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The Paradox of Time

Life is a paradox. Humans are born youthful and full of vigor, but have no experience. As time progresses, people become more experienced and knowledgeable of the world around them, but they physically begin to deteriorate. So, just as one begins to understand the intricacies of life, his or her physical state becomes an impenetrable obstacle. This begs the question, what if one person aged in reverse? If a person were born physically eighty years old, and died when he or she were physically young, would life be better, since aging would be harmonious with experience? The movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,* loosely based off the short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, explores this idea. Benjamin Button is physically born an old man, but regresses in age and dies as a baby. Since he is alone in doing this, many problems arise throughout the course of his life. However, this is interesting to view from a philosophical standpoint, because it highlights the paradoxes of life. In a progressive sense, time is paradoxical to human existence because as time passes and people grow more experienced, they physically deteriorate. If a person were to regress in age, he or she would be gathering experience synchronous to his or her aging.

To illuminate this paradox, there is a quote by Mark Twain that goes:  *Life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen.* In this quote, Twain is saying how people would be exponentially more happy with life if they were born at an old age and slowly regressed to a younger age. From a biological perspective, this regressive aging would seem perfect. A person would have acquired the most life experience at a point in life when he or she would be at his or her physical best. This idea is supported by a related quote that comes to mind by George Bernard Shaw: *Youth is wasted on the young.* This quote sheds light on the opposite concept of the Twain quote – the vigor and energy that comes with being a young person is wasted, due to the lack of experience a young person has. So, if people were to age in reverse, they would be most experienced when they are physically at their strongest, seemingly eliminating an apparent paradox in life.

Even if a person were to age in reverse, happiness is not guaranteed, as implied by Twain’s quote. In *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,* Button’s reverse aging creates several obstacles for him that are devastating. For instance, when Button is mentally a young boy, he meets Daisy, a girl who is his age as well, but much younger, physically. He is immediately drawn to her, but cannot be with her without looking odd or perverse. This problem follows him throughout the course of his life; he cannot be with Daisy until much later, when they nearly are the same age. Even when they are together at last and have a child, Button is forced to leave. He realizes that he cannot raise a child, when inevitably one day he would be younger than his own child. One of the most pivotal points in an adult’s life, the birth of a child, turns out to be devastating to Button, as a result of his unique condition. The movie seems to imply that, although aging in reverse has both benefits and detriments, the detriments greatly outweigh benefits. The remedy for this would be to have everyone age in reverse, instead of just one person. If aging in reverse were universal, most of the drawbacks would be eliminated because things would essentially be uniform, and anything that could be a problem would eventually find a solution.

From my personal standpoint, the only way I could see it possible to agree with Twain’s quote is if the entire population aged in reverse, thus normalizing the phenomenon. If I were to singularly age in reverse, it would be an incredibly sad life because all my friends and family would inevitable grow old and die while simultaneously I am retrogressing into my prime physical state. However, if humanity ubiquitously aged in reverse, it would be an entirely different scenario. We would all be approaching a physically perfect age while simultaneously gathering experience. Some could see this as a problem still for children; a child would be physically older than his or her parents. However, if the entire population were to age in reverse, there would be obvious solutions to this problem, such as creating more day care centers instead of nursing homes. Also, a person would die when he or she is happiest, playing with toys and enjoying the carefree days of infancy. As an old person, one would die frail and incapable, usually aware of once better times. If one truly believes in the cliché “ignorance is bliss”, regressive aging would manifest that expression.

*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is connected to this year’s Core Human Questions theme in that the journey of life seems to come full circle, and one can draw striking parallels between the oldest and the youngest in society in terms of physicality. A specific example of this is when Button learns to walk when he is an old man, just as a small child learns to walk. Even though Button regresses in age, he still hits many of the milestones that would normally occur in life. In other words, his condition does not entirely prevent him from living a somewhat normal life. He still learns to walk, falls in love, has a job, and so forth. From this perspective, the movie seems to stress the importance of the journey over the destination. If eventually you end up where you began, the journey is far more essential than the destination.

Ideally, like Mark Twain, one would like to think that aging backwards would be more beneficial than aging forwards. If all humanity aged backwards, this would seem better than aging forwards, since it would be homogenized. “Old” people would enjoy the blissful days of physical youth when they are at their wisest. However, if you were to age backwards, like in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,* there would be a huge deficit in level of content with life, since everyone you love would be getting older while you were growing younger. The quote and the movie, when thought about from different perspectives, allows one to consider philosophical questions about the paradoxical nature of time and aging.