 880.

24 See also Catrien Santing in this issue.

About the author

CHRISTOPH JEDAN is Professor of Ethics and Comparative Philosophy of Religion at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen, Oude Boteringestraat 38, 9712 GK Groningen, The Netherlands, and Fellow of the Aletta Jacobs School of Public Health.

Areas of Expertise: Virtue Ethics, Religion and Politics, Historiography of Philosophy, Death Studies, Stoicism, History of Consolation.

Email: c.jedan@rug.nl