When time becomes personal. Aging and personal identity

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Abstract

Aging is an integral part of human existence. The problem of aging addresses the most fundamental coordinates of our lives but also the ones of the phenomenological method: time, embodiment, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, and even the social norms that grow into the very notion of aging as such. In my article, I delineate a phenomenological analysis of aging and show how such an analysis connects with the debate concerning personal identity: I claim that aging is not merely a physical process, but is far more significantly also a spiritual one as the process of aging consists in our awareness of and conscious relation to our aging. This spiritual process takes place on an individual and on a social level, whereas the latter is the more primordial layer of this experience. This complicates the question of personal identity since it will raise the question in two ways, namely who I am for myself and who I am for the others, and in a further step how the latter experience shapes the former. However, we can state that aging is neither only physical nor only spiritual. It concerns my bodily processes as it concerns the complex reflexive structure that relates my former self with my present and even future self.

Keywords Aging · Social age · Phenomenology · Existentialism · Personal identity · Narrative identity

“Only then, when one becomes aware of what has disappeared and gone beyond recall, [...] does one understand time as a question directed at oneself.”

Jean Améry – *On Aging* (Améry 1994, 13)

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Aging is an integral part of human existence. Over the course of our lives, we undergo dramatic changes. We are born, we grow up, we mature, we get old, and we eventually die. We get stronger or weaker, thinner or thicker, taller or smaller, and that even multiple times throughout our lives. Every 7 years, every single cell in our body is being replaced in full. In fact, everything that we are is getting replaced every 7 years. If we are lucky, this process repeats itself more than 10 times over the course of our lives. On top of this, we might get artificial hips, screws to hold together broken bones, external fluids and blood exchanges to keep everything going, some of us might even get whole organs replaced. Yet, we remain who we are despite these *physical* transformations.

On a *spiritual* level, these transformations are even more dramatic. We come into this world without any prior knowledge and even without the most basic skills. We get to know the people around us, we learn languages, we learn to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel new things, and every single one of these new skills will reveal the world to us in a different way. As we get older, we go through different identities of ourselves: a great soccer player at school, an academic, a mother, etc. Over the course of our lives, we belong to different groups of friends, peers, social and cultural groups, different countries and in some cases even continents. And in some cases, we may experience all of these transitions in a single lifetime. We wake, we sleep, we dream, we hope, we believe, we live in multiple realities day in and day out: our “real” worlds that we share with others, the ones we dream of, the ones we believe in, and the ones we only share in private. And even digital worlds.

And then we even extend ourselves *temporally* as we remember and as we look ahead, placing ourselves into the worlds we once inhabited and the ones we may find ourselves in someday. We think of the people that accompanied us back then and right now at this present moment. We even look back with skills that we have acquired only later in our lives, into times when we had yet to develop them. We are confronted with pictures where we look young, or old, immature, or even stupid. We are proud of ourselves, of our achievements, or shamed of how we once looked with that sweater teetering on the edge of fashion standards back then. And we look at the others in the pictures and how they looked at that time. Some of them might even look at these pictures with us right now. Some of them might be still with us, while others have left us.

All these instances provoke big questions in us: Who am I? Who was I back then? Who am I going to be? Who or what have I become? In short: the problem of aging not only addresses the most fundamental coordinates of our lives, but also the ones of the phenomenological method: time, embodiment, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, and even the social norms that grow into the very notion of aging as such. In my article, I delineate a phenomenological analysis of aging and show how such an analysis connects with the debate concerning personal identity:

First, I argue that the predominance of the Heideggerian discourse on death has allowed many fundamental aspects of our finite human lives, aspects such as aging, to fall into relative obscurity. Had greater attention been paid to these fundamental aspects of human existence, analyses of problems like finitude would have been developed in an entirely different manner. Second, I claim that aging is not merely a physical process, but is far more significantly a spiritual

one (*ein geistiger Prozess*).¹ Our bodies age, but the process of aging consists in our awareness of and conscious relation to our aging. Third, this spiritual process takes place on an individual and on a social level, whereas the latter is the more primordial layer of this experience. Fourth, this complicates the question of personal identity since it raises the question in two ways, namely who I am for myself and who I am for others, and in a further step how the latter experience shapes the former. Last but not least, I maintain that aging is inextricably linked to a narrative form of identity that is constantly being readjusted over the course of our lifetime. However, this narrative construct is not simply up to our free and deliberate imagination since it is impossible for us to go beyond our bodily limitations. There is a physical resistance to aging that we cannot overcome, a resisting limitation that constitutes an essential quality of the process of aging. As a consequence, I argue that we need both aspects, the physical as well as the spiritual dimension, or the problem of human aging breaks down and becomes meaningless.

1 The discourse on aging in phenomenology

In the history of phenomenology, there are a multitude of attempts to gain a genuinely philosophical understanding of death. In doing so, phenomenology has been able to shift the focus away from what death is (its objective features and criteria); instead, phenomenology has put its focus on how death is given to us. Therefore, the question for phenomenology is not what death *is* but rather what death *means* to us. Although there is an abundance of phenomenological literature on the problem of death, there is great scarcity of literature on the very closely related problem of aging. Max Scheler was the first to put the problem of aging on the phenomenological agenda. In his posthumously published essay *Tod und Fortleben* (Scheler 1957), Scheler delivered a sharp and far-reaching analysis of death, aging, and life after death, i.e. living-on (*Fortleben*). Although his reflections on aging are only a brief sketch, that was not even the main focus of his analysis, they allow for an insight into how to conceptualize aging from a phenomenological perspective.

It would then take approximately 50 years until a group of philosophers and writers loosely connected to phenomenology, put the problem of aging on the philosophical agenda again. In 1958, André Gorz wrote an essay with the title *On Aging* in which he, in contrast to Scheler's more individualistic approach, analyzed aging from an entirely intersubjective perspective. For him, it perhaps goes without saying that aging is first: a spiritual process, and second: a social process (Gorz 2008, 359).² Following in his

¹ I am referring to the German term "Geist" with reference to Husserl's and Scheler's use of the term. Scheler in particular shows the reciprocal connection between "Geist" and "Person" which is essential for this undertaking here. In *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, Scheler defines "Geist" as follows: "[W]e use the term mind [Geist] for the entire sphere of acts [...]. With this term we designate all things that possess the nature of act, intentionality, and fulfillment of meaning, wherever we may find them. This of course implies at once that all mind is by essential necessity 'personal,' and that the idea of a 'non-personal mind' is 'contradictory.'" (Scheler 1973, 389)

² To my current knowledge, Gorz essay is not yet translated into English. All passages are translated by the author.

footsteps, Jean Améry and Simone de Beauvoir will follow with their analyses of aging that connect to Gorz but go into different directions: While Améry, in his same-titled long essay *On Aging* (1968), will explicitly advance a spiritual and existential reading of aging (Améry 1994), Simone de Beauvoir in her lengthy book *The Coming of Age* (1970) focuses on the social and political significance of aging and asks how people age in our societies and whether we can think of a society in which elderly people can age with dignity (de Beauvoir 1996).

2 The experience of aging: Max Scheler

In the aforementioned essay, Max Scheler has provided an incredibly insightful attempt to investigate and to describe systematically the “basic phenomenon of aging” (Scheler 1957, 21). By means of very precise descriptions of the temporal extensions and the corresponding types of acts, he shows that the past and future are not only given as abstract ideas but rather how they are present in very concrete lived experiences (*Erlebnis*). These concrete lived experiences are situated within our life-time, i.e. Scheler holds that we have a vague, yet very definitive feeling of our life as a whole. This individual experience of time is informed by a description of the individual’ life and how it proceeds in objective time, or in other words: how objective aging is conceived individually. According to Scheler, every temporal extension of the past, the present and the future has its extent. The sum of these extents forms the total extent of one’s life. What now happens in the process of our life is that these extents are reallocated according to the general direction of life towards death (*Lebensrichtung*) (Scheler 1957, 19–22). In aging, the extent of our past continuously grows whereas the extent of our future shrinks more every day. The extent of the present however gets increasingly compressed in between the growing extent of the past and the shrinking extent of the future. This leads to the well-known effect that one experiences the present in an increasingly evanescent way whereas the past feels heavier with the day and the future is more and more determined by our actions and life-choices.

Scheler’s formal analysis of the lived experience of aging has often been misunderstood as relying on an objective conception of time. However, Scheler’s analysis does not aim for an objective understanding of time but rather seeks to describe how aging is present within lived experience, as a specific “datum of experience” (*Erlebnisdatum*) (Scheler 1957, 19). Scheler does not aim for a description of an objective process of time, rather the contrary: he wants to show how the objective process of aging is given within our everyday experience. Aside from this, Scheler also thematizes aging by means of a decrease in strength and other more bodily symptoms such as fatigue, sickness, or as he describes it: “the feeling of life and its gravity.” (Scheler 1957, 22) In general, however, his focus rests on a spiritual understanding of aging and not simply on a description of the physical characteristics of aging.

3 Social age: André Gorz, Jean Améry, Simone de Beauvoir

Whereas Scheler focusses on the individual experience of aging, the aforementioned predominantly French-speaking thinkers focus almost entirely on the social

experience of aging, or what they call “social age.” André Gorz’ essay *On Aging* (1958) is the starting point for this particularly French discourse on aging into which later on also Jean Améry and Simone de Beauvoir will enter with their contributions and explicit references to Gorz. In stark contrast to Scheler, Gorz does not even bother to waste his time with a description of individual or even biological aging. He commits himself from the outset of his essay to the position that aging can only be understood as a social process. On the very first page, Gorz states: “Long before aging is a biological fate, it is a social fate.” (Gorz 2008, 359) For Gorz, it seems clear that aging is also not something that accompanies us from our birth onwards. It is rather something that we *acquire* over the course of our lives. In his account, it is a specific reflexive structure that sets in with social processes and contacts. In a paradoxical manner, one could say that we are not born with an age, we are rather introduced into age. Gorz writes: “He now has an age. He did not always have an age.” (Gorz 2008, 361) This means that up until a certain point, age does not mean that much to us. Age comes or even breaks into our lives at a certain point and from that point onwards, it does not leave us anymore. Gorz writes in a piercing manner:

I rather want to show that age comes to us from the others, that we ourselves indeed do not have an age, but only as others, in relation to the average life expectancy of our societies, as it is measured within the stages and initiatory transitions into a new status, a status that society attributes to us according to the average life-expectancy. (Gorz 2008, 365)

What Gorz is intending to say here is that we are only relating to our age when we are confronted with it by others. Only when we have to conform with certain arbitrary social expectations, we enter into a conscious relation to our age by measuring ourselves against the ever-changing standards of our social framework. This means that this is not only a relation to an anonymous outside but rather also to ourselves as others. In a very peculiar, if not comical manner, he exemplifies this process with the image of the birthday of a child. This poor child never chose to celebrate his/her birthday but year after year, society in the form of close relatives and friends gathers to introduce this child into the social norm of yearly measured age in the shape of colorful candles on a magnificent cake. Therefore, “age” for Gorz is not an individual but rather a deeply social process that is tightly connected to the integration of an individual life into the greater social fabric. It has to do with what I am for others, what others are for me, and also what I am for myself.

Jean Améry, who is not known for his optimism in general, appears to be more dramatic in this respect. Albeit too depressing on some points, Améry is important, however, because he is able to show the conceptual basis upon which Gorz’ idea of “social age” implicitly rests. Améry claims that, over the course of our lives, there is a shift or transition from the embodied to the temporal aspects of our existence. Whereas we cast our bodies out into the world while we are still young, we become more and more temporal beings as we get older. By being bodily creatures however, we are the target of this strange and complex process of aging that also Améry seeks to understand by social criteria:

What does "social age" mean? In the life of every human being there is a point in time ... where each discovers that one is only what one is. All at once we realize that the world no longer concedes us credit for our future, it no longer wants to entertain seeing us in terms of what we could be. Society no longer brings the possibilities into focus that we still think are vouchsafed to us in the picture that it makes of us. We find ourselves – not through our own judgment but as the mirror image of the look of the others that we immediately internalize – to be creatures without potential. *No one asks us any longer, "What do you want to do?" All declare, dispassionately and unflinching, "That you've already done."* The others, so we have to learn, have struck a balance and laid before us a bottom line that we are. (Améry 1994, 55)

So, even though remarkably more pessimistic, Améry seems to be very close to Gorz here when he interprets aging as a process that determines us from the outside. What's interesting in Améry is that we also internalize this gaze of the others. Hence, we now harbor a conflict within us between the image that we have of ourselves and the image that others have of us. From now on onwards, we have to contend with this conflicted realization that we are not the ones we thought we were. And after a certain point, we are not even sure anymore what or who we even are, and even worse: maybe we even lost the sense to determine who we are and what we are still able to do (i.e. midlife-crisis).

Simone de Beauvoir takes up these thoughts in her large and encompassing study *The Coming of Age* (1972). De Beauvoir seems to follow two goals in her study that roughly can be reduced to two perspectives: Aging from an outer and aging from an inner perspective. A big part of her study is also more political than the other aforementioned texts since she raises the question of how people of age are able to lead their lives in our contemporary society. This is also the reason for her more materialistic view on aging since for her, aging indeed is a biological as well as a cultural process. The latter aspect however is very much influenced by Gorz and Améry. In the second part of her book which bears the somewhat Heideggerian title "Being-in-the-world" and which analyzes aging from a philosophical perspective, there is a passage in which she recontextualizes the analyses of Gorz and Améry in a different light:

[Aging] is a dialectic relationship between my being as he defines it objectively and the awareness of myself that I acquire by means of him. Within me it is the Other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider – who is old; and that Other is myself. (de Beauvoir 1996, 284)

Here, the conflict within the process of aging becomes very clear. For de Beauvoir, especially the process of the actualization of age is of special importance. For example, the gaze into the mirror which shows us a different image than the one we had of ourselves, or maybe even an ugly image of ourselves that we might refuse to accept. At the same time, she is also able to show that in order to even see our aging, there are many experiences that figure as the basis for our experience of aging. Here, she adamantly rejects biological reductionisms, accounts wherein bodily features are taken as the primary phenomenon of aging. De Beauvoir shows how we already have to have

an idea of aging in order to interpret certain bodily changes as symptoms of this highly complex process of aging. In other words, this dialectical process harbors a plentitude of pre-understandings which are then embedded into our alleged “individual” experience. De Beauvoir therefore understands aging as a “cluster of rays of intentionality” that like an analogy are directed towards an absent object (de Beauvoir 1996, 291). And this absent object of course is me, the one who ages and who is not sure about him-/herself anymore.

4 Aging and personal identity

The above accounts make it all too apparent that aging figures as a core problem of one’s personal identity. Moreover, it might not be overstated to argue that at the very bottom, the discourse on personal identity is in fact also, maybe without even realizing it, a discourse on the problem of aging. It not only addresses the question of what or who I am, it also addresses the problem of how I remain “the same” over the course of my life despite all these dramatic physical and spiritual transformations. (Schechtman 1996) It is a process where I have to actualize myself for myself, in front of others, and it is also a process in which others actualize their image of me. Therefore, one’s personal identity is formed not only from one’s own perspective of things, but also from the perspective of others. And last but not least, to a large degree, aging consists precisely in trying to harmonize these opposing images. Sometimes, this works out, and sometimes this creates larger conflicts that we may never be able to resolve.

There are attempts to deal with this question in specific relation to the problem of aging. In a fairly recent article, David Carr has proposed to think of aging in terms of a “narrative identity.” (Carr 2016) Carr argues that human aging has a very specific structure that sets human aging apart from the aging of things. (e.g. Scarre 2016) He uses the example of a chair and argues that also a chair ages but we humans are different insofar as we are aware of and relate to our aging. This simple example for him is reason enough to think of aging not so much as a physical process but also, or even much more, as a spiritual process. In addition to this crucial observation, Carr seeks to understand aging in terms of a “narrative identity,” i.e. the very ways in which I relate to myself in terms of a story of myself that I constantly come back to and re-adjust accordingly.

It is important however, to state that the idea of a narrative identity does not allow for any story that we would like to tell ourselves or that we would like to hear. There are in fact limitations to our narratives. Schechtman captures this very sharply with the term “reality constraint”, i.e. “errors of fact” or “interpretative inaccuracies” that are at odds with our narratives. (Schechtman 1996, 119–130) For example, I would be happy to tell myself that I am still a world-class skier, but my aching bones and my broken knees tell me a different story that I simply have to accept. Refusing these physical facts, turns my life into an unwanted comedy that we can witness in the various forms of midlife-crises. Philosophically considered, it is the ideal example of what Jean-Paul Sartre called “bad faith” (Sartre 1971, 47–70).

Although we did not arrive at a definitive answer of how to conceptualize personal identity in relation to the problem of aging, we can nevertheless delineate this phenomenological attempt in a negative manner. We can state that aging is neither only physical nor only spiritual. It concerns my bodily processes as it concerns the complex

reflexive structure that relates my former self with my present and even future self. Therefore, it is a valuable lesson to take away against popular reductionisms of aging where it either concerns only aging cells or just our “attitude” towards aging. In the physical reductionism, we would be just chairs, to take up David Carr’s example mentioned above. We would coincide with our aging material components and all human drama that is captured in the specifically human phenomenon of aging would be lost. On the other hand, if we were just aging spiritually, we would be able to not age at all. If aging fell prey to our narratives, there would be no material resistance – we could tell ourselves whatever stories we wanted to hear, rendering the problem of aging obsolete in the end. Taking these two aspects together, I think that it has become readily apparent that we need both or the problem of human aging breaks down and becomes meaningless.

5 Conclusion: Time as a personal question

In going through the observations on aging in the works of Max Scheler, André Gorz, Jean Améry, and Simone de Beauvoir, I have argued that aging is not so much a physical but rather a spiritual process. Aging is not only a physical transformation of our bodies but a permanent reconfiguration of our relation to ourselves, others, and the world in general. This reconfiguration takes place in moments of explicit contemplation and realization from which I have outlined the individual and the social experience. In my descriptions of these two experiences of aging, I argued that it is actually the social experience of aging which is more fundamental: it is first and foremost my contact with others and the world, through which I come to a reflection on myself and my age.

Concerning the discourse on personal identity, it has become clear that aging puts fundamental components of self-identity in question. I change over time, my attitude towards myself changes over time, yet I somehow remain “the same.” I witness dramatic changes that I go through over the course of my life, yet I still recognize myself as myself. Yet, also others recognize me as me, the one they have come to know and the one they have in front of them at this present moment. This raises the question: How is this all possible? In going through more recent phenomenological resources, such as David Carr and Marya Schechtman, I tried to show that it is a great difficulty to properly situate the question of aging within the discourse on personal identity. In the end, I have come to no definitive answer. My hope however is that we are now able to better delineate this future field of phenomenological research on aging.

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