Active ageing in classical Rome through the gaze of Cicero: an analysis of *Cato Maior de senectute*

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The concept of active ageing began to be used by the World Health Organization in the late 1990s as a model for understanding the factors affecting the way in which people age. Several determinants of active ageing were already known in the classical world. The objective of this work is to review the work *Cato Maior de senectute*, identifying and selecting aspects related to current understanding of cognitive impairment and active ageing, in order to offer an overview of the understanding of these subjects in classical Rome.

Methods. This study is based on a reading of Marcus Tullius Cicero's *De senectute*. We analysed the structure and historical context of the work and extracted all references to the current concepts of cognitive impairment and active ageing.

Results. Some quotes from the text stress the importance of maintaining adequate cognitive activity, physical exercise, social relationships, and a balanced diet. References to pathological ageing are less frequent.

Conclusions. Many of the principles of active ageing were already known in the classical world, as part of a virtuous life. However, this view of ageing may stigmatise pathological ageing and loss of functional independence, which may have led classical authors not to write about these aspects, explaining the lack of information that has reached us today.

KEYWORDS

Cicero, active ageing, *De Senectute*, Rome, old age, geriatrics

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines active ageing as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age." The WHO adopted the term in the late 1990s with a view to transmitting a more inclusive message than "healthy ageing" and acknowledging factors beyond healthcare that influence how people and populations age.[1] Furthermore, active ageing is associated with lower risk of developing cognitive impairment[2] and, as a result, has been used as the model for designing programmes to improve population ageing.[3]

However, though the term has been used since the late 1990s, many of the principles of active ageing were advocated for in classical cultures. *Cato Maior de senectute* is a work written by Marcus Tullius Cicero in 44 BC, at the age of 62 years. It is a general work on old age, written as a reflection on the author's understanding of old age, and presents a view of the social aspects of ageing. However, its analysis from a medical perspective reveals observations related to such issues as cognitive impairment and the principles of active ageing, demonstrating that far from being novel concepts, these relevant aspects of ageing have been known since the dawn of Western civilisation.

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The objective of this work is to review *De senectute*, identifying and selecting aspects related to current understanding of cognitive impairment and active ageing, in order to offer an overview of knowledge about these subjects in ancient Rome.

Material and methods

This study is based on a reading of Marcus Tulius Cicero's *De senectute* (2001 edition, published by Editorial Triacastela and translated into Spanish by María Nieves Fidalgo).[A] This edition includes three introductory studies, addressing: *1)* Cicero and current geriatrics; *2)* the greatness and decadence of the elderly in the Roman world; and *3)* the life and work of Cicero; the studies were written by José Manuel Ribera Casado, Georges Minois, and José Antonio Monge Marigorta, respectively. These three pieces helped to contextualise the work.

To ensure the proper interpretation of the results, we performed a structural analysis of the work and an analysis of the historical context in which it was written. Finally, all quotes related to modern concepts of cognitive impairment and active ageing were extracted.

The determining factors of active ageing take into account the WHO model, which includes six groups of determinants, each of which involves several aspects: *1)* social and health-related (health promotion and disease prevention, healthcare services, continuity of care, mental health care); *2)* behavioural (smoking, physical activity, diet, oral health, alcohol, medication); *3)* personal (biology and genetics, psychological factors); *4)* environmental (agreeable environment, safe housing, absence of pollution); *5)* social (social support, violence and abuse, education); and *6)* economic (salary, welfare, work).[3]

Results

Structural and semiotic analysis of the work

De senectute is a philosophical dialogue written by Marcus Tullius Cicero in 44 BC. As noted by Ribera Casado in his analysis of the book, it is a work of reflection and maturity, as Cicero was 62 years old at the time he wrote it, just a year before his death.[4] In the book, he presents a debate between Cato the Elder, the main speaker, and two frequent characters from Cicero's works, Laelius and Scipio. The work addresses issues related to old age, virtue, and wisdom, and offers a profound reflection on the process of ageing and how to face it with dignity and serenity. It is not a medical text, but rather a book that speaks about gerontology, "a paedagogical text, a book whose reflections and recommendations convey messages that seek to improve the quality of life of elderly people, saving them from suffering and allowing them to live a fuller life in every way."[4] Cicero's writing style in the work is clear, direct, and persuasive. He uses elegant, accessible language to present his ideas and arguments, facilitating understanding and assimilation of the issues discussed. Cicero also uses such rhetorical devices as repetition and antithesis to stress certain points and make his argument more convincing. The structure follows the typical format of a Socratic dialogue, and is divided into various parts, including the introduction, presentation of the arguments, debate between the characters (which in this case bears a greater resemblance to a monologue), and the conclusion. The work begins with an introduction from Cicero, addressed to Atticus, which serves as a preamble to the main dialogue between Cato the Elder, Laelius, and Scipio. Cato represents the figure of the wise, virtuous old man, whose words and actions reflect his profound understanding of life and old age. In section 15, Cato reflects on the four reasons why old age may be miserable: withdrawal from active pursuits; weakening of the body; deprivation of almost all physical pleasures; and proximity to death. He then develops his explanation to argue against each of these four claims.

As in other works, *De senectute* shows Cicero's interest in exploring the human condition and his search for meaning and wisdom in different aspects of life. Thus, he uses multiple signs and symbols that represent deeper ideas about life, virtue, and the passage of time. The subject of the book itself, old age, is presented as a symbol of wisdom and experience accumulated through life. Through the dialogue, Cicero uses Cato's voice to explore the deepest aspects of old age, offering an enriching perspective that challenges conventional notions of old age as a stage of decline and despair. Instead, old age becomes a symbol of achievement, maturity, and the culmination of a virtuous life. The use of Cato as the protagonist may be interpreted as

[A]Translator's note: all English-language quotes are from William Armistead Falconer's 1923 translation: Cicero. De senectute, De amicitia, De divinatione [On old age, On friendship, On divination]. Falconer WA, transl. Boston (MA): Loeb Classical Library; 1923.

symbolising Stoic virtue and the serene acceptance of reality, as observed when he asserts that "*qui autem Omnia bona a se ipsi petunt, eis nihil malum potest videri quod naturae necessitas adferat*" (on the other hand, to those who seek all good from themselves nothing can seem evil that the laws of nature inevitably impose), "*sed tamen necesse fuit ese aliquid extremum et, tamquam in arborum bacis terraeque fructibus maturitate tempestiva quasi vietum et caducum, quod ferundum est molliter sapienti*" (and yet there had to be something final, and—as in the case of orchard fruits and crops of grain in the process of ripening which comes with time—something shrivelled, as it were, and prone to fall. But this state the wise man should endure with resignation), and "*quod cuique temporis ad vivendum datur, eo debet ese contentus*" (whatever the time given us in which to live, we should therewith be content). He is a figure of wisdom, rectitude, and serenity in old age, as exemplified in the phrase "*quocirca si sapientiam meam admirari soletis*" (wherefore, if you are accustomed to marvel at my wisdom). Finally, the dialogue is replete with metaphors and analogies that illustrate abstract concepts and convey more profound messages. For instance, Cato compares old age to a voyage at sea, where the old man must navigate with skill and prudence to avoid the perils of the rough sea; this suggests that old age is a journey riddled with obstacles, which must be overcome through wisdom and determination, and that it is not a final destination but rather a stage of life, which may be navigated with grace and dignity.

Figure 1. Bust of Cicero (Palazzo Nuovo, Musei Capitolini, Rome)..

Historical analysis of the work

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) was one of the most distinguished figures of the Roman Republic (Figure 1). Born in Arpinum, he was educated as a lawyer and earned great recognition as an orator, philosopher, and politician. His career culminated in his election as consul for 63 BC, during which time he foiled the Catilinarian conspiracy, consolidating his fame. He was a staunch defender of the Republic against the increasing personal power of such figures as Caesar and Mark Antony, which ultimately cost him his life. In addition to his political influence, Cicero was a prolific writer; his oeuvre includes speeches, philosophical treatises, and letters, which offer unique insight into the intellectual and political life of the time. His clear, elegant style made him an exemplary model of classical Latin, and his thought left a deep impression both on the rhetorical tradition and on Western political philosophy, particularly during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.[5,6] Cicero wrote *De senectute* in the year 44 BC. This era saw the end of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Empire, and was characterised by a series of social and political events that led to a climate of political uncertainty, as described in his *Epistulae ad Atticum*. Throughout his career, Cicero remained faithful to the ideal of the Republic (as shown in his main work, *De re publica*), and the dramatic political changes that were happening around him had a considerable impact on his thought. In fact, while *De senectute* focuses on old age and virtue, it also includes political and social reflection on the state of the Republic at the time. For instance, in section 20, in

which he extols the virtues of old age, he asserts that "*maximas res publicas ab adulescentibus labefactas, a senibus sustentatas et restitutas reperietis*" (the greatest states have been overthrown by the young and sustained and restored by the old). Through his protagonist and his arguments, Cicero may be hinting at his ideas of political leadership and its fundamental virtues, in contrast to the corruption and excess that he observed in the political reality of the day. In this regard, the selection of Cato as the protagonist is significant. Cato was a Roman politician and statesman of the second century BC, known for his integrity and moral resistance; in the dialogue, he is presented as a model of virtue and wisdom in old age. Through the depiction of Cato in his work, Cicero pays homage to him and underscores the importance of virtue and probity in all stages of life.

The work addresses the subject of old age from a Roman perspective, reflecting the attitudes and beliefs of Roman society, which saw old age as a stage of life that was worthy of respect and honour. The Romans had deep respect for old people, and valued their experience and wisdom. This respect for old age was reflected in various aspects of Roman life, from politics to religion and day-to-day life. In the political sphere, old men held such important roles as councillors and community leaders, as they were seen as the guardians of tradition and stability; therefore, their experience was valued in resolving conflicts and formulating policies. In *De senectute*, we see this in section 17, for instance, where Cato notes that: "*Non viribus aut velocitate aut celeritate corporum res magnae geruntur, sed consilio, auctoritate, setentia; quibus non modo non orbari, sed etiam augeri senectus solet*" (it is not by muscle, speed, or physical dexterity that great things are achieved, but by reflection, force of character, and judgement; in these qualities old age is usually not only not poorer, but is even richer). The Senate, which exerted a great influence over decision-making and the governance of the State, was mainly made up of older men on account of the faculties attributed to them, as suggested in section 19: "*quae nisi essent in senibus, non summum consilium maiores nostri appellasent senatum*" (if these mental qualities were not characteristic of old men our fathers would not have called their highest deliberative body the "senate"). In fact, the Latin name of the Senate, *senatus*, is derived from *senex*, elder man. Elders were also granted a central role in religion: priests and augurs, responsible for interpreting omens and performing religious ceremonies, were frequently older people who enjoyed great respect and authority in society. This is suggested by Cato's observation "*quid iuris consulti, quid pontífices, quid augures, quid philosophi senes, quam multa meminerunt*" (and how is it with aged lawyers, pontiffs, augurs, and philosophers? What a multitude of things they remember!) This view of old age was not restricted only to formal institutions; rather, elders also held a privileged position in Roman family life, as demonstrated in section 37 of *De senectute*, which describes how Appius "*tenebat non modo autorictatem, sed etiam imperium in suos*" (maintained not mere authority, but absolute command over his household). The young were expected to show respect and deference to their elders, and older people had a significant influence in educating and raising children. In *De senectute*, we see this in section 19, for instance: "*quam palmam utinam di inmortales tibi reservent ut avi reliquias persequare!*" (and I pray the immortal gods to reserve for you, Scipio, the glory of completing the work which your grandfather left unfinished!). The transmission of knowledge and values from one generation to the next was fundamental in classical society, and elders played a key role in this process, as illustrated in section 26: "*sic adolescentes senum praeceptis gaudent, quibus ad virtutum studia ducuntur*" (so young men find pleasure in their elders, by whose precepts they are led into virtue's paths). Regarding this vision of old age, the dialogue shows the influence of Stoicism, a philosophical school that emphasised virtue, self-discipline, and serene acceptance of fate. For instance, in section 33, Cicero writes: "*cursus est certus aetatis et una via naturae, eaque simplex, suaque cuique parti aetatis tempestivitas est data*" (nature has only a single path and that path is run but once, and to each stage of existence has been allotted its own appropriate quality).

Cognitive impairment and active ageing in the work

De senectute is not a medical treatise. As noted by Ribera Casado, Cicero's medical knowledge must be considered in the light of what would be expected of a cultured, well-educated man of the day, taking into account the fact that the two great figures in Roman medicine, Celsus and Galen, had not yet been born, and the *Corpus Hippocraticum* was still in use.[4]

Although it is not a medical text, it does include recommendations related to health. Very early in the dialogue, in section 7, Cato says that, while there are people who feel empty as they age, this must not be

attributed to ageing itself, but rather to their character: "*sed omnium istius modi querellarum in moribus est culp, non in aetate*" (but as regards all such complaints, the blame rests with character, not with age). Throughout the work, he insists that ageing alone does not necessarily involve a weakening of the faculties. For instance, in section 13, he cites the examples of Plato, Isocrates, and Gorgias, who he notes remained active until an advanced age; in section 15, he asks: "*nullaene igitur res sunt seniles quae, vel infirmis corporibus, animo tamen administrentur*?" (are there, then, no intellectual employments in which aged men may engage, even though their bodies are infirm?).

In section 9, Cato describes how "*aptissima onmino sunt, arma senectutis artes exercitationesque virtutum, quae in omni aetate cultae, cum diu multumque vixeris, miríficos ecferunt fructus*" (the most suitable defences of old age are the principles and practice of the virtues, which, if cultivated in every period of life, bring forth wonderful fruits at the close of a long and busy career). Here, we see how it was already known in classical Rome that stimulating the mind over the years could improve ageing. We also observe a recurring theme in classical thought, the importance of virtue in the development of the human being. Regarding the importance of exercising the memory, section 21 reads as follows: "*At memoria minuitur. Credo, nisi eam exerceas, aut etiam si sis natura tardior*" (but, it is alleged, the memory is impaired. Of course, if you do not exercise it, or also if you are by nature somewhat dull); in other words, Cato stresses the importance of maintaining adequate cognitive activity throughout life. In the same section, he says that [the aged] "*omnia, quae curant, meminerunt; vadimonia constituta, quis sibi, cui ipsi debant*" (remember everything that interests them, their appointments to appear in court, and who are their creditors and who their debtors). With this assertion, he underscores how normal ageing does not imply forgetting relevant aspects of day-to-day life; we still use this concept today to attempt to establish a difference between pathological and non-pathological memory complaints. The importance of remaining cognitively active is once again highlighted in section 26, in which Cato describes how learning new things is not limited to youth, but rather should continue in old age: "*ut et Solonem versibus gloriantem videmus, qui se cotidie aliquid addiscentem dicit senem fieri*" (such was the case with Solon, whom we see boasting in his verses that he grows old learning something every day). In the same section, Cato himself notes that, already an old man, he began studying the Greek language, confirming the importance to him of remaining intellectually active in old age. He stresses this once again in section 38, noting how "*hae sunt execirtationes ingenii, hace curricula mentis, in his desudans atque elaborans corporis vires non magno opere desidero*" (these employments are my intellectual gymnastics; these the race-courses of my mind; and while I sweat and toil with them I do not greatly feel the loss of bodily strength). And he concludes: "*Semper enim in his studiis laboribusque viventi non intellegitur quando obrepat senectus*" (thus employed his life gradually and imperceptibly glides into old age). Throughout the work, he returns on numerous occasions to the importance of maintaining cognitive activity, declaring in section 49 that "*si vero habet aliquod tamquam pabulum studii atque doctrinae, nihil est otiosa senectute iucundius*" (and indeed if it has any provender, so to speak, of study and learning, nothing is more enjoyable than a leisured old age), and in section 50 that "*atque hace quidem studia doctrinae, quae quidem prudentibus et bene institutis pariter cum aetate crescunt*" (this zeal [for learning], at least in the case of wise and well-trained men, advances in even pace with age).

Cato accepts physical decline as a process inherent to ageing, but does not attribute it a negative value, as we observe in section 27: "*nec nunc quidem vires desidero adulescentis, non plus quam adulescens tauri aut elephanti desiderabam*" (I do not now feel the need of the strength of youth—for that was the second head under the faults of old age—any more than when a young man I felt the need of the strength of the bull or of the elephant). Indeed, he disparages as "babblers" those who lament their physical decline, as other faculties are gained with ageing. Cato echoes this decline in section 32, where he notes that "*quartum ago annum et octogesimum* […], *sed tamen hoc que dicere, non me quidem eis ese viribus, quibus aut miles bello Punico*" (I am in my eighty-fourth year […] but still I can say this much: that while I am not now, indeed, possessed of that physical strength which I had as a private soldier in the Punic War […]). Furthermore, Cato considers that physical strength should not be missed in old age, saying in section 33: "*denique isto bono utare, dum adsit, cum absit, ne requiras*" (in short, enjoy the blessing of strength while you have it and do not bewail it when it is gone).

In section 29, he describes how "*libidinosa enim et intemperans adulescentia effetum corpus tradit senectuti*"

(an intemperate and indulgent youth delivers to old age a body all worn out). He adds in section 34 that physical exercise is important to staying healthy in old age, noting that "*potest igitur exercitatio et temperantia etiam in senectute conservare aliquid pristini roboris*" (It is possible, therefore, for a man by exercise and self-control, even in old age, to preserve some of his original vigour). Thus, in section 35 he notes that "*pugnandum tamquam contra morborum sic contra senectutem*" (it is our duty […] to fight against [old age] as we would fight against disease). Subsequently, in section 36 he expresses in very clear terms the importance of a balanced diet, physical exercise, and mental stimulation in old age: "*habenda ratio valetunidis, utendum exercitationibus modicis, tantum cibi et potionis adhibendum ut reficiantur vires, non opprimantur. Nec vero corpori solum subveniendum est, sed menti atque animo multo magis*" (to adopt a regimen of health; to practise moderate exercise; and to take just enough of food and drink to restore our strength and not to overburden it. Nor, indeed, are we to give our attention solely to the body; much greater care is due to the mind and soul).

In section 36, he speaks about dementia as a possibility in old age, although he attributes it entirely to not having led a virtuous life, asserting that "*sic ista senilis stultitia, quae deliratio appellari solet, senum levium est, non ómnium*" (so that senile debility, usually called "dotage," is a characteristic, not of all old men, but only of those who are weak in mind and will). The same is true of the personality and behavioural changes that may appear with ageing: in section 65, he writes that "*at sunt morosi et anxii et iracundi et difíciles senes. Si quaerimus, etiam avari; sed hace morum vitia sunt, non senectutis*" (but, the critics say, old men are morose, troubled, fretful, and hard to please; and, if we inquire, we shall find that some of them are misers, too, However, these are faults of character, not of age).

In section 38, Cato describes the importance, in his view, of functional independence in old age, asserting that "*ita enim senectus honesta est, si se ipsa defendit, si ius suum retinet, si nemini emancipata est, si usque ad ultimum spiritum dominatur in suos*" (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.)

From section 39, he highlights that old age is a stage of life in which the search for pleasure diminishes, writing in this section that "*sequiur tertia vituperatio senectutis, quod eam carere dicum voluptatibus*" (we come now to the third ground for abusing old age, and that is, that it is devoid of sensual pleasures), and in section 47 that "*at non est voluptatum tanta quasi titillatio in senibus. Credo, sed ne desideratio quidem*" (it may be urged that, in old men, "pleasure's tingling," if I may so call it, is not so great. True, but neither is their yearning for pleasures so great). Cato sees this in a positive light, as it enables a more tranquil view of the world, as we see in sections 39 ("*o praeclarum munus aetatis, siquidem id aufert a nobis, quod est in adulescentia vitiosissimum*" [O glorious boon of age, if it does indeed free us from youth's most vicious fault!]) and 42 ("*impedit enim consilium voluptas, rationi inimica est, mentis, ut ita dicam, praestringi oculos, nec habet ullum cum virtute commercium*" [for carnal pleasure hinders deliberation, is at war with reason, blindfolds the eyes of the mind, so to speak, and has no fellowship with virtue]). In section 44, he clearly explains that "*quia non modo vituperatio nulla, sed etiam suma laus senectitus est, quod ea voluptates nullas magno opere desiderat*" (the fact that old age feels little longing for sensual pleasures not only is no cause for reproach, but rather is ground for the highest praise).

Cato also underscores the importance of social gatherings. For instance, he says in section 45 that "*neque enim ipsorum conviviorum delectationem voluptatibus corporis magis quam coetu amicorum et sermonibus metiebar*" (nor, indeed, did I measure my delight in these social gatherings more by the physical pleasure than by the pleasure of meeting and conversing with my friends), and in section 46 that "*conviviumque vicinorum cotidie compleo, quod ad multam noctem quam maxime possumus vario sermone producimus*" (every day I join my neighbours in a social meal which we protract as late as we can into the night with talk on varying themes). In section 58, he notes the importance of shared hobbies: "*nobis senibus ex lusionibus multis talos relinquant et tesseras*" (out of many sports leave us old fellows our dice and knuckle-bones).

From section 69, Cato addresses attitudes to death, which he sees as a natural process that should be accepted because *"quid est autem quae secundum naturam quem senibus emori?*" (indeed, what is more consonant with Nature than for the old to die?). In these reflections on attitudes to death, we see how Cicero (through Cato's words) believes that the physical body is temporary but the soul is immortal. For instance, in section 77,

he asserts that: "*est enim animus caelestis ex altissimo domicilio depressus et quasi demersus in terram, locum divinae naturae aeternititatique contrarium*" (for the soul is celestial, brought down from its most exalted home and buried, as it were, in earth, a place uncongenial to its divine and eternal nature).

Discussion

De senectute is not a medical treatise, but rather a work in which Cicero, through Cato, develops his vision of ageing as a natural process that must be accepted as part of life itself, and which depends to a great extent on how life was lived. In this regard, the Stoic vision and the cultivation of virtue are seen as means to live a fulfilling life in old age. Furthermore, the final part of the work addresses attitudes towards death, as it is closer to old age than to youth. Also with respect to this attitude to death, Cicero presents a vision of tranquillity, based on the immortality of the soul and on virtue cultivated throughout life. Though it is not a medical work, *De senectute* enables us to understand how certain aspects of the physical and cognitive decline associated with ageing were viewed at the time, as well as the principles that led to healthy ageing.

It is not surprising that Cicero should select Cato the Elder, who died at 85 years of age, as his protagonist. Cato was a distinguished politician, soldier, orator, and writer in classical Rome, and remained politically and socially active until his final days. His life is known through the writings of different authors of the day, who portray him as a symbol of the traditional values of the Republic, a staunch defender of austerity, discipline, and ancient customs, against increasing Hellenic influence. In other words, Cato embodied the archetype of the austere Roman, defending tradition against the perceived decadence of his day, and therefore was a model for Cicero.[7]

In this regard, Cicero proposes a vision of old age not as inevitable decline, but rather as a natural stage that is dignified and rich in ethical, intellectual, and civic opportunities. This view partially contrasts with certain attitudes that were prevalent in Rome, while also aligning with other values that were deeply rooted in the culture of the Republic.[8] In Roman society, old age had a dual meaning. On the one hand, the *auctoritas* of older people was valued, particularly in the Senate and in religious and legal settings. Respect towards elders was deep-rooted. On the other, Roman culture also admired *virtus*, frequently associated with physical vigour, military activity, and political ambition; in certain contexts, this may have led to older age being seen as an obstacle or burden.[9] Cicero's argument is structured around four common criticisms of old age: withdrawal from active pursuits, physical weakening, deprivation of pleasure, and proximity to death. Cato responds to each of these arguments with philosophical serenity: old age does not prevent exercising the mind or virtue; physical weakening may be compensated for through calmness and sage advice; the deprivation of physical pleasure is understood more as a liberation than as a loss; and death must not be feared but rather accepted as a part of natural order. This conception has roots in Stoicism and Platonism, and reflects the Roman ideal of the wise man: moderation, prudence, and service to the community. Cicero supports the idea that an individual's true value is not their physical strength, but rather their moral probity and reason. Thus, old age is an opportunity to cultivate virtue, to guide the young, and to contribute experience to public life. Thus, *De senectute* seeks to harmonise these two dimensions: Cicero defends old age, not denying its limitations but rather reformulating its virtues. He suggests that old age is not the twilight of life, but rather its crowning moment, if one has lived with integrity.

In his work, Cicero acknowledges the possibility that cognitive alterations or behavioural changes may appear with ageing, although these are attributed to the failure to lead a virtuous life or cultivate activities that enable healthy ageing. Thus, he seems not to recognise the possible development of a disease inherent to old age, which leads to cognitive or behavioural changes. This is consistent with classical beliefs, which acknowledged the possibility of impaired brain function in old age, but attributed it to the ageing process itself.[10] In any case, recent works have demonstrated that, though there were some descriptions of memory and behavioural disorders in old age, these generally received little attention in classical texts,[11] which placed greater emphasis on physical decline. This is also addressed by Cicero in *De senectute*, although the author considers it to be a normal process in ageing that should not be interpreted negatively because, though ageing is naturally accompanied by physical decline, it also enhances other abilities, such as patience and restraint. Similarly, he contributes a calm view of ageing, asserting that, unlike in youth, older people are less driven by the passions. He regards this

quality as positive, considering that the impulsivity of youth leads to poor decision-making.

Although it makes no further reference to a modern conception of cognitive incline, *De senectute* does refer numerous times to what would today be considered active ageing, a term coined by the WHO in the late 1990s to describe a lifestyle that leads to fulfilment in old age. In 2024, the *Lancet* Commission published a report on the prevention of dementia, which established that in up to 45% of cases, dementia could be delayed or prevented by addressing 14 risk factors: childhood education, arterial hypertension, hypoacusia, elevated LDL cholesterol, smoking, obesity, depression, physical inactivity, diabetes mellitus, social isolation, alcohol consumption, head trauma, vision loss, and environmental pollution.[12] Treatment of these risk factors throughout life leads to healthy ageing. By reviewing in detail these risk factors, and the lifestyles associated with them, we may observe how *De senectute* already speaks directly of their importance to a fulfilling old age. Cicero directly states the need "to adopt a regimen of health; to practise moderate exercise; and to take just enough of food and drink to restore our strength and not to overburden it. Nor, indeed, are we to give our attention solely to the body; much greater care is due to the mind and soul"; and that "an intemperate and indulgent youth delivers to old age a body all worn out." In other words, these statements address the importance of a balanced lifestyle, health management, physical activity, cognitive stimulation, and diet as means of ensuring healthy ageing. The work refers constantly to the importance of cultivating the mind throughout life, including during old age. In other words, Cicero advocates for maintaining adequate cognitive activity throughout life, in order to reach old age with a good mental status and to maintain mental faculties. Therefore, education and cognitive stimulation were already known to be tools that led to healthy ageing. Cicero also recognises the importance of physical exercise, arguing that "it is possible, therefore, for a man by exercise and self-control, even in old age, to preserve some of his original vigour." However, the importance of physical exercise is mentioned far less frequently than the importance of exercising the mind. This is consistent with the classical idea that cultivating the mind and soul led to virtue. This is stated clearly by Cicero: "the most suitable defences of old age are the principles and practice of the virtues, which, if cultivated in every period of life, bring forth wonderful fruits at the close of a long and busy career." Another important consideration in healthy ageing is encouraging social gatherings. The idea of humans as social beings was a key aspect of classical thought; however, it is noteworthy that Cicero regards this as a contributing factor in healthy ageing: "nor, indeed, did I measure my delight in these social gatherings more by the physical pleasure than by the pleasure of meeting and conversing with my friends." Therefore, Cicero understood the importance of social gatherings as a fundamental part of a person's development.

However, from the perspective of today's understanding of ageing, there are two darker sides to this view of old age as a period of fulfilment in *De senectute*. Firstly, as was customary in the classical world, a direct link is made between a fulfilling old age and a virtuous life. A lack of understanding of neurological diseases associated with ageing led to the idea that weakening of mental faculties or changes in personality were exclusively due to a lack of virtue or to habit, and therefore caused a stigmatised view of pathological ageing, as reflected in Cato's assertion that "senile debility, usually called 'dotage,' is a characteristic, not of all old men, but only of those who are weak in mind and will." Secondly, and probably influenced by this belief, Cicero considers that "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"; in other words, old age is only considered dignified if the person in question is functionally independent. Disability in old age was an unknown subject, on which there are no great references from classical authors; nonetheless, given the general view of disability and the above-mentioned references linking a virtuous life to healthy ageing, it is likely that the appearance of processes that impair the independence of older people would have been seen negatively, contributing to the stigmatisation of disease in old age.

In conclusion, *De senectute* demonstrates that several of the factors that we associate today with active ageing were already known in ancient Rome. Thus, maintenance of cognitive and intellectual activity, physical exercise, a balanced diet without excesses, social relationships, and disease management were considered fundamental to health in old age. Therefore, though the term active ageing was coined in the late 1990s, many of the elements the concept involves were known and practised in antiquity. However, it is possible that this vision of good ageing

associated with virtue may have had a negative impact on perceptions of pathological ageing, by associating it with a lack of virtue, potentially leading to a stigmatised view of dementia and other age-related diseases.

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