



Aging And Ethics: Philosophical Problems in Gerontology (Contemporary Issues in Biomedicine, Ethics, and Society)

Nancy S. Jecker

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The Aging Self and the Aging Society Ethical issues involving the elderly have recently come to the fore. This should come as no surprise: Since the turn of the century, there has been an eightfold increase in the number of Americans over the age of sixty five, and almost a tripling of their proportion to the general population. Those over the age of eighty-five- the fastest growing group in the country-are twenty one more times as numerous as in 1900. Demographers expect this trend to accelerate into the twenty-first century. The aging of society casts into vivid relief a number of deep and troubling questions. On the one hand, as individuals, we grapple with the immediate experience of aging and mortality and seek to find in it philosophical or ethical significance. We also wonder what responsibilities we bear toward aging family members and what expectations of others our plans for old age can reasonably include. On the other hand, as a community, we must decide: What special role, if any, do older persons occupy in our society? What constitutes a just distribution of medical resources between generations? And, How can institutions that serve the old foster imperiled values, such as autonomy, self-respect, and dignity? Only recently have we begun to explore these themes, yet already a rich and fruitful literature has grown up around them.

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