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Abstract

Although many people are living longer and healthier than before and life expectancies have even more than doubled in the last 150 years, cultures of aging have not kept up with these developments. On the contrary: in most Western countries people are driven from the labor market at a younger age than was still the case in the 1960s and they are labeled as 'aged 'as soon as they have become 50 years old. Partly as a response to this early exclusion from normal adulthood, cultures of aging have developed which paradoxically define aging well as "staying young". This article argues that contemporary developments in longevity ask for inspiring cultures of aging which do not deny its vulnerabilities nor belittle its potentials. As unique lives are deepened in aging, they may lead to inspiring cultures of aging which go beyond the dominant perspectives that emphasize either staying young or hopeless decline.

Keywords: philosophy, aging, vulnerability, unique lives, finitude, wisdom.

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Una Implicación Creciente en la Vida con los Demás. Hacia una Filosofía del Envejecimiento

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Resumen

Aunque muchas personas están viviendo más tiempo y con más salud que antes, y las expectativas de vida se han más que duplicado en los últimos 150 años, los comportamientos sociales ante el envejecimiento no se corresponden con estos desarrollos. Por el contrario, en la mayoría de países occidentales, las personas son excluidas del mercado laboral a una edad más temprana incluso que en la década de 1960, y son etiquetadas como 'mayores' tan pronto como cumplen 50 años de edad. En parte como respuesta a esta exclusión temprana de la edad adulta, los estudios sobre el envejecimiento han propuesto, paradójicamente, definiciones de envejecer bien como "mantenerse joven". Este artículo sostiene que la evolución contemporánea de la longevidad reclama nuevas propuestas sobre el envejecimiento que no nieguen sus vulnerabilidades ni menosprecien sus potencialidades. Puesto que con la edad se ahonda en la singularidad de la vida, esto debería inspirar nuevas aproximaciones al envejecimiento que vayan más allá de las perspectivas habituales, que se decantan, o bien por una cultura del mantenerse jóvenes, o por un declive sin esperanza.

Palabras clave: filosofía, envejecimiento, vulnerabilidad, vidas singulares, finitud, sabiduría.

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In terms of statistical measurements more humans live longer than ever before: life expectancy at birth has practically doubled in most developed countries over the last 150 years. Yet something appears to be missing. There have been repeated calls, especially by the *World Health Organization* since World Health Day 1982, to add "*life*" to years after years have been added to life. The culture, however, that is instrumental in making lives longer, through such things as improved hygiene and medical care, is not up to addressing all questions that arise in trying to facilitate and inspire more meaningful lives while aging. This can be seen in many models of "successful aging" which tend to emphasize the absence of illnesses (Rowe & Kahn, 1987; Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

It must be stated, however, that aging is intrinsically connected to increased risks of suffering from illnesses or disabilities, as biological senescing implies a gradual reduction of the functional capacities of the different parts and organs of the human body. This means that our concepts of "aging well" must include good ways to deal with chronic diseases and handicaps that may accompany aging. But these ways must form part of an inspiring culture of aging, in which aging people can continue to play a role. This is all the more important as aging has changed since the days when most present pension systems that regulate societal participation were developed. In the past, the age of retirement was extremely high compared to life expectancies as agricultural and industrial work were so hard that whoever lived long enough to benefit from retirement was usually physically exhausted and in ill shape. Nowadays, many people may live for a relatively long time after having been awarded the status of being "aged." Yet this is occurring at ages that have, astonishingly, been lowered since the eighties of the last century, while life expectancies have risen. Most organizations that guard the interests of older persons use the age of fifty years as a criterion for membership. It might be said that social and cultural senescing has *accelerated*, while it has slowed down in terms of waning functional capacities. This tendency to expel aging persons from the central domains of society at relatively early ages has resulted in a remarkable construction of the life course which puts an enormous pressure on a relatively short period of "normal" adulthood, in which careers must be realized, children must be raised and pensions must be built up within 25

to 30 years. At the same time, people who have been declared "aged" at a chronological age of 50 or 55 years may still live several decades, perhaps longer than their lives as "normal" adults. Even when these people are chronically ill, they cannot be expected to constantly focus on their coming death. In the absence of an inspiring culture of aging well, the aged tend to focus on staying young, encouraged and cheated by a commercial culture of anti-aging.

It becomes clear that the term "aging" must be used with care: we have to distinguish getting a higher age from biological senescing but also from the socio-cultural senescing of functional capacities, while "aging" may serve as a term which refers to the ways in which people live their lives after they have been labeled as 'aged' by their societies. More static terms such as "old age" or "senescence" are losing their meaning in face of the highly differentiated and long term processes that are relevant here. In speaking about "aging," it is important to proceed carefully, because the term "aging" refers to a general process which can only be observed in specific people. In the public arena we can, however, find many specifically colored, but presumably general images of aging which have been created by agents who have huge interests in advocating these images. We can find interesting examples of this in the anti-aging industry, which generally tries to promote an image of aging that is the result of good or poor maintenance or investment. Other institutions may tend to identify aging with a burden of care that ought to be managed according to their specific organizational models and interests. Such generalizing positive or negative images do not fit well with the actual information available on the elderly in Western societies, which demonstrates an impressive variety in the social trajectories and individual experiences of aging that should be taken more seriously (Maddox & Powell Lawton, 1988; Crystal & Waehrer, 1996; Kunzmann, 2008; Yang & Lee, 2010).

However, such variety does not mean that anything is possible. Although there is certainly no reason to paint a negative picture of aging, it is nevertheless an anthropological reality that vulnerability accumulates in higher ages. Aging is a process in which the vulnerability that is an essential component of finite human life will gradually assert itself.

The Need for an Inspiring Culture of Aging

We can speak of a cultural lag: cultural developments lag behind the reality of a growing importance of aging processes. This results in a strong need for a culture of aging in which participation and recognition of aging persons are encouraged and, possibly, newly emerging meanings of aging can be discovered and reflected upon. To discover such meanings, we can focus on experiences which are exclusive to people referred to as "aged." Such an approach may have its own value, but has the effect of separating the "aged" from the "non-aged" and, more fundamentally, of separating aging from normal life.

I would like to explore how the interpretation of human life may be enriched by experiences that are more likely to be made in aging than while being young, although they are not exclusive to the aged. Processes of aging and its place in society have changed to such a degree that we now have the opportunity to discover aspects that could not be experienced as easily before. Aging is not so much a phase of life but especially a process enabling a perspective freed from many practical preoccupations, making it possible to gain a more detached vision of the crucial qualities of human life. Such a detached but still engaged vision, which may touch on traditional motives of wisdom demands involvement and dedication.

There is still a lot to learn from the great philosophers of the past, but they have written far more about death than about aging. This is understandable, as they lived in times when persons of all ages lived far more under the threat of a sudden death than is the case nowadays. As we can learn from historical demography, well into the 20th century the risk of dying was much higher for any age (Imhoff, 1984). This historical background explains why the fundamental idea of human finitude tended to be identified with mortality (Baars, 2012). Throughout history, poets, theologians, and philosophers have been overwhelmed by the experience that all that we are and do, is futile because sooner or later, this will all be gone. Here, the futility and vanity of all us humans who like to think they are so important stare us in the face. Life seems just a short period during which we are under the illusion that our activities and personal views really matter, but they rest on nothing more than an all-too-short breath of life. The message for those who are already "aged" is that their lives

are even shorter: they are well advised to prepare for their deaths. Of course, mortality has lost none of its inevitable seriousness, but there are good reasons to give finitude a broader interpretation which addresses more strongly the qualities of life. I propose that aging nowadays presents us with the possibility of discovering other qualities that may inform and enrich our understanding of living in time (Baars, 2010).

At this point it is of interest to reread some ancient narratives about the differences between finite and infinite life. In Homer's *Odyssey* (Homer, 1991) we find the story of the hero Odysseus who finds himself on the island of the wonderful goddess Calypso under whose spell he has been for several years. The Olympic gods, however, force Calypso to set him free. Thus, he is faced with a far-reaching choice: either he can continue to share his life with the beautiful and ageless Calypso and will not die, or he will have to leave her island and may have to fight for his life in order to return to his home on the island of Ithaca. Odysseus answers Calypso that he longs to return to his wife and prefers a mortal life, although he does not look forward to all the dangers he may have to face. But, he emphasizes, he has "a heart that is inured to suffering" (Homer, 1991, p. 76) which has helped him in the past, so he will endure what is to come. This episode is very interesting when compared with the many stories about paradises where eternal life was lost in punishment of sinful behavior. Important in this classical quotation is not the heroic pose of the lonely warrior who conquers all, but the autonomous decision –not a condemnation– to choose a mortal life full of uncertainty yet also full of possible precious encounters with other persons. This preciousness of life is intrinsically related to its finitude. Odysseus decides in favor of a finite and vulnerable life: a profound choice with far-reaching implications. If everything could always be postponed, nothing would really matter. Only in a finite life can something be really at stake and can life gain its full depth in this very moment.

The early Homeric emphasis on the value of mortal life was developed centuries later by Roman Stoics such as Seneca (4 BC-65) and Marcus Aurelius (121-180). The Stoics could be quite drastic in their condemnation of those who hesitate to live because of their fear of death and from this perspective they also criticized those who do not want to age:

> See how they desire to live long! Worn-out old men pray like street-beggars for the addition of a few years; they pretend to be younger than they are; they flatter themselves with lies and get as much pleasure from self-deception as if they were deceiving fate as well as themselves. When finally some weakness has reminded them of their mortality, how fearfully they meet death, as though they are not quitting life but been dragged away from it! They shout repeatedly that they have been fools, as they have not really lived…That is when they reflect on how pointlessly they have toiled to gain what they did not enjoy, how all their effort has been utterly wasted (Seneca, 2007, 150f.)

For these Stoic philosophers philosophy was also an art of living and they warned their audiences not to spoil life out of fear of death. Early modern thinkers such as Petrarch (1304-1374) and Montaigne (1533-1592) have repeated the message that fear of death can be avoided because death is unavoidable (Baars & Dohmen, forthcoming). For them, the meaning of fear was that it might help to avoid the danger the fear focuses on; but in the case of death, this does not make sense. Seneca and Montaigne are used to looking death in the face and have little compassion with those who complain that they have to die; they see this behavior as a waste of time and believe that those who waste the time of their lives do not really deserve to live any longer. If they were granted a longer life, they would still not know how to enjoy it. And anyway, because we will be dead an eternity, living a little longer or shorter would not make a difference. Seneca stresses that he does not experience his life as short, because he does not allow time to be taken from him as do those *occupati* who let themselves be carried away by the course of events and the many things to do.

Whereas the beginning of the Stoic art of life is the acceptance of the inevitability of death, more Epicurean is the strategy to ignore death, because it would not be a part of life. According to Epicurus, we will never meet death, because as long as we live, death is absent, and when death arrives, we are not there anymore. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein (1974) repeats this Epicurean statement: "Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death" (6.4311). It is clear that thinkers in the Epicurean and Stoic traditions

have tended to see death merely as one's own death, whereas the death of others who are dear to us will be fully experienced and remain a painful horizon of vulnerable life.

Aging as Finitization: A Deepening of Unique Lives

As a result of the traditional fascination with death and a concomitant neglect of aging, finitude has usually been understood as mortality, which is not unimportant but must be extended to the different times in which we live and age (Baars, 2007). In transforming the awareness that our lives are finite into an inspiring perspective for aging, I do not intend to diminish the importance of death as the last horizon of this life that we live. I will, however, turn this perspective around and feed its intensity back into life as a whole. Instead of diminishing the importance of mortal life because, after a while we will all be dead; or identifying life with youth and "normal" adulthood, while positioning "old age" in the shadow of death, I would like to emphasize that every moment can get a special depth and every life a quality of uniqueness because life as such is finite. Emphasizing the finitude of life can also increase the intensity with which we live it; also, or especially, as we are aging. When we realize that the times of our lives are limited, we become aware that we must live these short lives and face the challenges and opportunities that are most essential to us. Another change of perspective compared with the main tradition of Western thought about death, from the ancient Greeks and Romans to modern philosophers as Wittgenstein and Heidegger is that the issues of finitude and death include the constitutive importance of other people instead of being just a personal challenge.

The extension of finitude to the different times in which we live and age is the essence of the perspective of finitization: its underlying idea is that the inevitability of change can inspire us to appreciate the uniqueness of persons and situations as they are emerging, changing and disappearing over time (Baars, 2002, 2012). This perspective of finitization, of living a finite life in all situations and phases, is also meant as an affirmation of life, not only in its glorious moments but also when life is difficult.

There is a deep connection between finitude and individual uniqueness. The fact that persons and situations will not remain the same

highlights the particular qualities and limitations of individuals at particular moments, their relationships with others in specific situations, and the uniqueness of this all. Of course, everything is temporary, but this is precisely what makes life so important. The easy association between aging and finitude in the limited sense of mortality tends to occlude the finitude that pervades human life as we live it. Even being young does not offer any guarantees: statistics about life expectancy are just long-term generalizations. The wish to ignore finitude not only during youth but also during "normal" adulthood leads to an abstract image of a normalized world that excludes those "abnormal" persons who do not fit these images.

An important limitation of the *Odyssey* and many later narratives is that all attention tends to be focused on the struggle of the young hero with a daunting adversary such as a Cyclops, dragon, giant, or magician. After victory comes the reward when the hero receives what he fought for. Odysseus returns home and is reunited with his wife; the prince puts the princess on his white horse "and they live happily ever after." What happened after the fight is apparently not worth mentioning, although this is what the fight was all about. Although the activist struggle for life entails more sensation, most recounted adventures turn around the endangered freedom and dignity of human lives, and there is no reason to remain stuck at the sensational level.

Likewise, aging life may offer more opportunities and unexpected exciting challenges than are foreseen in a career-oriented planning of the life course. In other words, the adventure of life does not only unfold in youth and "normal" adulthood but also in later life.

In order to explore this a bit further, I propose that human aging can be seen as:

A. a gradual intensification of a vulnerability which is inherent in human life.
B. a process of increasing complexity, richness of reflected experience and diversity.

In their interaction both processes offer a perspective on the meanings of human aging.

The chances of understanding these two dimensions of life in aging are much higher than during fully active, busy life. The qualities of finite life, which can reveal themselves more easily –although certainly not

exclusively– in aging can be an enrichment for life in all its phases. The meaning of aging can therefore be seen as a deepening of the understanding of life in every phase.

A. The Vulnerability of the Inter-Human Condition

A fundamental uncertainty is part and parcel of the inter-human condition and applies to our existence in its entirety. Human life is not accidentally, but essentially vulnerable, which is the most direct manifestation of its finitude:

- Human life contains death
- Human freedom contains the possibility of evil
- Intense happiness contains an equally intense suffering

The intensity and the ways in which we participate in life are related to an awareness of its vulnerability. Facing our own or someone else's possible and eventually even inevitable death, can lead to a fuller experience of the value of a relationship. But there are many less dramatic examples of this fundamental uncertainty and vulnerability of all that is really precious. We are, for instance, unable to control others insofar as they are personally important to us. Paradoxically, this constitutes the possible value of an encounter or a conversation. What would be the meaning of such an encounter if we were able to tell what was going to happen? In that case, an encounter would lose much of its possible importance and would become a mere confirmation of what has already been agreed upon or was otherwise determined. The acceptance of the mutual possibility of getting hurt is an imperative condition for all relationships that imply personal involvement in one way or another. At a fundamental level, vulnerability also implies that we have no guarantees that all we wish for, aim at or count on will actually happen. If we have a personal need for our fellow humans, this particularly concerns their quality of being spontaneous and potentially unpredictable. Likewise, communication has to be attempted again and again, with all the risks of not succeeding; forgetting this leads to a way of communicating that can regress into slick mono-logical routine. Potential misunderstanding is not an external disturbance or disorder, but a reference to the vulnerability of communication processes and the precarious, provisional nature of rationality and morality.

In our attempts to understand the world, each other and ourselves, we are continuously confronted with alienation, misunderstanding and lack of clarity. However, this has also led to the great philosophical or scientific designs of reality, although these have too often claimed to offer a foundation that would be beyond all doubt. Even if we no longer take such absolutist claims seriously, these designs represent unceasing attempts to find meaningful answers to the vulnerability of the inter-human condition.

Which is not so easy: neither in attempts to understand our situation, nor in relating to suffering. Although in wealthy countries disturbing forms of suffering are removed from sight and placed in professional institutions, we still know that numerous people are born with major deficiencies or chronic health problems. Moreover, we inevitably experience not only personal loss and tragedy, but are also faced with large-scale disasters or genocide as reported by the media or described in historical documents. Such occurrences highlight our finitude as the incapacity to make sense of such suffering or to end it. Of course, old age can also be a source of intensive, sometimes long lasting suffering, as in advanced stages of Alzheimer's, in which we can find no meaning. There is a continuous need for meaningful answers that, however, elude us in their promised definitiveness. Finitude is not a philosophical invention; it is rather the starting point of philosophy and other forms of exploring the world that try to find answers from within the inter-human condition.

In its various ways, vulnerability has a constitutive meaning because it is part of our reality and it drives us to develop humane responses: the genuinely humane part of the story of life begins when we face these happenings and respond to them. Then, apparently meaningless occurrences can become meaningful. The inter-human condition is not only characterized by negativity and meaninglessness, but also by the affirmative answers that serve as humane responses. The vulnerability of life invites human responses of solidarity, as life's problems can not usually be dealt with by presumably independent individuals, neither at life's beginning and ending nor at many moments in between. The challenges we face, being confronted with the uncontrollable vulnerability of life, are permanent and cannot in any way be expelled definitively. They belong to an inter-human condition that shows its quality –or the lack of it– in the way it deals with them. These challenges

cannot be regarded as external, manageable problems which interfere with an uncomplicated daily normality.

We cannot, however, maintain that all forms of suffering are direct consequences of this fundamental vulnerability of life. Many problems that face aged people have little to do with their age, and much more with their problematic situations or scarce resources. To approach these problems adequately, we must avoid three pitfalls. The first pitfall is to assume that all problems which occur during aging are the inevitable result of an increasing vulnerability which should be accepted; thus neglecting the possible structural sources of suffering. From life course data we can conclude that there are many structural mechanisms which produce unnecessary suffering; problems gerontologists have articulated as cumulative disadvantage over the life course or as gross inequalities in life chances over the globe (Baars, Dannefer, Phillipson & Walker, 2006; Dannefer, 2003). Such structural sources of misery may not only demand political responsibility but also a broader social responsibility. The second pitfall concerns the idea or pragmatic attitude that suffering only deserves serious attention when it can be cured or otherwise fixed quickly as in a pit stop model of service, which puts chronic disease and long term care in a risky position. This comes close to excluding chronic suffering from normality; an exclusion which not only affects frail elderly, but also the mentally and physically disabled or the chronically ill of all ages. This is certainly not a social development we should support, as it undermines the humane quality of society that affects far more people than the elderly alone, as vulnerability is inherent to human existence. The third pitfall is the assumption that human suffering has only external causes which can and should be taken away. There are still good reasons to heed the vulnerability of the interhuman condition, for the highly cultivated ability of the Western world to cure diseases, create safer environments, and postpone dying has created the illusion that people suffer or die because the efforts to help them have failed. Although this can also be the case, eventually human life runs against its inherent limitations. The highly specialized and often effective technology tends to obscure this insecure character of the interhuman condition and to create the illusion that people are dying because medical technology has not yet found the means to cure the diseases they are dying from (Hayflick & Moody, 2003). Where suffering cannot be

helped, in spite of all efforts, it deserves to be dignified as an integral part of vulnerable human life.

Aging as increasing vulnerability

Positioning aging within the context of the vulnerability of the inter-human condition is not intended to play down the more problematic aspects of aging. On the contrary, in the process of aging the vulnerability of the inter-human condition can easily increase: love may end, loved ones may die, your body can fail you in different ways, and friends may leave or disappoint you. It is important, however, not to create an abstract opposition between invulnerable normal adulthood and the vulnerable elderly. When care is needed it should be given; there is no need to regard all aging persons as dependent or a burden to society. Such negative generalizations do no justice to the enormous amount of informal care which is done by people who are themselves labeled "aged."

Problems of bodily senescing are an inevitable reality but their complicated dynamics do not operate in synchrony with calendar age and their effects can be very different as genetic dispositions interact with environments (Gilbert & Epel, 2009). If people are well cared for and do not overburden themselves; if they adapt their ways of living to their capacities and needs and are "lucky" (a term which expresses partly our lack of understanding), they may live healthily for a very long time. But they can also become terminally ill when they are young. Generalizations may be helpful if one needs a statistical basis for planning facilities for large numbers of people, but they tend to also dominate everyday life situations where they make much less sense: there are no guarantees in aging (as in life); neither positive nor negative. The only certainty is death, but within the human life span this is not fixed to any age; it comes unexpectedly, unless somebody is already terminally ill.

It is important to avoid diagnosing human aging solely in medical terms. The tendency to see aging as a pathological process implies the surrender of aging and the aged to a medical regime. Of course, medical care is needed when there are health problems –as in all phases of life– but aging is not a disease and, in itself, not a medical but a socio-existential process. As soon as these processes are only approached in instrumental

medical terms this places aging persons outside interpersonal concerns. As far as treatment has technical or professional aspects this may be justified, but to respond humanely we need a common ground which comes from the acknowledgement of a shared vulnerability. Suffering reminds us in a most confronting way of our own vulnerability which makes it all too easy to hide behind instrumentality.

B. Increasing Complexities in Aging

Unique lives: empirical and ethical

We inevitably begin our lives in specific circumstances: with this body, with those parents, in that time in history, in that part of the world. Being born in a specific situation, with particular bodily characteristics, with both weak and strong points, is something we can only undergo, although it will have major consequences. Human beings are born into circumstances that support, frustrate, crush, or inspire them and this situationality remains a condition of life. Living implies a constant confrontation with situations that "present themselves": a beautiful morning, a nice message, an accident, or an interesting encounter. Interwoven with this more fluctuant layer of situations are the more persistent cultural or structural characteristics that are related to such aspects as citizenship, education, income, health care, housing, employment, pensions or ageism (Baars, Dohmen, Grenier & Phillipson, 2013). Although the circumstances of life and the influences of other persons are highly influential and formative during the early years, research on the life course of aging adults informs us that the effects of enduring situations in adulthood and later life should not be underestimated. Although life's situations may become more strongly influenced and modified by the adult, they remain to an important degree beyond personal control, for instance where more structural aspects of society, our bodily wellbeing and that of intimate others are concerned. At the same time, however, by being actively present we inevitably sustain or transform the situations we find ourselves in.

In this permanent interweaving of passivity and activity, we are confronted with the finitude of life every day: since I am here, I cannot be somewhere else; if I stay indoors to do this, I cannot go out and do

something else; I have only this body, not another one. Unique sequences of situations and actions that lead to characteristic patterns in someone's life belong to the empirical reference of what I have earlier referred to as finitization. This uniqueness of life becomes more striking in the longer term as taken opportunities may create other opportunities but discard many others. At certain typical turns or transitions in the life course one has to choose from a range of possibilities, for instance regarding educational trajectories, intimate partners, forms of work or ways to live in retirement. Such situations have become more frequent in late modernity where education is never finished, lifelong employment in the same line of work or even lifelong intimate partners have become less typical than before and retirement may become an important part of the life course.

Moreover, late modern culture constantly enlarges the possibilities for participating even in situations that are far away in geographical terms. When I am in Madrid, I can at the same time chat with somebody in Sao Paolo, while being on the phone with a friend in New York. However, I remain finite and cannot be in Madrid, Sao Paolo and New York at the same time, and this still makes a difference. In all these situations it will be necessary to choose and decide without being able to realize simultaneously all the other possibilities. Even if somebody would decide to do nothing with his or her life and to become as passive as possible, this attitude would have an enormous influence on the way such a life would be lived. Life cannot be evaded or escaped; it can only take place in giving it a finite shape. In this sense I propose to re-interpret finitude in an active sense, as a life-long process of finitization.

As a result of this constant finitization, aging implies on an empirical level an increasing singularity of experiences resulting from an interplay between, on the one hand, the passivity of life, in which I undergo what happens to me, and on the other hand, the formative activity of my preferences, habits, choices, and decisions. Individual lives assume their unique temporal shapes in such dynamic configurations of activity and passivity.

What are the ethical or moral implications of this perspective? First of all, it requires a modesty regarding the many broad generalizations about "the aged" that conflict with the unique complexity of their lives. Each person grew up in specific circumstances and has been enriched, as well

as possibly scarred, by his or her experiences. As people get older, this complexity increases rather than decreases. This basic characteristic of life challenges all generalizations about "the aged" or "the elderly" that pin them down to something abstract such as a number of years. Counterevidence can often be found nearby: a closer inspection finds huge differences within the category of persons who are classified as "aged"; according to many organizations that claim to speak for them and their interests, this refers to all persons of fifty years and older. Intra-age differences will hardly become less important when older persons will be compared with other members of their birth cohorts. And in personal contacts we can experience that the more we become interested in a person, the greater the complexity of his or her motives and actions appear to be, and the more hesitant we become to put a label on them. Generalizations about age categories and their averages ignore the diversity among older people. Their voices have become very thin in the many large-scale inventories of "the elderly" and their "measured" characteristics, where much is said about them and too little by them. Moreover, much that is said by them has been pre-structured by the research format. Similarly, the development of policies for "the elderly" is a precarious task to be carried out with discretion, since changes in policy or organizational formats must be incorporated in practical orientations that cannot be decided one-sidedly but should be determined together with those involved.

At a more personal ethical level the inevitable finitization during the course of life implies that we must find an adequate response to whoever and whatever one encounters in specific situations and to know when and where to be present and how. We can learn from biographical experiences that serious mistakes in these matters may be seriously regretted. What can make decisions complicated is that we cannot determine independently, from the position of an isolated individual, when and where we should be present, because we are also meaningful to others. When it is important to myself and others that I should be present in person it is morally risky to arrange that somebody else should represent me. This is one of the "things" that are meant by the proverbial seriousness of life, which should not be interpreted as an imperative that everything should be done seriously, but to know when, where and how we should be present.

Of course it remains possible to be indifferent to the specific qualities of persons or situations and to let life pass by. In such a case, indifference is the way life is lived –with all its consequences– there is no possibility of an objective experiment during which we step out of time. In that sense we cannot withdraw from life. The attention for unique lives does not have to end in the narrows of narcissism, because the meanings of one's life are usually deeply connected with the lives of evenly unique others even when they are painfully missed. Personal uniqueness presupposes others: social and cultural contexts that enable, limit and challenge the ways in which personal uniqueness may come to expression. Aging is not an individualistic project that remains isolated from other people; it is always situated in a life world and confronted with systemic structures and processes. Even extreme loneliness presupposes the importance of other persons who are painfully missed.

Personal uniqueness not only has a descriptive sense of a "unique biography" but also denotes creativity and transcendence of existing situations. There is nothing wrong with reminiscence, but it is usually given much prominence in relation to aging and personal uniqueness becomes documented in an autobiographical retrospection that seeks descriptive completeness in telling the story of one's life. This tends to neglect that older persons still live in the present and move into the future. Looking back on unique lives is just one aspect of aging.

Here, uniqueness interacts with hope and transcendence: we remain finite, but we don't know in advance what our possibilities and potentials are. For the philosopher Hannah Arendt, the human condition is characterized by "natality": we are not in the world to die but to be born. "With each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. . . . [E]ach child is a miracle which saves the world" (Arendt, 1958, p. 178). All human beings are endowed with the capacity to begin, to start something new, and to do the unexpected. In that sense each day is not only a unique present but also a new day that breaks out of reproductive cycles. Natality is not only something that happens at birth, but it qualifies human lives from birth to death, inspiring life with hope, creativity, critique, rebirth, and the emergence of new horizons.

One way to approach aging would be to see it as a process of understanding what it is to be human: to have experienced what it is to be young, to grow up, and to go through different situations or phases and to

try to grasp what the most crucial or vital aspects are. To a certain extent it will be inevitable to make the mistake of projecting one's own understanding and experiences on situations of other persons who are equally unique. To begin from one's own prejudices is, as philosophers such as Gadamer (2005) have shown, a hermeneutical necessity. Becoming gradually aware of the inevitable prejudices is the only way to develop more understanding of other situations, because my life, my experiences, and my understanding form the necessary horizons from which I can try to approach human life in a more general sense. Instead of presuming to begin at a universal level, which would be nothing more than elevating my lived experience to the only pattern that counts, I remain caught in a process of going back and forth between specific experiences and interpretations on the one hand and glimpses of a more general pattern on the other hand. In this sense, projections and ethnocentricity are unavoidable, but should also be reflectively restrained, as no human biography or human culture can claim to represent humanity.

A Perspective

The historical change towards an aging society, with more aged people and higher life expectancy, calls for a society where aging persons can still make their own contributions. The evolutionary perspective in which they constitute a useless post-reproductive dead weight, or "disposable soma" (Kirkwood, 1999) cannot be a leading perspective for a humane society. In this historical state of affairs, the aged might break new ground and paradoxically serve the young with their pioneering work, for life expectancies are not likely to decline in the future and there is a lot to discover while persons are aging. In order to assert their growing resources of experience in society, it is desirable that aging persons speak up for themselves and shed light on whatever might be discussed. This includes the reflection of experiences in aging. There is an urgent need of such a reflection as aging well cannot be the same as staying young (Baars, 2012).

In this way the aged could take up their specific position in the dynamics of asymmetry and complementarity over the life course where children need parents, pupils need teachers but also *vice versa*.

Moreover, children become parents and pupils become teachers and so on and so forth, so the asymmetry is reversible. Consequently, adults will be confronted with the children they once were and teachers with their pasts as pupils. And they constantly need each other so that everyone can play his own role. Thus aging persons are confronted with the children, the youngsters and vital adults they once used to be and these may encounter some aspects of their possible futures in their aging counterparts.

This requires, however, a situation where ages and generations present no major obstacles for mutual encounters and communication. In a culture that idealizes being young and dynamic this may be not so easy, but it becomes really hard when aging persons identify more with the young than with those persons who are confronted with a culmination of the vulnerabilities of life. Aging persons can make important contributions to an inspiring culture of aging, as part of an inspiring perspective on human life as a whole, if they take their aging seriously and explore its new perspectives and horizons. The idea of aging I would like to derive from this, is one of growing reflective sensitivity; also in the sense of a growing ability to tell superficiality and glamour from that what really matters. This does not mean that "wisdom comes with age" as the saying goes. The vulnerability of life implies that this is not the case; there may be "no fool like an old fool" and we are certainly never too old to learn. Aging can be brought into an inspiring perspective as a possibility of a growing awareness of the value and the dignity of vulnerable and passing human life, particularly in its seeming perfectly ordinary and everyday moments. As a growing sensitive awareness of the fragile particularity of all that we cherish and cling to, it may be a promise amidst a culture which offers endless substitutes.

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