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SHARED AGING AND TRANSGENERATIONALITY[1]

abstract

Aging has hitherto been overlooked by social ontologists. The article argues for its reconsideration advocating for a phenomenological shift from "aging" to "being aged" to address the major shortcomings of current approaches. Two key insights are revealed: (i) age discrimination arises from a standardized view of life that neglects the personal dimension of aging; (ii) phenomenology proves helpful in addressing qualitative assessments of aging and its social dimension while maintaining existential sensitivity. Within the proposed framework, it becomes possible to outline a theory of shared aging and transgenerationality, hinging on three main claims: a) aging unfolds as generational time shared in a transgenerational sense; b) it unites people in social wholes according to different modes and degrees; c) it inspires primary and secondary transgenerationality. All this lays the groundwork to understand generational temporality, sociality, and normativity beyond constructivism.

keywords

aging, generation, social ontology, transgenerationality, phenomenology

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Introduction

"Aging" denotes a phenomenon *in fieri.* One *becomes* old and never ceases to age until the time of death—in this sense, aging can only be observed in its diachronic and non-static dimension. Given that registry age alone is insufficient to account for its complexity, we shall investigate the phenomenon more broadly and determine what defines aging and the subjects that we refer to as "the elderly".

A first sense to understand aging is through the biological dimension of human beings. Clearly, while people age, the same cannot be said of artifacts, which at most can break down (Ferraris, 2022). Hinging on this distinction, we may identify aging with *senescing*—i.e., the process of biological, physiological, and functional change that involves living organisms, and humans specifically, as they progress in life. Generally, it is related to a decline in performance and an increased exposure to disease (Burton, 2009). Thus understood, aging is primarily viewed as an object of medical sciences and, since the experimental practices of Francis Bacon in the 18th century, has been observed through a positivistic lens, albeit not without important reconceptualization (Isaacs, 1992; Crome & Lally, 2011).

Nonetheless, aging escapes the purely biological definition of "internal clock" of the human being (Baars, 2016). Evidence shows that individuals do not all age in the same way or at the same rate but rather follow different trajectories, which only partially depend on biological-functional factors. Instead, they are significantly influenced by the living and welfare conditions of the subjects considered—that is, how we age is related to how we live together and treat those who age. If the first definition of aging has thus the merit of describing it as an "embodied" phenomenon, it proves, however, not to be exhaustive.

At the very least, we shall consider a second sense of aging, one that specifically pertains to its social dimension. This latter is not subordinate to the biological one—social conventions, norms, rules, and deontic powers associated with aging do not necessarily align with biological correlates and may even contradict statistical data while yet retaining normative validity (Maddox & Powell, 1988). Broadly speaking, the group of those who age can be identified with "the elderly" and a wide array of practices, attitudes, values, and roles are conventionally attached to it. Examples include giving up one's seat on the bus, paying respect, and attributing wisdom. But individual and shared beliefs may also portray aging subjects as possessing outdated knowledge, representing a social and economic burden, or wielding excessive political power. Whether positive or negative, such ascriptions are all social in nature. They present a strong cultural connotation, informing what aging means to a given community or society beyond the registry age or the assessment of functional capacities. It is

precisely this social consideration of aging that may generate prejudice, stigmatization, and even oppression of individuals and groups based on their age (*ageism*). This seems even more relevant within the current context of population aging, threatening to give rise to new and increased forms of inequality and discrimination.

It is therefore urgent to ask what kind of normative relations are structured among individuals when the category of "aging" is involved and how this may affect social group membership and collective actions. So, we should at least consider that aging constitutes a question for social ontologists as well, a relevant question that deserves more attention.

1. Where current approaches fall short

Yet, traditional social ontology has hardly given any emphasis to aging. One may wonder whether this omission is the result of neglect or structural theoretical limitations in the way it generally conceptualizes social reality. To address this issue, we shall test whether existing frameworks can be adapted to account for aging and assess their adequacy to the task. For clarity, we will rely on the recent distinction introduced by Åsa Burman (2023), which broadly categorizes major theories into *ideal* and *nonideal* social ontology.[1]

Theorists of *ideal social ontology* have focused on the conditions that enable social groups to act in the plural form of "we" be it framed as the result of individual intention coordination (Bratman, 1993), a specific psychological modality (Searle, 1995) or a joint commitment of members (Gilbert, 1989). They do not, however, elaborate on the criteria that differentiate the various types of social actions, groups, and modes of sharing that populate our social world. This is why, while effective in describing a certain sense of "being together", ideal approaches have been criticized as overly impersonal and impermeable to qualitative values (De Vecchi, 2022).

In this context, whether a person is young or old does not seem to make any ontological difference in her participation as a member of a group. Similarly, whether the group in question is "the elderly" or a basketball team, its formation and expression of intentionality are understood according to the same ontological structure, the collective one. However, even adopting the commonsense viewpoint, we do not regard aging as a neutral experience. On the contrary, we believe that it significantly affects social relations and collective formations in terms of its significance to both the individual and society at large. Even from this brief review, we can therefore conclude that the ideal social ontology fails to capture aging as a qualitatively connoted phenomenon.

Let us then turn to *nonideal social ontology*. Theories of this second kind share the explicit aim of addressing opaque social kinds, social powers, and forms of oppression which are invisible by ideal approaches. Instead, they expand to include social facts that exist independently of the intentionality of subjects but are nonetheless social (Khalidi, 2015). Methodologically, nonideal theorists prioritize layered, real-life examples over abstract and neutralized scenarios which often fail to uncover implicit forms of power. While we can be optimistic that these accounts may effectively capture ageism as a form of social oppression, it is necessary to recognize a third additional dimension to aging before conducting such an inquiry—a dimension that they are not fully equipped to grasp.

To make this claim, we shall consider an example that we will call "the bus stop controversy". At a sparsely populated bus stop in a suburban area of Piedmont, three women are waiting: two are middle-aged, and one is older. One of the middle-aged women, needing information about the bus arrival time, asks her peer, who replies that it should not be long. Meanwhile, the older woman, consulting her smartphone, reports a fifteen-minute delay,

1 Their separation is only instrumentally pronounced for explanatory purposes.

citing the public transportation app and her experience as a former bus driver. The first woman refrains from saying anything out of courtesy, but it is clear that she doubts the reliability of the directions she has received. After ten minutes, she asks for another update. This time, the other middle-aged woman also checks the transportation app and confirms the older woman's earlier prediction. The first woman seems satisfied with the confirmation. When the bus arrives, it is extremely crowded. A young passenger offers his seat to the older woman, but she politely declines, "Thank you, but there's no need, I'm not that old yet".

Let us now briefly read the "bus stop dispute" through the lenses of three major notions of nonideal accounts: that of categorial injustice (Ásta, 2018), ontic injustice (Jenkins, 2020), and telic power (Burman, 2023).

Ásta's conferralist theory interprets the scenario as a case of "categorial injustice", which occurs when "agents are systematically thwarted in their attempts at performing actions by how they are socially construed" (2019, p. 392). Under this view, the older commuter is treated unfairly *upon* being labeled as an *aged person*, which imposes a set of constraints that prevent her from being seen as a reliable source of information in the given context. These constraints clash with her institutional enablements by virtue of her professional experience and the evidence from the official app, making it impossible for her to interact as she would be entitled to.[2] Although conferralism tracks an existing dynamic, Burman (2019) points to a crucial lack in the theory, i.e., it can only account for categories that we *know* we live by, while it remains blind to those which do not imply awareness of the subjects and yet affect them.

This limitation does not concern Katharine Jenkins' account of "ontic injustice", which is said to arise whenever members of a social kind are subjected to a set of social constraints and enablements that are wrongful to them. Ontic injustice thus emphasizes a mismatch between moral and social entitlements, highlighted by the concepts of recognition and respect (Jenkins, 2020, p. 196). And yet, while managing to address opaque oppressive phenomena, Jenkins' account only offers a moral critique of them, failing to describe their structure at an ontological level.

Lastly, Burman (2023) introduces the notion of "telic power", where an agent is measured against an ideal and the distance from it affects their ability to achieve certain outcomes. Interestingly, this enables to distinguish social phenomena in a qualitative sense—an idea that will be further explored in the next pages. However, we should observe that telic power is related to the notion of deontic power—i.e., the dispositional concept or ability to perform a certain action—only insofar as they are *perceived* to clash with people's standards. They do not evaluate the subject's experience that is measured against the telic ideal.

Most relevant to this investigation is that none of the three accounts, while managing to explain why injustice occurs in the bus stop controversy, can address what happens when the older woman refuses the young commuter's seat. Whether we frame it in terms of constraints and enablements, social and moral entitlements, or deontic and telic powers, no suitable explanation is provided for why a mismatch occurs. This is for theoretical reasons: if ideal social ontology is primarily concerned with collective intentionality and is silent on power relations, the emancipatory push of nonideal social ontology makes it the focus at the expense of the centrality of subjects. In other words, these models effectively critique how aging is construed and how injustice arises, but they fail to account for its personal dimension. To address this, we must shift focus from "aging" to "being aged" and investigate the experience phenomenologically, as it is lived by the self.

2 The conferralist framework proves to be particularly valuable in addressing systemic forms of injustice and oppression, such as ageism in the workplace or healthcare, as widely documented (Ayalon *et al.*, 2019).

2. Living personally

When thinking of aging as the passage of time in our lives, we are not referring to the objective time of science but to a qualitatively different concept—it is *our* time, *le temps vécu*. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on time as an inner experience, qualifies as a promising framework for exploring what it means to "being aged".

By further developing the tripartite structure of the internal temporality of consciousness (Husserl, 1966), Max Scheler (1957) views aging as a process that "flows away passing through an essentially 'present' constant, namely the 'body' [*Leib*] given in a particular mode of consciousness as the background of all organic sensations" (p. 18). At least in principle, the subject can immediately perceive, remember, or anticipate any point in their lifetime not through abstraction but as a direct object of lived experience [*Erlebnis*].

At the same time, each point of the present, past, and future fits into the arc of a development that extends as much as our lifetime. As we age, the breadth of our future is constantly consumed by our growing past, and the present is increasingly compressed between the two. Hence, although temporality develops with a directional tendency towards the future, it also inevitably bears the experience of its finitude. It follows that the mature consciousness of aging coincides with experiencing the direction of life towards death [*Lebensrichtung*].

As this constitutes the horizon of our experience of embodied subjects, it cannot be transcended. The *datum* of the experience of aging is thus neither entirely constructible nor objectifiable. The social construction of aging is here relativized and contrasted with a robust experience that is simply given, qualitatively and normatively connoted, and inescapable, if not by resorting to *epoché*.

This phenomenological experience grounds both the biological and social definitions of aging in the structure of consciousness. As Paul Améry (1994) emphasizes, "we find time in aging" (p. 11). The weight of temporal strata is constantly felt by the aging subjects—not merely due to physical decline or increased bodily suffering, but because they carry time within themselves. So much so that we would know we were aging even if we had no perception of our bodily senescence or were the last human beings alive (Scheler, 1957, p. 16).

In short, with aging comes the alteration of the immediate and intuitive quality of how we "feel our life". For the young, it appears as a "vast and shining expanse in which being spreads out" (Scheler, 1957, p. 20). Aging, however, reveals to the subjects the structure of their temporality as "the worldless inner sense of pure time" (Améry, 1994, p. 127).

This already allows for two observations. First, a significant mismatch that originates discrimination based on age ought to be read as stemming from a mode of "feeling life" that is assumed outside its personal dimension. Second, revisiting social ontology from a phenomenological perspective promises to illuminate the social and shared dimensions of aging while maintaining existential sensibility.

Thus far, I have claimed that major accounts of ideal and nonideal social ontology fail to consider the experience of one's own aging. They disregard the personal dimension of the phenomenon, relying instead on synchronic evaluations of individuals or groups who assume their mode of "feeling life" to be universally applicable—hence, synchronically true at any point in time. However, this fails to grasp the situated and embodied character of aging. A similar approach is underpinned by the pretense of the standardization of lived time, which negates the qualitative difference between aging and other life stages. Moreover, this standardization fosters the illusion that time can transcend the personal dimension and be rendered objectifiable.

On the contrary, aging is always immediately experienced *by someone* (Strawson, 2009, p. 271), suggesting a *what-is-likeness* that cannot be separated from the phenomenological horizon of temporality. Just as having a headache is not offered as a split experience—where one first

realizes the unpleasant perception of pain and then wonders to whom that experience might belong—the experience of aging is always imbued with perspectival ownership and a sense of *what-it-is-like-for-me-ness* (Zahavi, 2014). Moreover, we can now recover and fully appreciate the emphasis on aging as a diachronic and *in fieri* phenomenon, which here finds ontological grounding.

Social evaluations of aging that do not start from this consideration are structurally myopic, not with respect to the emotional correlate of the experience of aging—which can be varied—but to its intrinsic meaning and value for the self. Referring back to Scheler (1957, p. 30), if subjects obliterate the diachronic dimension of life and the phenomenological experience of change that it entails, they lose awareness of mortality and exist under the mirage of "eternal youth".

This is all the more relevant as a similar perspective is now reinforced by medical and scientific technologies that promise to "end aging" (De Gray & Rae, 2007). Hence, aging is at once favored—due to the increasing level of improvement in widespread living conditions—and yet denied in its ontological value. Since the experience of temporality belongs to the structure of the living self and one is meaningless without the other (Margolis, 1988, p. 41), to erase aging would be to abdicate the self, which cannot be eternal. Rather, to exist as a subject, one must come to life first, i.e., have a beginning [*commencement*]. In the same way, by facing death the subject is forced to recognize something that does not come from within and cannot be embraced by consciousness nor dominated by it (Levinas, 1987). Even if the subject essentially lives the present and comprehends the past and future as extensions of this mode of existing, in aging lies the prolonged and increasingly explicit experience of approaching such a limit. If death coincides with the impossibility of a project and action of the subject (according to the idea that "when there is death, there is not you"), aging is the lived—hence, present—experience of the reduction of possibility of the self in favor of something from outside, which the subject cannot be made part of. Emmanuel Levinas thus posits the emergence of the pluralistic structure of existence. Theoretical consequences of this point will be elaborated in the final section.

3. Living socially

Classical phenomenology brings attention to the qualitative nature of aging, offering a notion of time that is not uniform but always relates to the personal life of the subject who is aging. However, adopting this approach may expose to a critique of interpersonal reductionism. While aligning with the rejection of a positivist approach to gerontology, Jan Baars (1991) argues that phenomenology fails to qualify as an alternative theory of aging because it focuses too narrowly on the microlevel, neglecting power relations that extend beyond direct interpersonal interactions. This critique suggests that, while mainstream social ontology appears excessively impersonal, phenomenology is reductive in the opposite sense by being overly personal. Paradoxically, this would lead to the same blindness to power earlier detected in ideal social ontology.

Considering this challenge allows us to show how the project of a phenomenological social ontology can, in fact, outline a theory of aging that addresses social relations and power while also maintaining its existential and personal focus.

Simone de Beauvoir (1972) explores this tension through the notion of *alienation*. Aging is not personal in the sense that it concerns the subject's consciousness alone—"As long as you feel young, you are young". Rather, it is a dialectical relationship between the subject's being and that of others. According to de Beauvoir, "Within me, it is the Other—that is to say, the person I am for the outsider—who is old" (p. 284). Because of the structural non-coincidence of the I for the self and the I for the other, aging figures as an "unrealizable" phenomenon (p. 291). More radically than what Baars seems to think, such an aspect does not solely concern

interpersonal relationships but inextricably refers to the systematic forms of recognition and normativity connected to one's social existence. Ontologically, aging places the experience of distance from the I within oneself, and it does so through the interaction between the perceived self and the social structures and conditions that lay outside of it and characterize its environment. In other words, the personal definition of aging depends on the social class to which one belongs and the forms of "systematic destruction that [is] inflicted upon some men throughout their lives" (p. 542). Social power, roles, and structures as well as the notion of alienation thus enter the definition of aging beyond constructivism—it is because aging relates to the personal experience of the embodied consciousness that it is also essentially social and sensitive to the forms in which social wholes address it (which nonideal social ontologies are primarily devoted to capture).

Thus, even in the face of Baars' critique of interpersonal reductionism, phenomenology proves far from inadequate to perform a critical task on the "culture of aging" (Davis, 2009). On the contrary, the convergence of social ontology and phenomenological perspectives on social subjects—setting aside the significant differences between Husserl, Scheler, Levinas, Améry, and De Beauvoir—reveals that aging is *personal* because it is *social*, and *social* because it is *personal*.

This tells us two things. First, it is essential to consider how aging is experienced both by the self and by others to assess the different ways in which it impacts social wholes as personally lived. Second, as societies are structured by deeply interconnected generations, it is possible to outline a phenomenological account of "aging together" that crosses generational boundaries and paves the way for a social ontology of transgenerationality. These considerations deserve further attention.

4. Transgenerationality

As it turns out, with aging comes an alteration of one's perception of lived time. By being qualitatively different from other life stages, the experience of aging can be considered "generational", i.e., it pertains to a group of individuals who share significant life conditions, interests, experiences, and values broadly connected to their age. This seems to be true in at least two senses.

Firstly, aging can be a defining characteristic of a generation. From an in-group perspective, aging is an experience by which individuals may recognize each other as sharing significant features, thereby justifying or reinforcing their identification as members of the same generation here intended as social group. This can lead to forms of negotiation of one's own aging through the encounter with other members of the same generation and offer relevant reasons for peer solidarity and group coalition. From an out-group perspective, a generation can look like a very different thing depending on how aging is defined by the broader society, and it may include members of different age groups based on the context considered.

Secondly, aging informs the relationship between generations. As it essentially refers to a change in *what-it-is-like-for-me-ness* of experience over time, aging can be detected as a source of intergenerational struggle. Because life is experienced in radically different ways at different life stages, generations cannot immediately recognize each other in identity and rather often develop a dialectic, if not an openly conflictual relationship. Moreover, as mentioned above, aging can be an experience around which social power is expressed, and oppression occurs. Members of a generation may thus be identified as "aging" based on their belonging to the group regardless of whether they exhibit any specific conscious state, physical or cognitive ability, and so on. This analysis has been trying to stress that the problem with such a move is primarily ontological and only secondarily political and ethical.

What is most relevant, however, is that in both senses in which aging can be taken to

be a generational experience, it necessarily presupposes the existence of transgenerational relationships as well. The emphasis here is on the necessity of such relationships.

This applies both to primary transgenerationality—observed paradigmatically in the parental relationship—and to secondary transgenerationality—which unfolds at a cultural and societal level (Andina, 2022). By observing transgenerational bonds of cooperation and care, one notices that initially, greater power and responsibility are given to the first generation. Over time, obligations tend to balance out, eventually reversing the relationship of care, weighing more heavily on the second generation (Andina, 2022, pp. 70–73). This is precisely what happens in aging, where the younger generation looks after the elderly, just as the latter had done with them as children. Indeed, without such a structure, it would be difficult to imagine that generations could continue to exist and alternate.

Aging can thus be described as an experience of *generational* time structurally shared in a *transgenerational* sense. Yet, such sharing comes in different modes and degrees.

Intuitively, it is clear that the way a group of older people experience aging is not the same as the way younger people experience the aging of their grandparents. Hence, a further step is needed to consider how transgenerational relationships exist and normatively bind both the elderly and the non-elderly around the experience of aging.

Once again, phenomenology helps clarify the picture. By recovering the axiology of values offered by Scheler (2008; 2009), it is possible to consider different modes of "shared aging" which bring individuals together giving rise to different social wholes.

The most accomplished one is *collective feeling* [*Miteinanderfühlen*]. Here, the shared experience of aging does not amount to the sum of its members' individual experiences and common knowledge thereof (*summative account*) but rather emerges as a "we-mode" (De Vecchi, 2015, p. 93). A married couple aging together over decades is the prime example of this phenomenon, which is also confirmed by recent psychological studies on transactive memory performances (Harris et al., 2022). As it is the most accomplished form of sharing, collective feeling is also the most difficult to realize in a transgenerational sense, due to the qualitative difference of perceived life between generations.

Yet, there are additional modes of shared experience that ideal social ontology tends to disregard. While they are less eidetically accomplished than collective feeling, they can nonetheless originate social wholes and orient a transgenerational culture of aging. In *co-feeling* [*Mitfühlen*], individuals sympathize with others by co-sensing the value that they feel—this occurs in the I-mode. Furthermore, through *refeeling* [*Nachfühlen*], individuals discover empathy as the increased possibility of experiencing values through the ability of others to grasp some that they themselves would not. Lastly, *emotional contagion* [*Ansteckung*] is a pseudo-we-mode where individuals identify with impersonal collective forms, such as masses, that influence their perception of certain values without them being necessarily aware of it (De Vecchi, 2015, pp. 93–94).

This qualitative account of shared aging offers the basis for a theory of social unity that explains the formation of plural subjects in society while also grasping the difference between members' modes of participation, reciprocity, and identification—all of which are crucial to transgenerationality. At the same time, this classification can be used to perform the critical task on power discussed above, as it offers a taxonomy of forms in which discrimination and oppression could operate within transgenerational structures. Indeed, the less personal the mode of sharing, the higher the risk of alienation.

Finally, another relevant outcome is that intersubjective relationships around aging are framed to include non-overlapping generations as well. As aging reveals the structure of lived temporality, subjects can reconcile with the idea of death, against the "emotional contagion" of eternal youth. At the same time, they experience a "surplus" of content and

directionality that transcends the turnover process by which temporal dimensions are filled with content (Scheler, 1957, p. 44). Consequently, the more the experience of aging emerges to consciousness and is shared in the ways mentioned above, the more societies are revealed as transgenerational devices.

In this context, future generations in particular are not called upon to sublimate the condition of finitude experienced in aging into a generalized hope for the future of society. Such an approach would appear as a form of alienation as dangerous as that of age-based oppression, in that it would nullify the personal subjects within the social wholes to which they belong.

The relationship with future generations is not functionalistic in the opposite sense either—justifying care for future generations solely on the premise that they will care for us in old age cannot apply to remote generations. Instead, just as it transcends the spatial limits of individuality all while respecting the boundaries of embodied life, shared aging unveils the horizon of an intrinsically transgenerational time that is nevertheless experienced from within one's own finitude. Once again, openness to the future is intrinsic to the structure of human consciousness, manifesting in society through the anticipation of new generations that will succeed us—i.e., the experience of being "penultimate". Because it is both *personal* and *social,* aging offers reason to explore each act of consciousness as "being *for* a time that would be without me, *for* a time after my time" (Levinas, 2003, p. 27) and outline a theory of intergenerational justice that accords with it (Frisch, 2018).

Hence, investigating aging in a phenomenological sense offers a valuable framework not only for addressing social unity and age‌ based oppression beyond constructivism but also for rethinking the ontological relationship between temporality, sociality, and normativity at a fundamental level. All this, I have argued, substantiates the adoption of a transgenerational perspective in social ontology.

Conclusion

In this article, we have moved on an ontological plane to repropose the phenomenological thesis of temporal existence and draw novel implications for our shared life as increasingly aging societies. By investigating aging and its relevancy to the field of social ontology, we have showed how the structure of temporal existence emerges to the consciousness of the aging person and that—most fruitfully—such experience is intrinsically social. Time captured in its diachronic and lived dimension does not relate to an isolated (and solitary) subject. Instead, it grounds the construction of groups according to different modes of living and aging together. Thus, we have argued for considering aging as a generational experience structurally shared in a transgenerational sense. This is relevant for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it provides insight into peer coalition and intergenerational conflict, offering a conceptual foundation for social conflict, injustice, and oppression as resulting from the struggle for recognition of one's *what-it-is-like-for-me-ness* of perceived time. On the other hand, it bears intrinsic normative value, providing sufficient reason to take charge of transgenerationality at a societal level. These claims encourage the pursuit of a phenomenological and transgenerational social ontology.

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