

INTRODUCTION

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Exploring Ageing as a Social Fact: Introductory Notes

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EXPLORING AGEING AS A SOCIAL FACT: INTRODUCTORY NOTES¹

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1. What is at stake

We currently inhabit a lifeworld where we do not simply age, but our societies are themselves characterised as *ageing societies*. In advanced societies, ageing is not only a biological and personal characteristic, but a social fact. As lifespans steadily increase, ageing becomes endemic to social life. Thus, ageing as an intrinsic *quality* of life is radically transformed and reshaped by *quantity*: life lengthens, and the population of seniors undergoes major increase.

To provide some key data from the European Union (EUROSTAT, 2025): on 1st January 2024, the European Union population was estimated at 449.3 million people, of whom more than one-fifth (21.6%) were aged 65 years and over. The median age of the EU population at this point was 44.7 years. Looking into the future, trends indicate that people aged 65 years and over will account for 32.5% of the EU population by 2100, compared with 21.6% in 2024.

Due to multiple and interrelated socio-historical factors (high living standards, medical-technological innovations, transformed lifestyles, among numerous others), the scenario cannot be reduced to a question that relates solely to “the senior population”. This massive and historic phenomenon implies more than a focus on a single social group or generation: it concerns society as a whole, across all dimensions of intergenerational relations, well-being and social justice, as well as personal identity. In other words, ageing as a social fact also affects younger generations. Philosophically speaking, problems that relate to an ageing population embrace both the ontological sphere (*what we are*) and the ethical sphere (*what we do and ought to do*).

Following these parallel lines of enquiry, what is at stake is, on the one hand, understanding ourselves as ageing individuals, alongside the structural interrelations between the generations; and, on the other hand, the state-of-the-art of our social care systems as well as our normative and moral obligations to deal with ageing. A double-faced theoretical and practical commitment well expressed, for example, by the concept of solidarity, as a descriptive notion – the inner bonds between people; and as a normative ideal – the obligation to support and care for others. It is not by chance that in response to the ageing population, public discourse is predominantly focused on strengthening the instruments of social solidarity, like universal healthcare and pension systems, and fairer conditions between generations. As I have attempted to outline elsewhere (Volpe, 2024), solidarity in light of ageing societies should encompass a threefold function. First, it should act as social integration, ensuring a shared sense of cooperation among generations – or, more ideally, a sense of inter-generational community. Secondly, it should act as social protection, in terms of sustainable social care, welfare and pension systems, that are adequate to the needs of

both those who benefit and those who contribute. Thirdly, it should function as political action, forging concrete alliances between generations on behalf of social justice and against reciprocal discrimination – the latter often being described as a form of “generationism” or “ageism”. Again, solidarity, being primarily a relation of mutual concern and support, rather than unidirectional assistance, helps in acknowledging the way that the ageing population affects everybody: perhaps, alongside climate change, this is actually *the most symmetrical phenomenon* of our time, involving, as it does, all generations.

However, an overview of the macrophenomenon of ageing should be able to include consideration of the personal and more individual and intimate dimension of ageing as a social fact. The multidimensionality of ageing as a subject was already well captured by Simone de Beauvoir when, in 1970, she broke a taboo by talking about old age – moreover with specific reference to the female gender – in her *La Vieillesse (The Coming of Age)*, as we can read in the first lines of her preface:

[...] [A]s far as our own species is concerned old age is by no means easy to define. It is a biological phenomenon – the elderly man’s organism displays certain particularities. It brings with it psychological consequences – certain forms of behaviour are rightly looked upon as being characteristic of old age. And like all human situations it has an existential dimension – it changes the individual’s relationship with the world and with his own history. Then again man never lives in a state of nature: in his old age, as at every other period of his life, his status is imposed upon him by the society to which he belongs. What so complicates the whole problem is the close interdependence of all these points of view. Nowadays we know that it is pointless to study the physiological and the psychological aspects separately, for each governs the other; and as we shall see, this relationship is especially clear in old age – the chosen realm of psychosomatic disturbance. Yet what is termed the individual’s psychic or spiritual life can only be understood in the light of his existential situation: this situation, therefore, also affects his physical organism. And the converse applies, for he experiences his relationship with time differently according to whether his body is more or less impaired. (Beauvoir, 1972, p. 9)

These kinds of analysis – foregrounded in what will follow – also call attention to the personal and even existential aspects of ageing. Disregarding personal experience by limiting one’s outlook to the “big picture” might constitute a real problem, causing negative impacts to the concrete ways society and institutions seek to address the issues. Ageing is certainly and primarily a biological phenomenon, but – following Beauvoir – also carries with it certain psychological and social consequences. These more intimate, embodied and existential aspects may relate to the ability of older people to engage in meaningful life experiences, reaffirm their personal freedom, and navigate the complexity of social life within an ever-changing environment. These experiences are strongly personal but simultaneously link to forms of meaningful interaction with others and one’s social surroundings. In some ways, there is a clear implication that the degree of personal freedom and integrity is important when it comes to ageing. Yet, most of all, to echo the German philosopher and sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2019), a *broken* experience of ageing might have to do with some loss of “resonance” (*Resonanz*), that is, the loss of a “a responsive relationship” with the social world and even with our own body, that cannot be objectively estimated solely through measures such as index of well-being, options and resources. Even more than a lack of subjective appropriation of things and relations, ageing may have to do with the lack of proper significance of lived experience, whereby things, people, places and memories too, lose their authentic meaning and “sound”;

basically, become alienated. One thinks of the concurrent manifestations of isolation, depression, segregation or cultural exclusion of older people.

Zoom-out views and multiple zoom-in views are therefore needed to address ageing as a social fact, and philosophy is called upon to reflexively respond with multiple conceptual tools and suggestions from its long tradition.

2. Exploring population ageing through philosophy

Within the already vast and expanding literature on population ageing, the present monographic issue entitled “The Coming of Age: Personal Identity, Well-Being, and Justice in an Ageing Society” aims to provide an interdisciplinary and rigorous contribution to the ongoing discussion.

First, it aims to present a diverse picture of the current debate around these issues within social ontology, phenomenology and practical philosophy, including the contributions of both early-career researchers and renowned scholars.

Secondly, it aims to cover different angles of the debate with perspectives on generations, social care and psycho-existential as well as personal dimensions, by considering the history of culture and classic works on the topic.

Thirdly, it has also the ambition of targeting the wide public, including lawmakers, who need ever more *orientation* if they are to navigate the current scenario of ageing populations, that often becomes manifest through multiple crises: crisis of generational relationships, crisis of welfare, crisis of care and social reproduction, and crises of representation and democracy, too. These latter are perhaps the most urgent, as the issues involved concern the very sustainability of our societies and their core institutions. Excessively narrow notions and short-term measures are clearly insufficient to address these crises, and philosophy in its full extension might be a useful tool for a better understanding of the topic and even better practical long-term responses.

The monographic issue comprises three sections, reflecting the multilayered nature of ageing.

Section 1 concerns the ontological and phenomenological analysis of the idea of a generation and what is variously defined by the authors as “transgenerationality”.

The first essay in this section, “On the ‘Chain of Generations’” by Tiziana Andina, takes up the (titular) idea formulated by Hugh McCormick and offers an examination of this notion showing how to better frame an ontology of transgenerationality. The second essay in the section, “The Transgenerational Action of Growing Old Together: Ageism and Future-Maker Generations in Ageing Societies” by Alessandro Anzà, embarks upon an exploration of transgenerationality, in order to tackle prevailing discriminatory attitudes rooted in superficial judgments and stereotypes about age and generations. The third essay, “Redesigning Social Groups. Understanding the Young-Elder Divide” by Valeria Martino, examines the concept of “generational social group”, and provides an in-depth analysis of the three main meanings of “generation”, namely cohort, kinship and social group. The fourth essay, “Shared Ageing and Transgenerationality” by Costanza Penna, argues for the reconsideration of ageing from a social ontological perspective, advocating for a phenomenological shift from “ageing” to “being aged” to address some of the shortcomings of current approaches. The section’s fifth and last essay, “A Phenomenology of Hesitation, Open-mindedness and Intergenerational Habitus Formation at Older Age” by Jessica Stanier, explores intergenerational shifts in cultural norms, the social separation between generations, and deepens those structural factors that pose obstacles to intergenerational relationships and open-mindedness at older age.

Section 2 concerns the compelling topic of well-being in an ageing society, comprising legal, phenomenological and bioethical aspects.

The first essay in the section, “Well-being in the Elderly: the Opportunity and Freedom to Achieve Valuable Functioning” by Francesca Guma, analyses well-being in older people from the perspective of the capabilities approach, with a particular focus on the role of personal freedom in achieving functioning at different stages of the ageing process. The second essay, “The Ripeness of Old Age: An enactive perspective on wellbeing in later life” by Joe Higgins, develops an analysis of wellbeing-related afflictions such as depression, explaining them through the framework of enactivism. The third essay, “Older people as vulnerable persons in the perspective of law” by Claudia Irti, explores the legal category of “older individuals”, considered necessary to address the gradual decline in physical and mental abilities associated with ageing, and suggests that creating a group or category for vulnerable (elderly) individuals could bring several advantages. The fourth essay in the section, “The more they need care, the more they struggle to receive it. Older patients and the inverse care law” by Federico Pennestrì, describes the relevant determinants of health that prevent many adults, especially elders, from receiving the adequate care they need, and outlines a number of policies that combat ageism. The fifth and last essay in the section, “Well-being and Multisensory Engagement in Dementia: An Embodied and Relational Account” by Ragna Winniewski, shows how multisensory engagement contributes to the emergence of states of well-being in ageing-related cases of dementia, through bodily memory, inter-bodily resonance and therapeutic atmosphere.

Section 3, finally, addresses the issues of personal identity, personhood and social justice, including political issues.

The first essay of the section, “Democracy, Ageing, Disability” by Elvio Baccharini and Aleksandar Šušnjar, discusses the democratic inclusion of individuals with severe cognitive disabilities and those in advanced age with a relevant decline of cognitive capacities, as the fundamental problem in theories of justice as regards precisely the inclusion of individuals who lack cognitive capacities in a high degree. The second essay, “The temporality of remaining trapped. Beauvoir on ageing as a gendered phenomenon” by Katja Čičigoj and Nicole Miglio, explores the phenomenon of gender-based ageing with the support of Beauvoir’s account of ageing, temporality and gender. Using Beauvoir’s framework, the authors analyse matters of reproductive duties in patriarchal societies, as well as the existential dimension of ageing for women. The third essay, “Vulnerability to Disinformation in Older Age” by Cristina Meini and Martina Rosola, engages with the problem of disinformation and how certain groups of people, especially older people, are particularly exposed to it. They examine the core ageing-related factors in the phenomenon and call for ways to be found to protect people in this category. The fourth essay, “Self, Personhood and Self-Awareness: A Phenomenological Analysis of Dementia” by Danielle Petherbridge, undertakes a phenomenological reflection upon self and personhood in dementia, exploring an alternative view to that which understands dementia only in terms of diminished cognitive capacities or complete loss of meaningful interaction. The fifth and last essay in the section, “Ageing and Limit Situation – A Study of Existential Dynamics in Psychotherapy with Older Adults” by Felix Schmidt, examines the concept of a “limit situation” (*Grenzsituation*) in relation to ageing and old age in a geriatric psychotherapy setting. The essay brings together philosophy and qualitative social research to explore novel ways for employing phenomenology in psychotherapy and clinical practice.

“The Coming of Age: Personal Identity, Well-Being and Justice in an Ageing Society” was conceptualised on the occasion of the 2023 San Raffaele School of Philosophy, held at the Faculty of Philosophy of Vita-Salute San Raffaele University (October 4th–6th). The School was organised within the “Ageing well in an ageing society” (Age-It) Research Project (Spokes 7

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We hope that this collective scholarly work might provide a worthy and enriching contribution to discussion on such a critical topic of our time.

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