

International Perspectives on Aging 25
Series Editors: Jason L. Powell, Sheying Chen

Mark Schweda
Michael Coors
Claudia Bozzaro *Editors*

Aging and Human Nature

Perspectives from Philosophical,
Theological, and Historical
Anthropology

 Springer

International Perspectives on Aging

Volume 25

Series Editors

Jason L. Powell, Department of Social and Political Science, University of Chester,
Chester, UK

Sheying Chen, Department of Public Administration, Pace University, New York,
NY, USA

The study of aging is continuing to increase rapidly across multiple disciplines. This wide-ranging series on International Perspectives on Aging provides readers with much-needed comprehensive texts and critical perspectives on the latest research, policy, and practical developments. Both aging and globalization have become a reality of our times, yet a systematic effort of a global magnitude to address aging is yet to be seen. The series bridges the gaps in the literature and provides cutting-edge debate on new and traditional areas of comparative aging, all from an international perspective. More specifically, this book series on International Perspectives on Aging puts the spotlight on international and comparative studies of aging.

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Mark Schweda • Michael Coors
Claudia Bozzaro
Editors

Aging and Human Nature

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and Historical Anthropology

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Editors

Mark Schweda
Department of Health Services Research
University of Oldenburg
Oldenburg, Lower Saxony, Germany

Michael Coors
Institute of Social Ethics, Faculty of
Theology
University of Zurich
Zurich, Switzerland

Claudia Bozzaro
Department of Medical Ethics & History of
Medicine
University of Freiburg
Freiburg im Breisgau, Baden-Württemberg,
Germany

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Preface

The idea for this volume took shape at the international workshop *Homo Senescens: Aging and Old Age in Philosophical, Theological and Historical Anthropology* organized by the editors at the Centre for Health Care Ethics (Zentrum für Gesundheitsethik (ZfG)) in Hanover, Germany, in October 2015. Some of the following chapters are based on talks given at this workshop. Others have been invited additionally to complement the scope.

We would like to thank all those who have made this volume possible. We are particularly grateful to the authors of the different chapters for the time and thought they invested and for their patience. Furthermore, we are indebted to the funders of the initial workshop: the Ministry for Science and Culture of Lower Saxony, the Hanns-Lilje Foundation, the University of Freiburg, and the Centre for Health Care Ethics, Hanover. A special thank you goes to those who supported the finalization of this volume with their invaluable proofreading and copyediting work: Marie Danelski (ZfG, Hanover), Pekko Roman (University of Freiburg), Elin Scheel (ZfG, Hanover), Lena Stange (University of Oldenburg), and Merle Weßel (University of Oldenburg). Finally, we would like to thank Springer for their support in publishing the book in the series *International Perspectives on Aging*.

Oldenburg, Germany
Zurich, Switzerland
Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany

Mark Schweda
Michael Coors
Claudia Bozzaro

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Aging and Human Nature – Perspectives from Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Anthropology



Mark Schweda, Michael Coors, and Claudia Bozzaro

One of the very first statements on the human condition, passed down from the earliest dawn of Western cultural history, refers to aging and old age. In the story of Oedipus in ancient Greek mythology, the Sphinx lurking on the road to Thebes confronts travelers with a riddle about a creature that “walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night.” Oedipus is the first one to give the correct answer, articulating the advanced insight of human self-awareness and thus liberating the city from the ancient spell of mythic powers: “Man: as an infant, he crawls on all fours; as an adult, he walks on two legs and, in old age, he uses a ‘walking’ stick” (Moore 2019, 176).

It seems as though this initial relation of human nature to the process of aging and the life stage of old age, also to be found in religious texts like *Job* (14:1–12), *Isaiah* (40:6–7), or *Ecclesiastes* (12:2–4), soon fell back into oblivion. In classical philosophy as much as in traditional Christian theology, the question of human nature was soon primarily aimed at the identification of some self-contained essential structure determined by a specific position in the cosmic or creative order of things, and definable in general theoretical concepts once and for all. Humans appeared as the *zoon politikon*, the *animal rationale*, or the “crown of creation” (Cahill et al. 2017). Any changes could only be regarded as accidental variations of

M. Schweda (✉)

Department of Health Services Research, University of Oldenburg,
Oldenburg, Lower Saxony, Germany
e-mail: mark.schweda@uni-oldenburg.de

M. Coors

Institute of Social Ethics, Faculty of Theology, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland
e-mail: michael.coors@uzh.ch

C. Bozzaro

Department of Medical Ethics & History of Medicine, University of Freiburg,
Freiburg im Breisgau, Baden-Württemberg, Germany
e-mail: bozzaro@egm.uni-freiburg.de

the underlying substantial form. For centuries, the implied equation of human existence with middle (male) adulthood framed old age – as well as childhood – as a marginal problem and a deviant or even deficient mode of being human. Thus, philosophical considerations on aging and old age remained largely anecdotal and never gained much systematic weight (Small 2007). It was the modern destruction of traditional metaphysical and theological systems that first paved the way for a theoretically articulate awareness of the human individual's concrete embodied and situated existence and its constitutive indeterminacy, processuality, and potential of – as well as need for – development and self-definition (Rescher 1990). As a consequence, contingency, corporeality, vulnerability, dependency, relationality, fragmentariness, and finitude have become central philosophical themes and crucial characterizations of human existence since the mid-nineteenth century (Rescher 1990). Thus, Martin Heidegger famously describes the fundamentally temporal constitution of human *Dasein* in its entanglement of past, present, and future (Heidegger 1962). However, even here, this existential temporal structure remains strangely generic and formal and does not provide any room for the systematic consideration of aging and old age. Death constitutes the central perspective and ultimate horizon of human life, but the pertinent idea of “running towards death” (Heidegger 1962, §53) seems to ignore the concrete course and the different turns and stages of the track that lies ahead.

In the modern “sciences of man,” on the other hand, empirical knowledge on aging and old age has virtually exploded over the last two centuries. This growing attention came along with historically unprecedented increases in average life expectancy in many (Western) societies. The respective scientific research first started off with biological and medical investigations into the evolutionary origins and biological mechanisms of human senescence. In the course of these studies, fundamental principles of biological life as well as constitutive features of living organisms were elucidated (Arking 2006). Yet, by the mid-twentieth century, gerontological research had begun to expand its scope to the psychological and sociocultural aspects and dimensions of aging and old age (Achenbaum 1995). Groundbreaking psychological studies examined the subjective experience of, emotional reaction to, and developmental challenges posed by growing older (Schaie and Willis 2016). The sociology of aging examined the practices, institutional frameworks, and social roles and structures shaping, facilitating, or complicating the situation of older people in modern society (Settersten and Angel 2011). And the humanities as well as cultural and ethnological studies explored the symbolic meanings attributed to aging and old age, the images and interpretations shaping our perception and experience of aging and old age in different historical epochs and cultural contexts (Cole et al. 2010; Sokolovsky 2009). As the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of aging studies indicates, the topic is still scientifically productive (Gulette 2004). As a result of this multiplication of empirical knowledge, our view of aging and old age has dissociated into a vast variety of different aspects and dimensions, a whole kaleidoscope of detailed gerontological information representing the complex and multifaceted realities of growing older (Bengtson and Settersten 2016). At times, this abundance of empirical details, of biological factors,

social influences, and historical and cultural variations almost seems to obscure the fact that aging is a fundamental aspect of the human condition, maybe even the central structure of human life as such: Wherever we may live, whatever we may do, we are all growing older, inexorably accumulating more past behind us while our future shrinks, and experiencing certain inevitable and irreversible changes in our body, our personality, and our sociocultural status and roles.

This dichotomy between general theoretical speculations on human nature that leave no room for aging and widespread empirical research on aging and old age that suspends the question of human nature hints at a crucial scientific lacuna. What is missing is a perspective that can elucidate the fundamental significance of aging in human existence and at the same time help to integrate and interpret the increasing mass of empirical information from a unified theoretical point of view. This situation appears all the more problematic today as a fundamental discussion on aging and human nature may now be needed more than ever. Due to the striking increases in average life expectancy and unparalleled demographic change in Western societies, new questions regarding the ethical evaluation and political organization of aging and old age have come to the fore. There are intense and controversial public as well as academic discussions on changing individual ideals and social imaginaries and expectations regarding old age as well as demographic challenges to generational relations and institutional structures in the fields of political participation, social security, and health care systems (Schweda et al. 2017; Schermer and Pinxten 2013; Holstein et al. 2011; Caro 2006). What could be reasonable and meaningful activities and projects for old age in light of an increasing average life expectancy? How do traditional roles and responsibilities within the family or in the workplace have to be redefined? Does the implicit intergenerational contract underlying much of our social life and our welfare systems have to be renegotiated? On closer inspection, many of the positions and arguments brought forward in these and similar debates rely on fundamental presuppositions: They make – often tacit and unwarranted – assumptions regarding human nature as such, the meaning of aging and old age for the human condition, and the significance of temporality, embodiment, vulnerability, fragility, (in)dependence and relationality, or finiteness in human existence. In order to develop a more profound and comprehensive understanding of what it means to be a human being, but also to clarify specific practical questions related to aging and old age and thus advance the pertaining ethical and sociopolitical debates, these fundamental underpinnings have to be spelled out on a more reflective theoretical level. What is needed is a systematic consideration of aging in view of human nature, that is, an analysis of its role and significance in human existence and the human condition: What does it mean for human beings to be aging creatures, to grow old and thus become more vulnerable and dependent? How can we understand the different manifestations of aging and old age in the human body? How should we interpret the processes of change, growth, and finalization in the course of human life? What implications does old age have for the different social relations and dimensions of human existence? And how can a clarification of these questions help advance current ethical and political controversies?

1.1 Conception and Structure

Against this backdrop, the present volume focuses on aging and human nature. The overarching aim is to provide a systematic inventory and discussion of the aspects and dimensions involved in the consideration of aging and old age as fundamental features of human existence and the human condition. In this sense, the different chapters of this volume provide a series of contributions to our understanding of aging and old age as an anthropological phenomenon and thus steps toward a more articulate concept of the human being as a *homo senescens*.

In characterizing the volume's approach as "anthropological," two different misunderstandings have to be dispelled right from the start: On the one hand, the term aims at a distinct theoretical perspective that differs from the common understanding of anthropological research in the Anglo-American academic tradition and scientific debate. Here, "anthropology" primarily refers to a field of empirical knowledge concerned with the study of human life, practices, and cultures or societies in the past and present. Thus, since the eighteenth century, social and cultural anthropology have employed archeological, ethnographic, and linguistic methods to explore and compare the languages, habits, customs, sacred rituals, technical equipment, and arts and crafts of human collectives and communities. As mentioned above, this tradition has also produced a large body of work examining the cultural images and practices regarding aging and old age in different historical and socio-cultural contexts (Rubinstein 1990). However, the respective studies usually do not touch upon the fundamental theoretical question of aging as a basic feature of human nature, human existence, and the human condition as such. Thus, with its focus on what it means for human beings to grow old and what can be said about aging from the point of view of human nature, the present volume takes a more fundamental and general theoretical approach than investigations from cultural anthropology and social sciences. It is aimed at elaborating perspectives of philosophical, theological, and historical anthropology (Wulf 2013).

On the other hand, these fundamental anthropological perspectives cannot afford to ignore the ever-increasing abundance of empirical information available on aging and old age. After all, they do not aim for abstract essentialist definitions derived from purely theoretical speculation, but at an empirically informed, realistic, and contemporary understanding of what it means to be an aging human being. Therefore, they have to acknowledge and integrate the existing state of empirical knowledge on the biological, psychological, social, and cultural aspects of aging. Moreover, in order to avoid objectivistic and scientific reductions and distortions, this empirical knowledge may not be restricted to exact scientific results from biology, medicine, or gerontology alone. It needs to include the whole range and diversity of insights and experiences accumulated on aging and old age from different sources throughout the centuries. In particular, it has to do justice to the character of man as an essentially indeterminate, open, and "self-interpreting animal" (Taylor 1985). Human nature cannot be captured like a given object. In a sense, human beings are always ahead of themselves. Their identity as individuals and as a species

is also shaped by what they individually and socioculturally project and design themselves to be. Accordingly, an adequate account of the human condition has to consider the different manifestations of this constitutive self-understanding in social practices and institutions as well as in cultural meanings and symbol systems. In this respect, the present volume is more specific in its basic questioning, theoretical interest, and outline than works offering philosophical, theological, or historical considerations on aging and old age in general (Scarre 2016; Jecker 2012; Cole et al. 2010; Mitchell et al. 2004). Its concept is related to the tradition of the twentieth century's philosophical, theological, and historical anthropology striving to incorporate the most advanced empirical knowledge of its time into a theoretically profound conception of man (Wulf 2013).

For these reasons, the systematic inventory and discussion of the fundamental anthropological aspects of aging and old age envisaged in this volume pursue an interdisciplinary approach. They bring together theories, methods, and insights from different disciplines, fields, and sources, assembling perspectives from philosophy, theology, the humanities, social research, and cultural studies. In addition, the contributions frequently consider cultural traditions as well as contemporary artistic expressions. Thus, the scope ranges from the Greek myth of Eos and Tithonos to current biogerontological life extension research; from the dialogue between Socrates and Cephalus in Plato's *Republic* to Erik Erikson's developmental psychology and Lars Tornstam's concept of gerotranscendence; from demographic projections and declarations of human rights to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or Steven Spielberg's *Cocoon*. In this comprehensive and multifaceted perspective, the volume aims to make a twofold contribution to contemporary academic discourses on aging and old age: First, it can help clarify and deepen our understanding of aging and old age by examining them from the fundamental point of view of philosophical, theological, and historical anthropology. At the same time, it can also enhance and expand the discourses of philosophical, theological, and historical anthropology by systematically considering that human beings are aging creatures.

1.2 Contributions

Aging and Human Nature brings together internationally distinguished scholars from the fields of philosophy, theology, history, gerontology, social research, the humanities, and aging studies. Their contributions tackle and discuss aging and old age from different anthropological angles. In order to provide a systematic and comprehensive overview, the volume is structured by reference to central areas and categories of philosophical, theological, and historical anthropology.

The first section considers fundamental aspects of the human condition, such as individuality, potentiality, and dependency. In the first chapter, philosopher *Thomas Rentsch* focuses on the individuality of aging. From the perspective of an anthropology of human life as a whole, Rentsch interprets aging as a radicalization of the

human condition. In this perspective, the radical individuation of the self in the process of growing old comes to the fore. To age means to become oneself in finite, unrepeatable life situations. The second chapter is dedicated to aging and potentiality. Starting from research in developmental psychology, gerontologist *Andreas Kruse* examines the dialectical interplay of limitation and development in aging and old age. His contribution debunks the persistent myth that human development is completed once adulthood is reached, and instead points out developmental potentials in old age right up to the very last stages of life. In doing so, Kruse identifies the ongoing search for meaning as a central topic of an anthropology of aging. In the third chapter, theologian *Heinz Rügger* deals with the tension between autonomy and dependence in old age. Focusing on experiences of increasing dependence while growing old, he argues that interdependence and passivity are constitutive features of the human condition. Therefore, a closer look at aging can help to correct traditional anthropological concepts with their one-sided emphasis on independence, and to recover a more balanced anthropological view that accepts dependence, passivity, and receptiveness as meaningful dimensions of human life in general.

The second section focuses on the bodily dimension of being human and discusses aging and old age under the aspects of embodiment, gender, and spatiality. Starting from phenomenological considerations, philosopher *Wim Dekkers* examines how the realization of growing older is mediated through first-person experiences of bodily deterioration and impairment. He further highlights the anthropological significance of postures and movements in which the individual life story finds an embodied manifestation. The aging body thus appears as “lived history.” *Maren Wehrle* then tackles the long-neglected topic of aging and gender. She starts from the assumption that both have to be understood as bodily phenomena and argues that embodied gendered aging is neither just a material fact nor simply a cultural phenomenon. The inner experience of the aging gendered body is at the same time shaped and framed by environmental, cultural-historical, and social circumstances. Philosopher *Christina Schües* finally addresses the topic of aging and the body from a rarely discussed perspective: the way we inhabit space. Also starting from the phenomenology of embodiment, she shows that living means bodily inhabiting space, which constitutes our way of being in the world and relating to others. She further shows the importance of this perspective not only for a better understanding of changes that may occur in human aging, but also for the ethical discussion of the specific needs of older people.

The third section considers the basic features of human existence in time, such as temporality, finitude, and narrativity. Philosopher *Jan Baars* starts from the observation that aging ultimately means living in time, more precisely living more and more time. Throughout history, the dichotomy between the objective metric time and the subjective lived time played an important role, also for the understanding of aging. By reference to Paul Ricœur, Baars proposes a narrative understanding of time that integrates metric and lived time as the most promising way to develop a meaningful account of human aging. In the next chapter, theologian *Michael Coors* approaches aging by drawing a connection between the bodily constitution of human beings and

the temporality of human lifetime. Combining a phenomenological perspective on the temporality of the body and Ricœur's considerations on the narrative configuration of human existence, he shows how our perceptions of aging as the embodied experience of human temporality are always configured by particular narrative schemes. *Mark Schweda* then focuses on the anthropological significance of the temporal structure of human life and explores how aging and old age are embedded in overarching orders of human lifetime. Particular attention is paid to three levels: the fundamental coordinates and parameters of human existence in time, the socio-cultural phases and passages of the life course, and the erratic individual trajectory through life. In her contribution, philosopher *Christine Overall* eventually deals with the paradox of human finitude. On the one hand, we as human beings are constantly engaged in overcoming our temporal limits, while on the other hand, without temporal finitude we would not be human. In view of this constitutive paradox, Overall states that there is no way of defining an ideal age at which we can definitively say that there is no reason to want more life.

The fourth section explores the social dimensions of being human, touching upon aspects of relationality, care, and generationality. Taking an existential viewpoint, theologian *Frits de Lange* first discusses the question of human relationality in old age. Starting from the phenomenology of Bernhard Waldenfels, he unfolds a responsive understanding of human life according to which living means responding to the appeal of the Other. The chapter then explores how we respond to life, to the body's frailty and alienation, and to the responsibilities of caring in advanced old age. The dimension of human relationships is also pivotal to the chapter by nursing scientist *Hartmut Remmers* on aging and care. Remmers argues that the idea and practice of caring is rooted in the human condition and the social relationality and mutual dependence of human beings. As old age is associated with processes of decline and loss, with increasing vulnerability and dependence, this insight is particularly important for a self-critical understanding of care work and its intellectual and sociopolitical preconditions. In the next chapter, educationalist *Jörg Zirfas* expands the perspective to include the embeddedness of individual aging in collective generational orders, sequences, and cycles. Considering the aspects of descent, progress, and transmission, Zirfas identifies the challenges posed by modern changes in generational succession and the shifts that can occur in the design of the respective phases of life. As he shows, the demarcation line between the generations is no longer clearly definable but involves ruptures and irregularities.

The volume's final section takes a closer look at the role of anthropological views of aging in contemporary public and scientific discourses and practices. In the first contribution, philosopher *Ronald Manheimer* explores the relation between human nature and meaning in old age. He shows that our understanding of aging oscillates between the ideas of an indispensable natural predisposition on the one hand and an unlimited cultural construction of meaning on the other. By discussing several philosophical perspectives on living in old age, he shows that there are at least two different approaches: one setting life's second half apart by defining new roles for old age, and another one emphasizing the continuity of human life. Against the backdrop of the standard anthropology of late modern society, which concentrates on the

youthful person at the peak of his or her powers and consequently defines aging in terms of deficiency, *Søren Holm* then elaborates elements of a positive anthropology of aging. In doing so, he focuses on what has traditionally been called wisdom. According to him, a knowledge gained through life experience is by definition something that older people can attain better than the young. In the next chapter, physician and ethicist *Samia Hurst* turns to the problem of vulnerability in old age. Discussing different conceptions of vulnerability, she develops a dispositional interpretation that focuses on the specific situation and need for protection of vulnerable people. This conception helps identify and tackle the different aspects of vulnerability in old age. Philosopher *Ralf Stoecker* then addresses the topic of aging and dignity. His chapter first reflects on the connection of understandings of dignity as a contingent value and as an a priori property of human beings. On this basis, Stoecker explores the idea of aging with dignity and discusses how old age can pose specific dangers to individual dignity. In the last chapter, theologian *Ralph Kunz* turns to spirituality and transcendence in old age. Comparing approaches from ancient philosophy with the modern concept of gerotranscendence formulated by Lars Tornstam, he emphasizes that concepts like “spirituality” and “transcendence” are historical constructs and critically discusses the danger of reducing spirituality to self-interest or to a coping strategy in the face of the burdens of old age. A theological approach to transcendence which refers to God’s self-transgression in becoming man offers a starting point for a hermeneutically informed religious gerontology.

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Part I
Aging and the Human Condition

Chapter 2

Becoming Oneself. On the Individuality of Aging



Thomas Rentsch

*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora; di, coeptis
(nam vos mutastis et illas) adspirate meis primaque ab origine
mundi ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen.*

(Ovid, Metamorphoses)

If we are to appreciate the individuality of aging in depth critically and reflexively, we must first reconstruct its fundamental philosophical and anthropological aspects. These disclose a perspective on the antecedent irreducible unity and totality of human life, which, as such, is unrepeatable and unique. Thus, in order to gain a meaningful and viable understanding of aging, we must develop an awareness of the totality of life, which is everywhere being lost today.

Through the increasing complexity in all socially relevant levels that is characteristic of modernity and even more so of late modernity and postmodernity, as well as the “new obscurity” (Habermas) in technology, economics, politics, and media communication on a global scale, traditional forms of identity are being lost. Alternatively, ideologically instrumentalized nationalistic terms such as “homeland” and “people” are used to regain a consciousness of identity. Moreover, the concept of the individual and of individuality has been used for a long time, and increasingly in contemporary discussion, essentially to characterize processes of social decay, of the fragmentation and isolation of the entire society. This has hindered the primarily existential, pragmatic, and normative, indeed, moral dimension of the individuality of each human – an individuality that is constitutively linked with his autonomy and dignity (Beck 1992, 2016; Steingart 2011) – from coming into view again.

In contrast, if we are to establish the anthropological basis of a critical-reflexive understanding of aging and its normative, practical, and ethical implications, it is systematically necessary that we comprehend individuality in a different and more fundamental way. A classic philosophical insight proves itself in a dramatic manner

T. Rentsch (✉)
Technical University of Dresden, Dresden, Germany
e-mail: Thomas.Rentsch@tu-dresden.de

vis-à-vis the phenomenon of individuality: What is always there, the “*nearest of the near*” (Heidegger), is always the most distant and hidden for knowledge. It strikes us the least. This is also true of individuality in its deep structure, its irreducible unrepeatability and uniqueness. In the entire tradition, individuality has been characterized as ineffable and ungraspable. The most famous statement about it can be traced back to Goethe, who in 1780 in a letter to Lavater wrote: “Have I already shared with you the thought ‘*Individuum est ineffabile*’ from which I derive a world” (Goethe 1949, 533)?

It is essential for our topic that we comprehend the phenomenon of individuality as *principium individuationis*, that is, as a *process* of individuation, and not as something that exists statically. What is at stake thereby is our process of self-becoming, our “*becoming ourselves*.” In every instant of my life, my life becomes ever greater, longer, and gains ever more lived, real, concrete lifetime. And in the same instant that I become ever greater in a qualitative sense, I constantly become ever smaller, ever less, ever shorter. This existential paradox holds for every human who has ever lived or will live: It holds always and for us all. Only thus can our unique individuality and hence also our personality constitute itself. For, as autonomous subjects who are becoming ourselves, we actively participate with our actions in this process of self-becoming, we ourselves form ourselves to the extent this is possible. And yet, the fundamental, temporally finite structure of the process of individuation eludes us: It is given to us as something that is not at our disposal. Finitude and the constitution of meaning are irreducibly connected.¹ In the following, I seek to show that what is at stake in our consideration of the practical comprehension of aging is both its meaning-constitutive individuality and its totality and social communality. Hence, what is at stake is that we ponder the anthropological, ethical, social, and political significance of aging in one.

2.1 The Significance and Misapprehension of Individuality

From the point of view of intellectual and cultural history, the inconceivability of the process of individuation is manifest in the fact that ineffable individuality has been rendered thematic and depicted – indeed, has become and been made explicitly conscious – not so much in theory, science, and philosophical analysis as in art. Think, for example, of the representation of the unique individuality of persons in famous paintings of the tradition – for example, the *Mona Lisa* – or of the unique arrangement of individual life experiences in Franz Schubert’s compositions. Through their respective style, these artistic creations are themselves achievements of a unique and unmistakable individuality.

The significance of art in depicting the original phenomenon of individuality and even more so the process of individuation and hence also aging can neither be overlooked nor overestimated. Novels, poems, paintings, movies, music compositions

¹ See Overall, Chap. 11 in this volume.

all reveal the proximate, ineffable nature of individuality, its venerable, antecedent unity and totality in its depth; indeed – to speak with Hegel – its inner, internal infinitude. This becomes transparently clear from one of the most significant classical works of antiquity: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which was written around the turn of the first century BCE. This great work depicts the endless series of transformations of the world from chaos to order: Its processual character from cosmogenesis to human history and every human as he, driven by love, desire, and will, becomes himself. As such, Medea stands as a unique individual in this entire process. Goethe's experiments in morphology and metamorphosis, seeking eternal permanence in change, likewise draw on these fundamental insights, which reveal the constant qualitative transformation that constitutes the individuality of all life.

Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* provides yet another unique dramatic depiction of the individual aging process. Goethe famously articulated the dictum "every old man is King Lear" (Goethe 1988, 623 [own translation]). Shakespeare omits nothing in his portrayal of aging as a time of growing vulnerability and decrepitude. Aging appears as a radicalization of the fundamental human situation: as physical, psychic, social, and cultural aging, as a dramatic potential for crisis. We witness loss, isolation, and alienation from the world, culminating in misrecognition of one's nearest relatives – they affect the *entire* human in his individuality. Shakespeare thereby achieves the catharsis at which tragedy aims, "purifying" the audience of illusions and false ideas, a process of dawning insight and enlightenment. Aging now appears as an opportunity we must use for the power of disillusionment, an opportunity for the paradoxical capacity to let go and bid farewell, an opportunity for renunciation – a higher form of human life. Shakespeare here expresses an insight into multimorbidity and how we must deal with it existentially, a dealing that can lead to the preservation of the dignity of the individual personality in old age – hence he writes: "What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither. Ripeness is all. Come on" (Shakespeare [1608] 2000, 5.2).

In his essays on aging subtitled *Revolt and Resignation* (1968/1994), Jean Améry likewise features alienation and mortality in his analysis. He combines readings of novels, everyday situations, philosophical concepts, and biographic experiences to a dialectic. He sees a potentially viable perspective for dignified aging in consciously lived resignation in light of the failure of any revolt against finitude. He accentuates our *temporal being* and the *irretrievability* of life this implies, which is absolutely constitutive for our individuality (Améry 1968/1994). In the ideal case, this irretrievability can help intensify and deepen our concrete life experience. In Améry's words, this means to experience age: to discover that one is only what one already is. As it becomes more alien and mysterious to us, the world constantly negates our individuality. One need only think of the present, of computer technology and digitization. Améry concludes that in light of manifold processes of alienation, we must learn to comprehend the aging process, bearing in mind the inalienable dignity of every personal individuality: We should not repress these processes but recognize them as a challenge. Thus, in its essence, the German Basic

Law is founded on the principle of the inviolable dignity of each and every individual human.

In her ambitious essay *The Coming of Age* (1972), Simone de Beauvoir explores how humans individually experience and evaluate biological, social, and cultural aspects of aging. She combines a normative critical analysis with a criticism of capitalism, which treats humans only as means of production and as consumers (Beauvoir 1972). Given the contemporary ideological tendency to speak of a “glut of retirees,” “superannuation,” and “anti-aging” and thereby to intend above all the high costs of nursing and caring for the unproductive, sick, and dependent elderly, Beauvoir’s critical theses, although written 50 years ago, are more current than ever. In our time, crucial sociopolitical questions have arisen: How much can, should, may, and must nursing cost for the elderly? Are robotic nurses such as are already used in Japan a solution? How should we deal with fellow humans affected by Alzheimer’s disease or dementia? These questions bear on even more serious questions: the problem of euthanasia and assisted suicide to mention only a few.

The phenomena and problems I have raised have either been discussed only occasionally or not at all in society as a whole. The totality of life, including aging, frailty, mortality, and the end of life and death are hardly present – or, at any rate, not in their fundamental significance – in public consciousness. Indeed, we gladly repress aspects of finitude. Whereas we are at all times conscious that growing adolescents must be reared and educated and finally provided sex education in puberty and that this is a central task for parents, guardians, and teachers; whereas there is an ongoing discussion in public and in the media about the possibilities and forms that this stage of the human process of self-becoming should take (for example, when and how should sex education occur?), aging and later life were left to themselves to a large extent. In everyday consciousness, expressions such as “well, people grow old” circulate. This appeared correct and sufficient for the most part. We can characterize the ideology of the post-war period even more provocatively: One must be adult, strong, and employable so that one can earn money, start a family, be as successful as possible and attain recognition, and be healthy and fit as long as possible. Old age, including sickness and disability, will take care of itself somehow. In the meantime, however, especially given the increasing life expectancy of large numbers of people, our consciousness has started to change, albeit in the context of the ideological tensions and obscurities I have outlined.

Given these developments, in my judgment, from a philosophical and ethical perspective, it is urgently necessary that we initiate an innovative *educational project* addressing society as a whole. Pedagogically and didactically, this project must begin as early as possible, rearing children not only to become adults but *for life as a whole*. Such rearing can intensively develop from adolescents’ concrete life experiences, since they are often in touch with the elderly and elders: their grandparents and relatives. Likewise, field trips to retirement and nursing facilities can contribute to a gain in knowledge. Since many years, I have encouraged this practice while designing the curriculum for ethics teachers in the state of Saxony. In short, the motto must be: not just sex education, but also education concerning life as a whole, up to and including old age and its many highly complex aspects. Naturally, such

instruction will also productively include art works of the kind discussed. Likewise, the elderly can be invited for a conversation with school classes, where they can narrate from their life experience (I merely mention some possibilities). Core texts about aging and how to live well in old age can also be the basis of instruction. It is quite clear that in such instruction, *individual* experiences and insights should and must play a central role.

And yet, for philosophical, ethical, and didactic reasons, in this project of education and rearing, we must, from the very beginning, avoid and clear up a far-reaching misunderstanding concerning the phenomenon of the individual and of individuality, and this on a systematic basis. Since its beginnings and even more so in the historically revolutionary period of the Enlightenment, European culture and rationality has been shaped by an epistemological problem that was further deepened and radicalized by Descartes. As is well known, the fundamental principle of this problematic approach is: “I think, therefore I am” (“*Cogito, ergo sum*”) (Descartes 1983, I.7). At first, for the bourgeois revolutions, it appeared quite reasonable and important to place the individual, free, and autonomous subject fundamentally at the center of thought in the process of emancipation. However, this approach led to a dominant subject-centered thinking. This thinking led, in turn, to a one-sided and reductionist understanding of individuality as mentioned earlier, an understanding that still burdens us today. It is an isolationist, subjectivist understanding of individuality. To put it drastically, ontologically, this thinking has not developed beyond a fixation with the individual. This focus harbors many dangers: dangers that bear not only on epistemology but also, above all, on practical philosophy and ethics.

2.2 Constitutive Theoretical and Fundamental Anthropological Aspects of Individuality

My thesis is that, from the very beginning, we must deconstruct and overcome the subjectivistic and hence isolationist understanding of individuality at all levels. To put it trenchantly, my analysis means that we can only comprehend the uniqueness, irreducibility, irretrievability, and theoretical inconceivability of every human individual in thought and knowledge when we appreciate the primary *shared heritage* of individuals in its role of constituting meaning. On analogy with the concept of intersubjectivity, I characterize this shared heritage as *inter-existentiality* and, in our context, as *inter-individuality*. This holds because the two fundamental aspects of human existence and hence of our individuality – body and spirit – cannot be grasped isolationistically and subjectivistically. Of course, we have known for a long time that each of us is comprised of body and spirit. However, given our fixation with the individual subject, for a long time, we overlooked that and how these fundamental dimensions of our existence are completely inter-existentially constituted, and this is so in our becoming no less than in our being.

Our embodiment is impossible without our parents. Indeed, at the start of our individual existence, we exist inside another individual: our mothers. We live, indeed, “dwell” in her body. Only thus is our process of self-becoming possible. As babies and infants, too, we live from our mother: from her milk and her constant affection. Our embodiment is inter-individually constituted; it remains so for our entire life through our nourishment, which fellow humans provide; through our fundamentally inter-existential sexuality; and through the assistance that we at all times experience bodily, whether in our daily actions, during medical treatment, or in later life through the assistance, affection, and care shown to our bodily being. I cannot analyze here how contemporary developments (for example, in-vitro fertilization, uterus transplants, and surrogacy) are transforming this inter-existential constitution of meaning. However, it is clear to me that, even in these cases, our inter-existential form of life is preserved, albeit in a changed form.

Yet, this inter-individuality, inasmuch as it is constitutive of meaning and utterly irreducible, also holds for consciousness and self-consciousness. Admittedly, we have for long thought of them in subject-centered and isolationist terms. In the twentieth century, Frege’s and Wittgenstein’s revolutionary work in the philosophy of language irrefutably established that human thought, consciousness, and self-consciousness are impossible without *language*, which we all share and which is both inter-existentially and inter-individually constitutive of meaning. Through language, we can communicate with our fellow humans and they with us on every level at which meaning is constituted, including gestures, emphases, and bodily expressions. But – and this is once again central for our analysis of individuality – this also holds for our subjective *relationship to ourselves*. Such self-relation, classically termed self-consciousness, is impossible without our capacity for speech, that is, without the language that we, from childhood on, keep learning and using ever more explicitly in our process of self-becoming. Ultimately, this self-consciousness is the core and the center of our individuality and our embodiment.

In the end, who we are, what we want, what we experience bodily or sensorily, and what we feel in our innermost being is only explicitly accessible to us through concepts, that is, in complete sentences that make a claim to truth, which our fellow humans likewise know, use, and understand. We only need to think of fundamental statements that serve to orient us like “I trust you” or “I love you.” As Wittgenstein’s private language argument brilliantly shows, even our private sphere ultimately only discloses itself to us linguistically and conceptually (Wittgenstein 1953, § 256). This also holds for all our fellow humans. Hereby, it is systematically absolutely crucial that it is not we who have “created” language. Rather, in its inconceivable totality and complexity, language is always ahead of us: We become ourselves in it, even though we are always free to use it as we will, whether by creating our own expressions, or by using it in novel and poetic ways in literature, or by introducing linguistic terms in science and philosophy that are systematically productive of and expand our knowledge. Indeed, genres such as poetry, biography, and personal letters, which distinctively articulate our subjectivity, our existential privacy, and our individuality, reveal that if language did not precede us, we could neither develop nor contemplate these literally assertive forms of individuality.

And yet, to think once again with Wittgenstein, it is essential for our topic that ordinary language is and remains the unanalyzable basis of our self-knowledge. The use of ordinary language, with expressions and sentences such as “I mean,” “I feel,” and “I am,” is always constitutive of meaning in our own subjective, private orientation in life in every concrete ordinary life-situation. In other words, without inter-existentiality, there could be neither subjectivity nor self-consciousness nor self-knowledge nor individuality. Here also, in relation to these two fundamental domains from which we drew our examples for the inter-individual constitution of our individuality, we are confronted by the distance of what is nearest: by our embodiment and ordinary language. One could ask: Why did it take nearly a millennium for philosophy and epistemology to become explicitly conscious of the priority of embodiment and language as fundamentally constitutive of meaning, and to incorporate this priority in their analyses, as has been done in the phenomenology of the body since Husserl and in the linguistic turn since Frege and Wittgenstein? Once again, the reason lies in the excessive nearness of these meaning-constitutive dimensions of our life, which therefore had to remain hidden for the longest time until the twentieth century. (Freudian psychoanalysis likewise teased out further dimensions of this proximity – sexuality and dreams – only in this period.)

2.3 On the Significance of Inter-Existential Individuality for Aging

It is only once we turn to the inter-existential and inter-individual constitutive dimension of meaning of our lives that we can properly appreciate the practical, ethical, moral significance of individuality and of the individual process of self-becoming for aging. This also holds for essential aspects of individuality. The *unity and totality* of self-becoming poses a shared pragmatic task of developing and shaping one’s *personal identity*. How can and should I understand myself, my life, and my existence normatively and practically? Who do I wish to be and become?

The didactic educational project of rearing people for life as a whole must first become conscious of these questions: It must explicitly thematize them. This includes developing knowledge and practical insight into the weighty circumstance that this question poses itself constantly and incessantly during one’s entire life – not just when growing up but also in later life until old age. The totality of life, the primary holism of our existence, is not an abstract formal shell; rather, it is concrete as the formation of real life at every moment – in all our plans and projects, whether small or large. Our inter-individuality affects itself and takes shape socially and communicatively throughout the entire process of self-becoming. This is why isolated substantializations using common nouns such as “childhood,” “youth,” and “old age” are so misleading: These putative “things in themselves” do not exist at all. Rather, the respective life processes can only be comprehended in the contexts of the life common to them.

Individuation occurs and is shaped in its relationship to parents and grandparents, while playing with our friends in the sandbox, in our relationships with teachers and guardians, and, finally, in our partnerships and romantic attachments and in marriage and family. The tendency to elide these social and communicative dimensions of meaning and to hypostatize life stages fosters ideological misjudgments and undermines the internal complexity of our individuality on every level. If we think of our own *narrative construction of identity*, we see that we live constantly in and with our recollections. With advancing age, recollections of our parents and grandparents constantly crop up in our current life situation: forceful scenes and moving words and sentences, adventures and experiences that we shared in the past. We then say: That has remained with me. Likewise, our most important teachers and what they taught us remain unforgotten. That means that we carry our individuality and inter-individuality as it has been developed and has unfolded itself so far along with us into later life. Indeed, we do so well into our last years. Without this narrative identity, we would not exist at all. We could not be understood and neither could we recognize or comprehend ourselves.

For an anthropological ethics of aging, this means that, given the irreducibly inter-individual constitution of identity, we also *remain* the child, the adolescent, the student, the graduate, and the doctoral candidate that we were because, without these concrete aspects of our life practice, we *could not be* who we are in our present situation of life. This again reveals the paradox at our heart: We *are* what we *were*. Generations cannot be separated: They can only be artificially sundered and abstractly objectified. If we remain at the level of a superficial empiricism, these irreducible dimensions of meaning elude us: When we see an aged geriatric patient, we imagine that we can see his entire existence objectively before us: his weakness, frailty, and helplessness. However, in light of our analyses so far, it would be completely one-sided to reduce him to this. Indeed, it would necessarily miss his authentic inter-individual identity, which can manifest in conversation with him, in listening to him tell his story, in narrativity.

A second aspect of the paradox I intend also holds for the individual formation of identity in the process of self-becoming: We already *are* what we will yet *become*. Heidegger's analysis of ecstatic temporality in *Being and Time* reveals that the lifetime that logically precedes us and enables us can neither be thought nor grasped without this irreducible ecstatic totality (Heidegger 1962). Our lifetime is not the quantitatively measurable clock-time but rather the qualitative time of our concrete life experience in which past and future are both constantly present and must be present. The dimension of recollection, including all our knowledge, experiences, education, and linguistic abilities, is one dimension of our lifetime; the other consists of our expectations, hopes, plans, and intentions, without which we could not orient ourselves at all. Fundamental questions arise with greater intensity for old age: What do I still want to accomplish? What can I still hope to achieve meaningfully? Ought I take on this task now?

It is central for the emergence and existence of our individual identity that these two dimensions of our life – past and future – constantly merge amidst our respective present and thus enable our concrete situations in life and existential moments,

that is to say, constitute them as real. Here also, it becomes clear that an isolationist understanding of life stages, especially aging and old age, is completely misguided. What is originally given is the qualitative totality of our lifetime, which we can only comprehend in terms of its contents and norms. It is as originally given and as enabling of meaning for our individuality as the forms of social and communicative identity constitution that precede us.

2.4 The Recognition of Limits and the Constitution of Existential Meaningfulness

I have emphasized these constitutive aspects of our individuality so strongly because the ethical foundations of a critical reflection on aging – including the fundamental aspects of *personal dignity* – only become accessible through them. Only thus can we, in the following, appropriately clarify the social and political consequences that result from the individuality of aging.

We can only comprehend the existential, ethical, and moral significance of the aging process when our reflection includes the connection between *finitude and meaning of life*, a connection that is constitutive of meaning. Our underivable *uniqueness* and *unrepeatability* is central for the individuality of each human being – for us and for all our fellow humans. Once again, it is something that, as meaning-enabling, precedes us, irrespective of the forms of adaption, conventions, or objections we factually practice. We exist only thus in every case – at all times – in our concrete life situation. It is only we who act and, planning, project and orient ourselves. This means that no one can take this precedence from us, even when we reflect with others and are influenced by them. To put it dramatically, we are condemned to freedom.

Let us now comprehend this “condemnation” meaningfully: as a culture of calm acknowledgment of the *limitation and finitude* that is truly *constitutive of the meaning of life*. Essential forms of human failure emerge from a misrecognition of the impossible. In contrast to this, a philosophical analysis of the limits of sense enables us to expose *the conditions of impossibility* of the constitution of meaning in the lifeworld. Only thus can we recognize vis-à-vis our own individual existence how valuable life really is: that it is irreplaceable precisely in its finitude and in aging.

More precisely, the constitutive connection between finitude and meaning reveals itself in the *irretrievability* of the past, the *irreversibility* of the course of life as we age and die, the *inescapability* of future situations, the *finality* and *irreversibility* of all events, the *unanticipatability* of the origins of meaningful and conscious life, and the *unpredictability* of its end. Although all these aspects constantly shape our life praxis, indeed, constitute it and enable its meaning; although (or just because) they constantly accompany our life-world praxis, we are either scarcely or not at all conscious of their fundamental practical and ethical significance; they are often forgotten or repressed. Tellingly, it is especially common that these processes of life and