

... McDonald Centre ... Oxford Institute of Population Ageing ... Oxford Healthcare Values Partnership ...

A Virtual Interdisciplinary Conference

# Ageing & Despair

towards patience and hope for health and care

presentations on the existential gravity  
of ageing and the art of dying



The Oxford Institute of  
Population Ageing



Healthcare  
Values  
Partnership





---

# Ageing & Despair

towards patience and hope for health and care

Jean Améry (Hanns Chaim Mayer) was an Austrian-born essayist, whose reflections on aging outline the cost that age brings to the human body, mind, and spirit. He has suggested the elderly come to rest, and are forced, by the depredations of ageing, to make do without—for example, unable to exercise their agency as they once did. Moreover, he has suggested, their inertia prevents the old from apprehending and accepting new developments and ideas. That is to say, the old find themselves in a world they no longer understand and without the capacities to engage with it. Despair enters as an unwanted companion.

But such despair corresponds to the darker side of ageing, which is often occluded by research that celebrates emancipatory ideals and offers strategies for promoting 'successful aging'. Such ideals and strategies often focus on narratives of agency, i.e., urgent action and market commodities that claim to reverse or delay the onset of aging. Other such research illuminates extrinsic disadvantages that compound age-related distresses, giving attention to income inequalities, housing inadequacies, and service limitations that can be remediated by providers or provisions. Yet little attention is given to the type of subjective affairs and experiences, i.e., the existential gravity, of ageing and the experiences of pain, suffering, and despair.

With 10 million persons over the age of sixty-five in the UK at present, an absolute statistic expected to double by 2050, it seems appropriate to think about the moral reality of aging with a focus upon not only the existential gravity but also the response, which might nurture new ways of thinking about health care and the provision of hope for an aging population. Such an endeavour becomes increasingly significant when one considers similar statistics: US statistics estimate their elderly populations will double by 2060, accounting for 24% of the population. Stats Canada indicates a similar relative statistic of 23% of the Canadian population will be over sixty-five by 2030. Likewise, Europe (including the UK) projects a 51% old-age dependency ratio by 2070.

This interdisciplinary virtual event has gathered theologians and philosophers for conversation with medical and nursing professionals as well as health care strategists such that the gravity of old age, including subjective experiences of suffering and despair, and the threats of death and dying, can be foregrounded. Although aging and despair offer the thematic contours for the conference presentations, further thinking about essential virtues for overcoming despair and the meaning or practices of hope will also be examined while reflections on the *Ars moriendi* (art of *dying*) will be offered such that health and care might be resourced, and public policies, educative experiences, and professional practices might be re-examined.

# Ageing & Despair



## Conference Timetable

### *Plenary Speakers*

- 09.00 Nigel Biggar, Conference welcome message  
Frits de Lange, "The existential gravity of ageing"  
09.45 Els van Wijngaarden, "The dark side of ageing"

### *Featured Speakers*

- 10.30 Chris Gilleard, "On old age"  
11.00 Seamus O'Mahony, "The compression of morbidity and biogerontology"  
11.30 Ashley Moyses, "Bearing the burdens we bare"  
12.15 Christopher Wareham, "Age and wellbeing"  
12.30 Lydia Dugdale, "Pandemic, ageing, and agency"

### *Plenary Speaker*

- 14.00 Farr Curlin, "Medicine and the art of dying well"

### *Featured Speakers*

- 14.30 Katherine Froggatt and Caroline Nicholson, "Reimagining ageing in the context of living and dying"  
15.00 Tyler VanderWeele, "Suffering and response"  
16.00 Christine Lai, "Spirituality of ageing and integral human development"  
16.30 Michael Mawson, "Pursuing success and spirituality in ageing"  
17.15 Autumn Alcott Ridenour, "Elderhood and sabbath rest as vocation"  
18.00 Joanna Collicutt, "Death and Life"

The McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford encourage you to join us for the 2020 virtual interdisciplinary conference.

The Ageing and Despair conference event includes recorded video presentations from an international and interdisciplinary group of scholars. Their respective presentations explore the existential gravity of ageing and the art of dying such that health and care for ageing and dying persons might be resourced, and public policies, educative experiences, and professional practices might be re-examined.

Videos have been recorded by our speakers and will be made available for viewing as scheduled.

For more information about the conference and our speakers, or to view the event videos, please go to the conference website here:

[www.mcdonaldcentreconference.info](http://www.mcdonaldcentreconference.info)

Alternatively, viewers might locate the videos at the McDonald Centre YouTube playlist here:

<https://tinyurl.com/yxnnt2pa>

Videos from this conference event will remain available to view for free through the end of the calendar year.

---

# Conference Speakers

## Plenary Speaker

**9.00am “The existential gravity of ageing”**

**Frederik (Frits) de Lange, PhD**

is Professor of Ethics at the Protestant Theological University, Groningen, the Netherlands, and Extraordinary Professor in Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South-Africa. Since 2005 his research concentrates on questions related to modern life course, gerontology, and the ethics of care. He wrote several books on the subject: *De mythe van het voltooid leven* [The Myth of a Completed Life], 2007; *De armoede van het zwitserlevengevoel* [The Shabbiness of Third Age Hedonism], 2008; and *Waardigheid —voor wie oud wil worden* [Dignity—for who wants to grow old], 2010; *In andermans handen: Over flow en grenzen in de zorg* [In someone else's hands. On flow and limits in care], 2011. As a Member in Residence of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, he published *Loving Later Life: An Ethics of Aging* (Eerdmans, 2015).



**9.45am “The dark side of ageing: lessons from older people who have a sense that their life is no longer worth living”**

**Elizabeth (Els) van Wijngaarden, PhD**

is Associate Professor in Care Ethics at the Universiteit Voor Humanistiek [University of Humanistic Studies], Utrecht, the Netherlands. With her PhD on ‘completed life in old age’, she was the first to explore experiences of relatively healthy older people with a strong wish for a self-directed death as they considered their lives no longer worth living. Her study was awarded the prestigious Research Prize 2017 of the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation. With her current research she builds on this pioneering work, focussing on death and dying in old age with a specific interest for and the role of choice and control at the end-of-life. Her other research interests include: dementia, experiences of suffering, meaning and meaninglessness at the end-of-life.



---

## Featured Speakers

### 10.30am “On old age”

#### Chris Gilleard, PhD

is Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Social & Policy Sciences at the University of Bath and the Division of Psychiatry at University College London. He has published in the areas of psychology, medicine, history and sociology as they relate to ageing and old age. He is also a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences.



### 11.00am “The compression of morbidity and biogerontology: how the yearning for Utopia became medicalized”

#### Seamus O’Mahony, MD

is a gastroenterologist and general physician (retired, Cork University Hospital), and was clinical professor at University College Cork Medical School, where he taught the medical humanities, ethics, and professionalism. He worked for many years in the NHS, and since 2001 has been based in his home city. He has been a critic of his own profession, and his books include *The Way We Die Now*, which won the BMA Chairman’s Choice award in 2017, and *Can Medicine Be Cured?* which was published in 2019. He is a regular contributor to the *Dublin Review of Books* and the *Medical Independent*; he has written also for the *Observer*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Examiner* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. He is a member of the *Lancet Commission on “The Value of Death”*.



### 11.30am “Bearing the burdens we bare: an indictment of a modern anthropology that burdens ageing persons”

#### Ashley Moyse, PhD

is the McDonald Postdoctoral Fellow in Christian Ethics and Public Life, and member of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Oxford. His research labours to engage with both theological and philosophical ethics, with particular interests in philosophy of technology, bioethics, and medical humanities. He has published several books, including a recent co-edited anthology, *Treating the Body in Medicine and Religion: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives* (Routledge, 2019), and *The art of living for the technological age: Toward a humanizing performance* (Fortress, 2021).



### 12.15pm “Age and wellbeing: ethical implications of the u-curve of happiness”

#### Christopher Wareham, PhD

received his doctorate from the European School of Molecular Medicine and the University of Milan. He joined the Steve Biko Centre for Bioethics in 2014, where he is currently Senior Lecturer, Head of the MSc Research Methods Unit, and Head of Undergraduate Studies in Bioethics for the Faculty of Health Sciences. He sits on the Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical) of the University of the Witwatersrand, and consults on ethical issues in biomedical science, education, and research. Christopher’s core areas of research are the Ethics of Ageing, the Ethics of Emerging Technologies, and African Bioethics. He is an NRF Rated Researcher and has previously been awarded a European School of Molecular Medicine Doctoral Fellowship, and a South African National Research Fund (NRF) Innovation Scholarship. Wareham is editor of the forthcoming *Cambridge Handbook on the Ethics of Ageing*. Other publications can be found in the following journals: *Journal of Bioethics Inquiry*; *BMJ—Journal of Medical Ethics*; *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*; *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy*; and *Bioethics*.



### 12.30pm “Pandemic, ageing, and agency”

#### Lydia Dugdale, MD, MAR (ethics)

is Dorothy L. and Daniel H. Silberberg Associate Professor of Medicine at Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons and Director of the Center for Clinical Medical Ethics. She also serves as Associate Director of Clinical Ethics at New York Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Irvine Medical Center. A practicing internist, Dugdale moved to Columbia in 2019 from Yale University, where she previously served as Associate Director of the Program for Biomedical Ethics. Her scholarship focuses on end-of-life issues, medical ethics, and the doctor-patient relationship. She edited *Dying in the Twenty-First Century* (MIT Press, 2015) and is author of *The Lost Art of Dying Well* (HarperOne, 2020), a popular press book on the preparation for death.





---

# Conference Schedule

## Plenary Speaker

**2.00am “Medicine and the art of dying well”**

**Farr A Curlin, MD**

is Josiah C Trent Professor of Medical Humanities in the Trent Center for Bioethics, Humanities and History of Medicine, and the Duke Divinity School, at Duke University. Before moving to Duke in 2014, he founded and was Co-Director of the Program on Medicine and Religion at the University of Chicago. At Duke, Farr practices palliative medicine and works with colleagues in the Trent Center and the Divinity School's Initiative on Theology, Medicine, and Culture to develop opportunities for study and scholarship at the intersection of theology, ethics and medicine. He is interested in the moral and spiritual dimensions of medical practice—particularly the doctor-patient relationship, the moral and professional formation of physicians, and practices of care for patients at the end of life.

---

## Featured Speakers

**2.30pm “Reimagining ageing in the context of living and dying”**

**Katherine Froggatt, PhD**

has worked in ageing and palliative care for over 30 years, having qualified as a nurse before moving into higher education working in nursing and applied health research departments. From 2013 to 2019 she was Professor of Ageing and Palliative Care at the International Observatory on End of Life Care at Lancaster University. She is currently undertaking a Grey Gap year exploring ways to develop her work in these areas.

**Caroline Nicholson, PhD, RGN, FHEA**

holds a chair in Palliative Care and Ageing within the School of Health Science, University of Surrey and is an Honorary Nurse Consultant at St Christopher's Hospice London. She is a current recipient of the Health Education England/ National Institute of Health Care Research Senior Clinical Lectureship. She is the UK representative on the European Association of Palliative Care task force into ageing and co-lead on End of Life for the British Geriatric Society (BGS).

Her research programme seeks to improve the experience of and care delivery to older people living with complex needs. She is particularly interested in the transitions that occurs in the last phase of life. Her clinical and academic practice includes sustaining and building the care workforce to meet the needs of older people living and dying overtime. She is co-editor of the BGS guidance on end of life and frailty for clinicians across the multi-disciplinary team.



---

## Featured Speakers

### 3.00pm “Suffering and response: directions in empirical research”

#### **Tyler J VanderWeele, PhD**

is the John L. Loeb and Frances Lehman Loeb Professor of Epidemiology in the Departments of Epidemiology and Biostatistics at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. He is also Co-Director of the Initiative on Health, Religion and Spirituality and Director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, and, for the 2019-2020 academic year, the George Eastman Visiting Professor at Balliol College, University of Oxford. He holds degrees from Harvard University, the University of Oxford, and the University of Pennsylvania, in mathematics, philosophy, theology, finance and applied economics, and biostatistics. His research spans social and psychiatric epidemiology; methodology for causal inference and measurement; the science of happiness and flourishing; and the study of religion and health, including both religion and population health and the role of religion and spirituality in end-of-life care. He is the recipient of the 2017 COPSS Presidents' Award from the Committee of Presidents of Statistical Societies. He has published over three hundred papers in peer-reviewed journals, and is author of the book *Explanation in Causal Inference*, published by Oxford University Press.



### 4.00 “Spirituality of ageing and integral human development: an intercultural approach”

#### **Christine Lai, DProf**

is concurrently a Research Associate at Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology (MBIT) at Cambridge, guest professor at Hong Kong Holy Spirit Seminary College of Theology and Philosophy and supervisor of Professional Doctorate of Practical Theology at Anglia Ruskin University. Currently, she is conducting research on “Spirituality of Integral Human Development for ageing in Hong Kong: an intercultural and interfaith approach.” With professional doctorates in both business administration and practical theology, Dr. Lai has been promoting holistic wellness and everyday spirituality through writings and lectures on “Life planning and spiritual practice,” “Transformation through Everyday spirituality,” “From Midlife to Ageing: Ultimate Meanings of Life in the Days of the Pandemics.” Recently, she has co-organized with MBIT the first international webinar on “In search of Meaning and Fulfillment through Interreligious Dialogue and Interculturation: Vatican Council II, Pope Francis and Beyond.” She is also the founding member and Vice-Chairman (International) of Asia Academy of Practical Theology (AAPT) Hong Kong.



### 4.30pm “Pursuing success and spirituality in ageing”

#### **Michael Mawson, PhD**

is Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology and Ethics and Research Fellow at the Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre at Charles Sturt University, Australia. He was previously Senior Lecturer in Theological Ethics at the University of Aberdeen. He is the author of *Christ Existing as Community: Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology* (OUP, 2018) and co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (OUP, 2019). He is currently working on a new book on theology, phenomenology and ageing.



### 5.15pm “Elderhood and sabbath rest as vocation”

#### **Autumn Alcott Ridenour, PhD**

is Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious and Theological Studies at Merrimack College in North Andover, Massachusetts. Her primary interests are in the areas of theological, philosophical, social, and bioethics, with attention to history and systematic theology. She is the author of *Sabbath Rest as Vocation: Aging Towards Death* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018) and has published articles in *Christian Bioethics*, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, *The Hastings Center Report* and several book chapters for edited volumes. Her current research project surrounds the interface of smartphones, devices, and the theological significance of presence within relationships.



### 6.00pm “Death and life: the crafting of Christian resources for living well in the light of mortality”

#### **Joanna Collicutt, PhD**

is Karl Jaspers Lecturer in Psychology and Spirituality, Ripon College Cuddesdon – an Anglican Seminary and lectures in psychology of religion at Oxford University. She was also Older People's Adviser for the Diocese of Oxford from 2010-2019, and it is in this capacity that she developed materials for a modern *Ars Moriendi* under the title ‘Death and life: Christian resources for living well in the light of mortality’. Joanna is a chartered clinical psychologist and registered specialist neuro-psychologist. Her most recent books are *The psychology of Christian character formation* (SCM, 2015), *Being mindful being Christian* (Monarch, 2016), *Thinking of you: A theological and practical resource for the spiritual care of people with dementia* (BRF, 2017), *When you pray* (BRF, 2019), *Seriously Messy* (BRF, 2019), and *Neurology and religion* (CUP, 2019).





---

## Thanks to...

All the speakers for their time and reflections on the conference theme.

Luke Harrison at Imago Video for video editing and post-production.

The McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life; the Oxford Faculty of Theology and Religion; the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing; and the Oxford Healthcare Values Partnership

The McDonald Agape Foundation and the Wellcome Trust ISSF for their generous support of this virtual interdisciplinary conference.