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PHENOMENOLOGY AND MIND

THE COMING OF AGE: PERSONAL IDENTITY, WELL-BEING, AND JUSTICE IN AN AGEING SOCIETY

Edited by Maria Russo and Alessandro Volpe

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Alessandro Volpe

Exploring Ageing as a Social Fact: Introductory Notes

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EXPLORING AGEING AS A SOCIAL FACT: INTRODUCTORY NOTES[1]

1 We acknowledge funding from Next Generation EU, in the context of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Investment PE8 – Project Age-It: "Ageing Well in an Ageing Society" [DM 1557 11.10.2022]. The views and opinions expressed are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them. This resource was co-financed by the Next Generation EU.

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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 Baccarini 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.

3. Acknowledgements

"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

and 10) funded by the Italian Ministry of the University and Research (MUR) and the European Union within the NextGenerationEU program. The School gathered together all the above-mentioned authors, and it was a great occasion for first discussions on these topics, of which this monographic issue represents the natural scientific outcome.

I would like to express special thanks to the co-editor of this issue, Maria Russo, for her scientific efforts in the selection, collection and review of the contributions. I wish to thank also the Managing Editor of the journal *Phenomenology and Mind*, Francesca Forlè, and the Editor-in-Chief, Francesca De Vecchi, for their lasting support on this journey.

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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SECTION



SECTION 1

ON GENERATIONS AND INTER- AND TRANS-GENERATIONALITY

Tiziana Andina
About the “Chain of Generations”

Alessandro Anzà
The Transgenerational Action of Growing Old Together. Ageism and Future-Maker Generations in Ageing Societies

Valeria Martino
Redesigning Social Groups. Understanding the Young-Elder Divide

Costanza Penna
Shared Aging and Transgenerationality

Jessica Stanier
A Phenomenology of Hesitation, Open-mindedness, and Intergenerational Habitus Formation at Older Age

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ABOUT THE "CHAIN OF GENERATIONS"[1]

abstract

This article takes up the idea of the "chain of generations" formulated by the British philosopher McCormick and has two basic objectives: (a) to offer an examination of the notion in ontology by showing how it is to be understood according to a predominantly metaphorical meaning; (b) to show how the notion of the people, which we propose to replace that of the chain of generations, better serves the purpose, i.e. is more useful for the formulation of an ontology of transgenerationality.

keywords

chain of generations, transgenerationality, future generations, intergenerational justice

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1. The chain of generations

In the context of a renewed interest in the concept of transgenerationality, stimulated above all by the studies of Derek Parfit and the formulation of his "non-identity problem", the concept of the "chain of generations" was used in 2009 by the philosopher Hugh McCormick in the article entitled "Intergenerational Justice and the Non-Reciprocity Problem". The article comments on two specific issues: non-reciprocity between generations, i.e. the fact that not all generations are connected or overlap, and the idea of justice as reciprocity. This idea states that future individuals may not be able to reciprocate the actions they encounter or bear the consequences of those actions. This fact could leave future generations particularly vulnerable and at the mercy of the decisions of those who have gone before them. In examining two specific circumstances, namely the constant overlap of generations and the fact that older people are dependent on younger people for their survival, McCormick is particularly committed to two aspects: He argues that future generations are not asymmetrically endangered by the actions of those who have gone before them because of the generational chain. Consequently, justice as reciprocity is not susceptible to the problem of non-reciprocity.

McCormick's argument can be summarized as follows: Since each generation belongs to the same chain, it follows that each link in the chain is "connected" to all the others on both sides – the one to the past and the one to the future. McCormick is thus advocating the idea that, through a kind of transitivity in which each generation has been related to at least the previous generation and will be related to the following generation – but in reality to several previous and several following generations – all generations are ultimately connected to each other. It is this connection that makes it possible for justice to be exercised as reciprocity. Nevertheless, one thing seems clear: even if we accept the idea of the generational chain as a link, it is obvious that if we compare each generation to a link in the chain, each link only has a direct relationship with the link that precedes it and the one that follows it. While the relationship between the individual link and all the others arises through a kind of mediation or transitive property, this seems to limit the possibilities of genuine reciprocity between the generations.

It seems clear that McCormick is concerned with ensuring the possibility of reciprocity through direct relations. If the direct relationship is possible in some form, then justice remains possible as a form of equalization between the parties.

However, there are aspects of this issue that McCormick has not fully explored and that go beyond the question of justice. We would like to point out that there is one issue that we believe is of central importance when it comes to the question of transgenerational

relationships. It is important to bear in mind that there is no clear form of contiguity between generations in certain types of communal action, which we would call *transgenerational social action*. This may mean that the form of compensation mentioned by McCormick cannot be exercised. For example, if the government of a particular state decides to retire its employees at the age of 41 and add their pensions to general state taxation, then it is clear that the consequence of this decision – which will take the form of a series of measures aimed at enacting this law and keeping it in force for as long as all retirees live – will have consequences that go far beyond the range of relationships available to the generation that made the policy decision. In cases involving long and complex intergenerational co-operation, it becomes difficult to apply the concept of balancing by contiguity proposed by McCormick.

2. Transgenerational social actions

We hypothesize that transgenerational social actions are not necessarily based on the relationship of contiguity between the generations involved in the action. Rather, one could say that they take place on the basis of a conscious decision to perform an action or a series of actions, assuming that these will be completed in the future. It is important to note that the position of temporal contiguity does not guarantee anything.

The case of the so-called Rumor Law, enacted in Italy under the government of Mariano Rumor, is an illustrative example. With this law, which became known as the "baby pension", the state undertook to give younger people the opportunity to retire. One particularly noteworthy aspect was the possibility for women who are married and have children to draw a pension after fourteen years, six months and one day of contributions.

The Government has exercised the power conferred on it by Parliament by Article 6 of Law No. 775 of 28 October 1970, in a manner signed by the Prime Minister in agreement with the Ministers for the Organization of Public Administration, for the Treasury and for the Budget, and has received the opinion of the parliamentary committee referred to in Article 21 of the said law: an opinion adopted by both the majority and the opposition. It should be noted that the law was passed with a broad consensus. Inspired by the trade unions, it was supported by both the majority and the opposition.

This political decision was taken in support of a highly patronizing action in which various sectors of political and civil society agreed to grant a privilege (an old-age pension for citizens in their early thirties) at the expense of public budgets and partly at the expense of the well-being of future generations. A considerable number of people in their early thirties were thus given the opportunity to retire. This had several consequences, including the fact that in many cases the retirement period was more than 40 years. In 2011, the total number of pensioners under the age of 50 reached more than half a million. Of these, 425,000 were INPDAP pensioners, i.e. from the public sector. The total annual cost was considerable and exceeded 9 billion euros.

It is estimated that around 17,000 people retired at the age of 35. These people would have received their pension for an average of just over 40 years. In other words, for a significant number of workers, the period in which they received their pension cheque was quite long. It may be helpful to point out that a study by Confartigianato estimates the total cost to the state at around 150 billion euros. In addition, it seems useful to emphasize at least one other factor: Public sector workers who retired between the ages of 35 and 39 are likely to receive a pension for at least three times as many years of contributions, given a life expectancy of 85 years. It seems reasonable to suggest that those who have retired early may receive a pension that is at least three times the amount they have paid in contributions.

It seems obvious that in cases like this, generational affiliation was not a deterrent. It seems that the decision of the Rumor government and all political parties that supported this measure did not fully take into account the potential impact on the balance of public finances,

e.g. in the form of higher public debt. It is perhaps understandable that the consequences of this measure were not immediately recognizable, as they only came to fruition many years after its adoption. In some cases, there is a kind of latency of the consequences that a particular transgenerational measure entails. If this latency is not adequately taken into account, decisions that could have a negative impact on future generations could be taken without sufficient consideration. For such latency creates a space in which individuals and collectives can be held accountable, which in turn can lead to a lack of effective consequences for their actions. It is therefore clear that generational contiguity is not a sufficient criterion to ensure a good level of transgenerational justice.

It is understandable that the younger generations in the 1970s were not thinking about their parents' pensions or the long-term sustainability of their country's pension system. Similarly, those who would be born decades after this measure was implemented were not yet born and therefore did not have the same concerns. This case illustrates that the concept of transgenerational chain or overlapping generations does not necessarily ensure that transgenerational relations are secured by some checks and balances with regard to the principles of equity. Those who should have avoided taking this undoubtedly unjust measure were the same people who had taken it.

However, the case of the baby pensions still raises an interesting point concerning the sustainability of the Welfare system. We define sustainability as a state of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It would appear that the recipients of the pension cheque were of a relatively young age (generally just over thirty) and had an average long-life expectancy (generally over eighty). The consequences of this situation were twofold. Those who had to bear these pensions over time were in part different people from those who had decided on this measure. In other words, to ensure the long-term sustainability of the measure, it would have been necessary for future generations to make a significant contribution. It is possible that future generations had to contribute to the pension benefits of those who had spent more time out of work than in work. This is a consequence of the measure that has helped to increase the national debt. It is also possible that future generations have had to accept a deterioration in their pension conditions and a general reduction in public spending opportunities. This was essentially an indirect consequence.

Given that younger generations have the opportunity to participate in political representation from the age of majority, and that the cohorts of younger people are less numerous overall than those of middle-aged or older people, it seems plausible that it was not they who may have raised the issue of the sustainability of the measure.

From all this we can tentatively conclude that the metaphor of the generational chain works well on the discursive level, but perhaps less well when we deal with the real problems of transgenerational equilibrium. As we have already said, transgenerational social actions have an interesting structure from an ontological point of view. One could say that these actions presuppose a certain relationship between the different generations. In transgenerational actions, as we have said, there is an actor (or a group of actors) who decides on the transgenerational action and an actor (or a group of actors) who must continue and finally complete the action. It is important to recognize that there is a necessary relationship between the groups of actors in relation to the action. This means that the group of actors who are at some distance in time from those who performed the action may have to co-operate, even if they did not decide to perform the action, in order for the action to be completed, perhaps through a series of related actions. In this case, it seems that co-operation could be a key factor in the success of the action. In the example of baby pensions, had the younger generation not agreed to take on an otherwise significant proportion of this expenditure, and