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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Prologue – An exemplar of "aging well"

Whenever I am asked what it might mean to "age well", I think about my great-aunt Antje. During my adolescent years, I visited her regularly and developed a very special bond with her. After my visits to her, I would feel enriched and privileged, as though she had conveyed some of her special life wisdom to me, even without explicitly giving me advice or telling me what to do. It would have been difficult for me to explain my feelings of deep connection with her, but her influence on my adolescent struggles to create a viable sense of identity for myself was certainly profound. My great-aunt died at the age of 92, quietly in her own home, where I had always known her. Her passing away made me feel like I had lost one of my main anchors in life. Admiration or adoration would perhaps be wrong and exaggerated terms to describe my feelings for her, and yet, to me she represented an invaluable landmark of wisdom and life-experience.

Up to the present day, my great-aunt represents to me a prime example of someone who managed to lead a genuinely good life. Since I only knew her as an old lady, in my mind her living well also naturally extended to being an exemplar of *aging well*. Though I am sure she would resolutely have waved aside any suggestion of her being a moral exemplar, she certainly has been one to me. When I set out on the scholarly journey of exploring the theme of aging well, which has resulted in this philosophical-gerontological study, I realized that my implicit assumptions on what it might mean to age well had to a large extent been informed by my experiences with my great-aunt. What made her so special in this regard? Despite the fact that her life had not been easy in many ways (which I will not elaborate on here), my great-aunt always managed to keep a vital engagement with life. She had clear opinions on what mattered to her, and was never afraid to express them. Her character was that of an introvert, and she once with humor qualified herself socially as a "hermit by nature". Nevertheless, she had gathered a select number of true friends and companions. I suspect they loved being in her presence because they enjoyed her genuine interest in their lives, her sense of humor, her knowledge of literature, and her sometimes unconventional outlook on things. She kept a lively

correspondence with a number of people, in her own very distinguished style of writing, inquiring about their well-being, but also lecturing them on what she perceived as shortcomings: failing to live up to one's principles or commitments, lacking loyalty to certain people or causes where this was required, or trying to influence people's choices in a moralistic or paternalistic manner. The biographical hardships she had survived in her life had made her a very resilient and opinionated woman, who wasn't always easy on herself and on others. With the passing of years, I think she grew milder towards herself, and she maintained an attitude of quiet enjoyment in the little things in her life – observing birds and flowers in her garden, listening to books being read on tape when she could no longer read herself. In the end, I think she had learned the hard way to embrace life as it came, not always happy or thankful or with equanimity, but nevertheless with dedication and out of a sincere wish to make the best of it in her very own way. It was this attitude of humorous and loving self-acceptance, in combination with the vital involvement she maintained with the outside world, even when her mobility shrank due to age-related conditions, that for me embodied her wisdom, resilience and vitality. Looking back, these were the qualities which I strove to nourish myself with during my adolescent visits to her. I think it is also this combination of attitudes and characteristics that in my mind preserves her as an exemplar of aging well.

I started this study with the story about my great-aunt as my own personal exemplar of aging well, because aging well can be identified as the broad underlying concern that connects the themes of aging, self-realization and cultural narratives about later life which are central to this study. Rather than focusing on idiosyncratic stories of aging-well exemplars like my great-aunt, however, this study takes a more abstract and analytical, philosophical perspective on the topic. In this opening chapter, I first briefly introduce the thematic domain this study is engaged with (§1.2), which then leads to a formulation of the problem statement, the objectives aimed at in this study and the central guiding research question (§1.3), and a short elaboration on the chosen approach (§1.4). These sections are followed by a discussion of some terminological issues that require clarification in advance to enable a proper understanding of the perspective that is developed during the main part of this study (§1.5). Finally, the positioning of this study in the fields of gerontology and moral philosophy is briefly considered (§1.6). The chapter concludes with a short preview of the outlook and structuring of the rest of the chapters (§1.7).

1.2 INTRODUCING THE THEMATIC DOMAIN AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This philosophical study about aging well in late modernity departs from two initial observations that are quintessential to understanding the background of its research objectives. The first observation pertains to a lack of satisfactory cultural narratives about later life in late modernity – satisfactory in the sense that they are able to provide individuals with the necessary resources to support a meaningful, positively valued identity as an older individual. The second observation pertains to the dominance of self-realization as a moral ideal in late modernity. Aging in late modernity is thus observed to take place against the background of a cultural ideology that strongly endorses a self-determined life shaped according to one's own choices and value orientation. Below, I will discuss these two observations in turn, working towards the formulation of this study's problem statement in §1.3.

1.2.1 Lack of meaning-generating narratives about later life

"Lacking a culturally viable ideal of old age, our civilization does not really harbor a concept of the whole of life", wrote Erikson (1997, p. 114). This statement suggests that contemporary (Western) culture and society misses something vital, as long as it does not include an ideal of old age that is meaningful and even inspiring. Erikson's terminology of an "ideal" is interesting: apparently, what our culture is missing in relation to old age is an image of *something to strive for*. The term ideal is generally associated with an orientation towards values, which represent a horizon of possibly worthy perspectives to be attained in the future. Thus, Erikson's quote seems to express that our culture lacks attractive, inspirational and meaning-generating values, images and stories that are associated with later life. This implies that for individual persons, aging well is complicated by a lack of viable cultural resources on which to found their identities.

Besides the lack of inspiring and meaning-generating cultural ideals of old age implied by Erikson's observation, several authors in gerontology have expressed worries about the prevalence of negative or adverse cultural imaginaries about later life in our contemporary, Western, late modern culture (Gullette, 1997, 2004, 2011; Cruikshank, 2003; Andrews, 1999, 2012). In particular, these authors reproach the one-sided identification of later life with images and narratives of decline and deterioration. Experiencing later life as meaningful to a satisfactory degree – which is quintessential to aging well, I would contend – will expectedly be further obstructed by such negative cultural associations. This situation has worrying implications for the existential life-reality of aging individuals in late modernity.

The existentialist philosopher De Beauvoir concluded her seminal work *La Vieillesse* with an outcry, a fierce denouncement of the way contemporary society treats its older people. She asked the poignant question: "What should a society be, so that in his last years a man might still be a man?"[1] (De Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 542). Improving the material living conditions of the elderly, she stated, is not sufficient. The fundamental problem is the lack of a culture that provides aging individuals with the interests, roles, and responsibilities that are needed to experience life as meaningful. De Beauvoir's cultural-critical diagnosis that it is fundamentally a lack of meaning that haunts our aging discourses in contemporary society is echoed in the historical analysis of aging in the Western world by Cole in his study *The journey of life. A cultural history of aging in America* (1992). Cole argues that during the course of modernization, Western culture has become devoid of inspiring and visible images about the meaning and purposes of later life. This development results in a growing lack of sensitivity for the moral, existential and spiritual dimensions of later life (Cole, 1992; Cole, Achenbaum & Carlin, 2008). Cole's historical analysis shows how gradually, aging has predominantly become a biomedical health issue, which enforces its association with decline, dependency and nearing death. These associations are all negatively perceived in Western modern culture. As a result, aging tends to evoke anxiety, pity, insecurity, condescension, and a general cultural mechanism of defense.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the cultural neglect of matters of meaning and morality concerning later life seems to be reproduced by the scientific study of aging, which in its turn influences political and policy discussions about dealing with an aging population. We see a strong emphasis on biomedical issues of health, frailty, longevity, et cetera, as well as a focus on the policy measures and political interventions that are required to master the dramatic numerical increase of the global aging population (Phillipson, 2013; Baars, 2006a). By contrast, mainstream gerontology generally tends to leave questions of meaning unanswered (Cole, Achenbaum & Carlin, 2008; Baars, 2012a). This lack of attention for the existential dimension of later life and the questions of meaning associated with it extends towards the political and societal discourse about aging. Cole, Achenbaum and Carlin (2008) argue that consequently, we are facing a profound "uncertainty about the roles, responsibilities, purposes and meanings of old age" in the late modern context (p. 241). Previously existing models of the "life cycle" that offered meaningful frameworks

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1 | Note that this formulation may unjustly raise the impression that De Beauvoir only spoke about older men; however, the whole context makes it clear that her analyses certainly applied to both older men and women alike. The original French citation reads 'Que devrait être une société pour que dans la vieillesse un homme demeure un homme?' (De Beauvoir 1970, 568).

to situate our own lives in a broader intergenerational network of meanings cease to be relevant in late modernity, which has made a shift towards thinking in terms of an individual "life course" instead of an individual-transcending life cycle. This life course is perceived in terms of a "trajectory in which individuals choose their projects and plans" (Cole, Achenbaum & Carlin, 2008, p. 242). Cole, Achenbaum and Carlin also note that transitions in this life course are typically accompanied by *identity-crises*, making the problem of how to uphold a viable, meaningful self-identity central to the lives of late modern individuals.

The potential effects of the observed lack of a culturally viable ideal of old age and the dominance of negative perceptions and expectations about later life in our contemporary culture are severe. For example, internalization of the adverse cultural imaginaries surrounding old age may lead to age-anxiety in individual cases. But the lack of viable cultural ideals of later life and the dominance of negative perceptions also expectedly influences how older people are treated by others, and impact which social roles and positions remain open to them in later life (Bolsenbroek & Laceulle, in press). Moreover, the negative cultural perceptions of later life will expectedly influence how politicians and policymakers act to organize structural societal arrangements, which in turn have a profound impact on the lives of older people.

The problematic cultural dynamics surrounding aging that have been sketched above blur our view when it comes to acknowledging the potential gains of later life, for instance, in terms of personal growth, fulfillment in social relations, or meaning-generating experiences of deepening individuality. These are gains that can be observed in the life narratives of many older people, alongside the inevitable confrontation with the fragility of the human condition. Many of us know individual exemplars of aging well in our personal social circles. These are people like my great-aunt, who manage to live a vital, morally engaged life while integrating the hardships they suffer in their lives in a meaningful way. But the idea that old age may also be an enriching phase of life with potential for growth and development, that it can have a moral and spiritual value of its own, does not seem to extend itself in any convincing way to the late modern dominant cultural discourses on aging and later life.

1.2.2 Aging in an era of self-realization

Individuals living in late modern circumstances are facing a cultural context in which a self-determined, self-directed, self-chosen biography has become a dominant moral ideal. The somewhat enigmatical expression "becoming who you are", can be seen as exemplary for what underlies this moral ideal: developing an authentic, self-appropriated "life of one's own", in which we continuously keep developing ourselves towards more optimal self-fulfillment. Becoming who you are is seen as quintessential to navigating important life choices

and dilemmas in an era where previously existing, traditional sources of moral authority are increasingly eroding and the responsibility for deciding what a morally good life is increasingly rests on the individual (C. Taylor, 1991; Ferrara, 1993, 1998). The philosophical discourse that underlies this line of thinking is taken up in this study under the heading of self-realization.

Self-realization, sometimes alternatively termed self-fulfillment or self-actualization, is a complex concept with a long and rich history in Western philosophy. However, in late modernity the concept of self-realization seems to have acquired a specific and increased importance. Due to the complex interaction of processes of individualization, de-traditionalization and globalization, the individual person is increasingly regarded as a prime source of morality and meaning in the late modern world (C. Taylor, 1989, 1991; Giddens, 1991). Consequently, in the quest for a good life that is experienced as meaningful, realizing one's own deepest aspirations and best capacities has become an almost inescapable call for the late modern individual. In spite of the unfathomable complexity and obvious uncertainty of the world in which we live, we are stimulated to perceive ourselves as moral agents capable of making important choices and decisions regarding what truly matters to us in life. As a result, self-realization has acquired a new urgency and a specific status as a guiding moral ideal in the late modern era. As Gewirth (1998) observes, "The ideal's prominence has waxed and waned at various periods of human history; but the present age has taken it up anew as a prime object of human striving, as a value that gives zest and meaning to the lives of the persons who adopt it as a central aim of their activities and aspirations" (p. ix).

The late modern individualistic exaltation of a life of one's own that has been analyzed by sociological thinkers like Giddens (1991), Beck (1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and Bauman (2001, 2007, 2008), is typical for the pervasiveness of self-realization as a moral ideal in the contemporary world. These thinkers argue that in a post-traditional context where previously self-evident sources of identity have been eroded, the responsibility for leading a good life in terms of meaning and morality has increasingly been delegated to the individual agent. C. Taylor (1989, 2007) provides historical and philosophical background for this observation, sketching how during the process of modernization, the dominant cultural perception of the human being transformed from being a particle in an ordered cosmic universe transcending the scope of influence of the individual, to being an autonomous agent with the ability to control and master the external world. Although the late modern discourse of an authentic, self-determined life is highly influential and dominant as a moral ideal, it is important to note that there exists a considerable gap between the ideology of individual choice and self-direction, and the empirical reality as it is experienced by many people, who see their opportunities for choosing impeded or blocked by the oppressive force

of structural arrangements, or by adverse socio-economic conditions (Baars, 2006a).

It is striking to note that self-realization, observed above to be one of the most dominant moral ideals of our times, revolves precisely around the notion of self-development and personal growth that is disregarded in cultural discourses about aging and later life. Apparently, this moral ideal is not regarded as an obvious or viable conceptualization of the good life for aging individuals. The predominantly negative and problematic cultural positioning of aging and later life, as discussed above (see §1.2.1), leads to the rather unsettling conclusion that the aging population seems to be excluded from participation in the dominant moral ideal of self-realization, especially once aging individuals become vulnerable and dependent.

Yet, given the shortcomings of existing cultural perceptions of later life, we might ask whether the self-realization discourse isn't an especially promising candidate to support a transformation of the problematically gloomy and less than inspiring cultural profiling of aging. Couldn't the late modern moral vocabulary of self-realization be translated to the context of aging in such a way that the negative cultural perception of old age is nuanced or refuted? Can the concept of self-realization provide a viable resource for cultural images and stories about later life that infuses this phase with the sense of meaning that seems to be problematically absent in its existing late modern cultural narratives?

On the one hand, this seems an exciting possibility worth investigating. After all, it would provide access to an influential ideal of the good life for aging individuals. Introducing self-realization to the aging discourse as a potential resource for challenging problematic cultural profiling of old age could then contribute to a welcome improvement and expansion of aging people's access to common goods and valued roles in late modern societies. On the other hand, serious doubts may be raised when pondering the application of the self-realization discourse to the context of aging and later life. For how does the typical late modern discourse on self-realization, with its emphasis on autonomous choice and authentic fulfillment of one's aspirations and capacities, relate to the existential reality of aging, in particular the fundamental fragility of the human condition and the growing vulnerability one is confronted with in later life? Even if we reject the one-sided cultural identification of aging with decline (Gullette, 1997, 2004), the fact remains that aging, for many if not all individuals, means a radical confrontation with the vulnerabilities that are generally intrinsic to the human condition, for instance through an increase in physical, mental and social frailty. In fact, the contemporary self-realization discourse may even complicate finding a satisfactory relation to these biographical encounters with existential vulnerability, because it implicitly relies on a typical late modern ideology of self-mastery and independence, which tends to

denigrate decline and decay. As Cole, Achenbaum and Carlin (2008) observe, "Rather than acknowledge these harsh realities, we [modern individuals] pretend that we can master them, and we feel like failures when we do not, hence the elevation of physical functioning to the criteria of successful aging and the virulent fear and denial of frailty and dependency" (p. 247).

Despite these difficulties regarding the application of the self-realization discourse to the context of aging however, it is important to emphasize that the impact of the moral ideal of self-realization is probably felt in some form in the life-reality of *all* individuals in late modern society, including aging people. The ideal is expressed implicitly in many cultural artifacts, ranging from films and literature to advertising and newspaper articles. Moreover, it seems reasonable to expect that the influence of the self-realization discourse upon the life course of aging individuals will increase in the 21st century, when the generations raised with the moral appeal of an authentic, self-determined life grow older. This further stresses the relevance of an exploration of the value of self-realization discourse in the context of aging – and in particular its potential value in the context of aging *well*.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study departs from two premises drawn from the sociological, philosophical and cultural gerontological observations briefly introduced above: 1) that people nowadays live their lives in a late modern context that celebrates (a certain interpretation of) self-realization as a guiding moral ideal, and 2) that this late modern context lacks satisfactory cultural imaginaries about aging and later life, a lack which complicates experiencing this life phase as meaningful. The study aims at answering the question whether the philosophical discourse of self-realization, that plays such a dominant role in late modern ideals of a good life, might be reframed in such a way that it can serve as a resource for cultural counter narratives about later life, forming a viable alternative for contemporary stereotyping and marginalizing cultural master narratives about aging. At the same time, this study wants to acknowledge the possible questions and doubts that can be raised by an attempt to suggest self-realization discourse as a viable meaning framework for aging well. This leads to the following formulation of research objectives and guiding research question.

The general aim of this study is to make a philosophical contribution to gerontology that concerns cultural and individual meanings of later life, thereby providing reflections on what it might mean to "age well". More specifically, this study targets the following objectives:

- To remedy the observed lack of inspiring cultural narratives about aging and later life in the context of late modernity, by suggesting an *alternative set of cultural narratives* drawing on philosophical resources associated with the self-realization discourse
- To formulate a *reframed account of self-realization*, that enables us to criticize the shortcomings of the late modern self-realization discourse when applied to the context of aging
- To contribute a philosophical perspective on the opportunities for older people in our society to successfully practice their potential for *moral agency* (conceived in this study as the purpose of self-realization), as well as offer a reflection on how these opportunities for practicing moral agency may be enhanced

In light of these objectives, this study aims to answer, as its central guiding question, whether the late modern discourse of self-realization can be reframed in such a way that it can serve as a resource for meaning-generating cultural narratives about later life in late modern circumstances.

1.4 A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

In order to address the guiding questions and objectives stated above, the rich philosophical tradition of self-realization will be probed for relevant sources that can contribute to the reframing objective of this study. As such, this study strives to be a contribution to aging studies from a primarily philosophical perspective. Despite its philosophical orientation however, this study is not a purely philosophical project, since it also uses insights and literature from gerontological, sociological and psychological origin. The acquired insights are drawn together in an attempt to arrive at a new synthesis that hopefully contributes to the purpose of reframing the self-realization discourse from the viewpoint of aging.

My approach to this inquiry is a *hermeneutic* one, which implies that I aim to engage in a "dialogue" with the studied texts, adjusting and refining my own intuitions in the process. Generally speaking, philosophical hermeneutics arose as an attempt to provide an epistemological basis for the humanities that differed from the objectivistic take on scientific truth that is characteristic of the natural sciences - an objectivistic and naturalistic approach that the social sciences have traditionally tried to peer with. By contrast, the hermeneutic approach presents an intersubjective, dialogical perspective on truth that aims to offer a viable alternative scientific approach escaping the charges of both subjectivism and relativism (Gadamer, 1989). Thus, the hermeneutic perspective rejects the more "positivistic" approaches to scientific research. Reality is

not out there to be studied as it is, because how it "is" is always perceived as a matter of interpretation. Moreover, the hermeneutic perspective principally acknowledges the possibility of multiple, equally valid interpretations of the same reality.

Specific to the hermeneutic approach is its emphasis on the situatedness of the researcher, whose prejudgments play a dominant role in the process of knowledge seeking. Knowledge and understanding are themselves perceived as situated, emerging from an intersubjective, dialogical practice between researchers and the "texts" (in the broadest possible sense) they study. I can only understand a reality from the perspective of my own situation, but I can alter my understanding by dialogically engaging with other interpretations and standpoints of the situation. Qualifying this study as a hermeneutic philosophical inquiry implies that I am not aiming to develop any final perspective or ultimate reality-claim regarding the theme of aging, self-realization and cultural narratives about later life. Instead, I aim to engage with the works of relevant philosophical and other thinkers in a dialogical way, confronting their work with my own initial ideas about the matter. Through this hermeneutic effort, I aim to provide an account of my research themes that in itself is open to continuing hermeneutic dialogue with other possible perspectives.

The openness and exploratory hermeneutic character of this study notwithstanding, it is important to emphasize that my approach also implies a normative philosophical engagement. In part, this engagement naturally follows from my own situatedness as a researcher/philosopher, which has equipped me with a horizon of certain intuitions, ideas, biases, preferences and the like. Thus, the fact that my personal normative engagement with the good of older people has informed my research project from the start is consistent with the chosen hermeneutic approach. Consequently, being trained as a humanistic thinker, I have inevitably been framing my research project from a humanistic inspiration that strives to advance a better, more humane existence for older people in our contemporary society. My study's underlying concern with aging *well* implies a certain advance preconception of the good, which precludes taking a neutral view to the issues of relevance to the research question. As will become clear, many of the theoretical positions I take are ultimately informed by this normative humanistic engagement.

I am aware that in some circles, taking such a normative position raises fundamental philosophical problems, for it can be seen as undesirable paternalism to prefer and advance a certain understanding of the good life over others. My standpoint on this issue is further addressed later on in this study. Here, it is important to point out that in my view, philosophical and scientific work always, to some extent, is and should be informed by the value orientation of the researcher in question. Rather than trying to bracket or exclude this value orientation from my work, my aspiration has been to put it to good

use in this study. It is my contention that, as long as it is thoroughly reflected upon, my normative philosophical orientation sensitizes my thinking about the themes of this study. The normative philosophical engagement of this study should thus, in my opinion, be perceived as a potentially valuable addition to the hermeneutic understanding of what it might mean to age well, rather than a troublesome obstacle to scientific quality.

1.5 SOME TERMINOLOGICAL ISSUES

This chapter started with the claim that the broad overarching theme of this study should be sought in the question what it might mean to age well. This terminology suggests that I am concerned with aging in a specific interpretation, which deviates from the biomedical, psychological and sociological approaches that play such a dominant role in the mainstream gerontological discourse. The perspective on aging that I develop focuses on its (experienced) meaning, both on the idiographic level of the individual agent's life and on the socio-cultural level. Baars (2006b, 2012a) provides a distinction between three different discourses concerned with aging that help clarify and illustrate the main focus of this study. First, there exists a discourse regarding *senescence*, i.e., the physical and biomedical aspects of aging. Second, there is a discourse regarding *older people as a social category*, focusing exclusively on the societal and economic effects of a growing population of older people, and the possibilities to manage these effects through (government) policies. Third, there is a discourse regarding *aging as a social-existential process of living in time*. This discourse focuses on questions of meaning and existential experiences of aging. According to Baars, the scientific and societal debate surrounding aging is dominated by the first two discourses, at the expense of the third one. By contrast, this study specifically aims to contribute to the third discourse.

Although the terms *aging*, *existential dimension* and *meaning* are applied frequently throughout this study, they are not explicitly conceptualized in the main argument. Since it is important to have a general idea of how these themes are understood in the context of this study, some consideration is given to them below.

Aging
In societal and scientific discourse, aging is usually assumed to present a phenomenon taking place during a specific phase or stage of life, with specific characteristics. One of the problems with this approach, however, is that the starting point of the phase or stage of aging is rather obscure and arbitrarily coupled to a certain chronological age, for example 65 or 70. Baars (2012b) insightfully argues that this identification of aging with the fact that one has

reached a certain chronological age is problematically one-sided, and therefore of limited use if we want to understand individual existential experiences of aging and the dimensions of meaning connected with it.

An alternative classifying criterion suggested by Baars (2006b) is the statement that people enter the phase of aging at the moment society (or culture) starts positioning them in terms of categories associated with old(er) age. This emphasizes the fact that aging is a socially constituted process (Baars, 1991). This social constitution of aging can be illustrated by the fact that during the course of Western history, different groups of people have been defined by culture or society as "old" at variable ages, depending on such divergent factors as gender, social class, (re)productive capacities or appearance. Thane (2010) further distinguishes three criteria along which people are socially constituted as "aged" or "aging": the chronological, the functional and the cultural. The chronological criterion is based upon people's calendar age. The functional criterion describes people as old depending on their capacity to perform certain tasks. The cultural criterion, however, classifies an individual as old according to the prevailing images and norms in certain cultural contexts, thereby implicitly expressing this culture's value orientation. It is this cultural criterion applied in the social constitution of aging which seems to be most usefully applicable to the understanding of aging in the current study.

This study thus interprets aging as a socio-culturally constituted process of living in time. In accordance with its orientation to Baars' (2006b, 2012a) third discourse, this study also explicitly perceives aging well to be concerned with the existential dimension of life, rather than with biological senescence or social status. It is important to realize however, that health issues, financial matters like pensions or insurance, and care arrangements at the micro-level of individual human lives also have an impact on experienced meaning. The meaning of later life thus cannot be interpreted as solely an individual existential matter. Meaning has the propensity for touching multiple dimensions, and it permeates questions situated at macro-, meso-, as well as micro-levels.

Existential dimension

In its most general sense, the existential dimension of life pertains to the basic human experience of "being-in-the-world". It relates to those elements of our lives that intrinsically belong to the human condition, such as our sociality, our vulnerability and finitude, our embodiment, and our inclination to strive for transcendence and meaning in our lives. Existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard (1843/1959), Heidegger (1927/1996) and Sartre (1956, 1948) have emphasized that people are "thrown" into a world without an inherent meaningful order, while at the same time, they have an incurable longing for experiencing life as coherent and meaningful. Since the world as such does not provide such coherence and meaning, people are destined to constantly search and create

their own order, thereby taking agential responsibility for their own lives. Ultimately, the existentialists believe that people's freedom and well-being depends on their ability to relate to the different domains of reality of the human condition in an *authentic* way.

Van Deurzen (2002), an existentialist psychotherapist, presents the existential dimension of life in a four-dimensional model, applicable to the context of counseling. Her model has the advantage that it translates the rather abstract views of existentialist philosophers about the human condition to the concrete reality of human lives. In this sense, it may help us understand what is entailed when speaking about the existential dimension of aging, an attempt undertaken in this study. Each domain distinguished in Van Deurzen's model provides us with opportunities, challenges and tensions in our striving for self-realization. Further, each domain has its own basic ideals and purposes that are strived for, but also its own threats, which have to be overcome in a viable way. It is in confrontation with these threats that people typically experience what in this study is termed "existential vulnerability".

The *physical* domain concerns our own bodily existence, as well as the material world around us. Applied to the context of aging, age-related ailments such as loss of hearing, sight, or mobility may confront us with the physical domain of the existential dimension of our lives.

The *social* domain concerns our relationships with other people, which are situated in a public domain determined by cultural norms, social conventions and power relations that influence and co-determine people's interdependent existence. Applied to the context of aging, this element of the existential dimension may show itself in loneliness due to the death of significant others like spouses or friends, or in finding a mode of relating to the growing dependence on one's caregivers, or also in deepening contacts with children and grandchildren.

The *personal* domain concerns our relationship with ourselves, situated in an inner realm of self-reflexivity and self-knowledge. Applied to the context of aging, the personal domain of the existential dimension of our lives relates to the deepening biographical uniqueness of human life, and may show itself when we reflect on our own finitude, or look back on our lives to see what we have become (Baars, 2016).

Finally, the *spiritual* or *transcendent* domain concerns the ideals, values and convictions that guide our life choices. Importantly, this transcendence need not be interpreted in a traditional religious sense, but may also pertain to our identification with guiding moral ideals or values that we believe are worth striving for. Applied to the context of aging, this domain of the existential dimension may show itself when we evaluate the purposes we have strived for in life and consider which purposes we still want to achieve, or when we contemplate what contribution we have made to the realization of those ideals and goals that

we perceive as highly important. In the context of self-realization, the transcendent domain has heightened relevance, since self-realization presupposes, as we will see in this study, the ability to form a moral orientation and identify with ethical aims that are of utmost value to us. Existential vulnerability in the transcendent domain perhaps most deeply interferes with the striving for self-realization, because it shows itself in feelings of meaninglessness, stagnation or withdrawal from life.

In sum, this study's interpretation of the existential dimension of life involves those elements and experiences that either enable or impede our realization of a satisfactory relation to the physical, social, personal and spiritual/transcendent dimensions of life. According to my argument, what is considered satisfactory is decided by the opportunities that this relation offers for people to lead *a good life with and for others, in accordance with their deepest aspirations and best capacities, as full participating members of society,* the formulation used in this study to describe moral agency (see §5.5). Which purposes people aspire to, and which goals and values they regard as meaningful, may differ significantly depending on the situation, character disposition, social context and orientation of the individual, however. This underscores the moral importance of individual uniqueness and diversity that is a principal assumption of the self-realization discourse.

Meaning

In a number of ways, the philosophical argument of this study relies on ideas and assumptions about the importance, indeed, the existential necessity, of experiencing a certain degree of meaning in life in order to perceive one's life as good (which is presupposed by the engagement with aging well). Drawing from its humanistic inspiration, this study also implicitly assumes the need to enhance the socio-cultural circumstances of people to contribute to their optimal realization of a meaningful life, and to alleviate the circumstances that threaten to result in feelings of meaninglessness. Yet, what is understood by meaning is not explicitly conceptualized in the main argument, which necessitates paying some attention to it here.

First of all, this study is concerned with people's subjective experiences of meaning. These experiences of meaning *in* life should thereby be distinguished from metaphysical philosophical or theological discussions about the objective meaning *of* life. But what is required in order to experience this meaning in life? Psychological approaches mention several aspects that need to be present to some degree if people are to experience meaning in their lives. Examples of needs suggested by these approaches include a sense of purpose in life, efficacy or feeling "in control", self-worth, moral worth, comprehensibility, connectedness, and transcendence (Baumeister, 1991; Derkx, 2011; Smaling & Alma, 2009). It remains unclear whether high scores on one need could com-

pensate for lower scores on other needs, or whether all needs have to be fulfilled equally in order to experience one's life as meaningful (which would of course significantly reduce the possibility of experiencing meaning).

Although such approaches based on psychological needs certainly are interesting and relevant attempts to provide a description of what underlies the experience of meaning, they have a rather functionalist orientation that relates problematically to the hermeneutic approach of this study. From a hermeneutic point of view, it seems too simplistic to reduce the experience of meaning to a quantitative addition of individual psychological needs for meaning that have been satisfactorily met, as Baumeister (1991) in particular, seems to suggest. For instance, approaches of meaning based on the presence or absence of fulfillment of individual psychological needs seem insufficiently able to address the influence that the socio-cultural position of people can have on the purposes that they are (or are not) able to formulate for themselves, or on their self-worth. Similarly, the psychological accounts make it hard to draw connections between questions of meaning and issues of social structure (Baars & Phillipson, 2013). It remains unclear, for instance, how culturally and historically specific the suggested sets of needs are, and what the structural impediments are to fulfilling them. A viable approach to questions of meaning should therefore at least be complemented with a view of how the fulfillment of these needs is socio-culturally mediated, and which concrete conditions need to be present in order for people to answer their needs for meaning.

In accordance with the description of the existential dimension given above, this study therefore chooses to present meaning not in terms of a predefined set of needs, but as a dynamic property of experience that emerges when people succeed in finding a satisfactory relation towards the physical, social, personal and transcendent domains of life. In this account, what is experienced as meaningful interacts with both the fundamental embodied nature of human existence and the fundamental socio-cultural constitution of identity. Meaning is perceived as an experience rooted in and flowing from the dynamic, relational way in which we strive for the ideals and the good at stake in each of the existential domains, while trying to find a way to overcome threats and challenges impeding our realization of those ideals. In this view, experiencing meaning in life requires existential work aimed at constantly (re)finding balance between purposes and threats in all four domains of the existential dimension. This work may, for instance, take the form of inner reflection, dialogues with other people, or actions that make a difference in society. In a sense, we might say that this existential work required to experience meaning in one's life is exactly what underlies people's striving for self-realization.

1.6 POSITIONING THE STUDY IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL
AND GERONTOLOGICAL FIELD

As indicated before, this study intends to make a philosophical contribution to the field of gerontology. Although its emphasis is on philosophical perspectives, insights from other disciplines, notably gerontology, are integrated in the argument. Given the multiplicity of existing approaches both in moral philosophy and in gerontology, however, it is clarifying to provide some explication of the positioning of this study in these fields.

1.6.1 Positioning in moral philosophy

In its broadest formulation, this study is concerned with the theme of aging well. Since I have defined aging as a socio-culturally constituted, existential process of living in time, aging well can be seen as a specification of living well. The ancient moral-philosophical question what it means to lead a good life is thus implicated by the research interest in this study. This interest already presupposes a certain interpretation of ethics and its central concerns, which is important to explicate here.

When situating self-realization in the moral philosophical debate, it is clarifying to introduce a distinction between two types of approaches. The *teleological* approaches to moral philosophy presuppose a substantive account of what it means to live a good life and to be a good person. The *deontological, consequentialist* or *procedural* interpretations of ethics, on the other hand, focus on rules and principles for acting in the (morally) right way. Teleological approaches assume that human beings strive for a certain purpose (telos) in their lives, which can either be seen as flowing from a cosmically given, meaningfully ordered plan (as in traditional Aristotelian virtue ethics, for instance), or as flowing from the self-appropriated value orientation of the individual (as is implied by contemporary forms of authenticity-ethics, for instance). By contrast, in deontological approaches to moral philosophy, the focus is on moral duties derived from following the moral authority of one's good will (as in traditional Kantian ethics). Alternatively, consequentialist approaches also qualify as procedural interpretations of ethics, such as utilitarianism, which measures the moral legitimacy of actions on the grounds of their contribution to the maximization of good. In both cases, the focus lies on the formulation of universally applicable, formal ethical rules and principles that are intended to distinguish between right and wrong courses of action.

It will come as no surprise that this study takes the standpoint that the most basic concern of moral philosophy is the question how we should lead a good life, and not the formulation of binding universal principles or guidelines for moral action. After all, this position is implied by the most fundamental

assumptions that underlie all versions of the self-realization discourse. Self-realization, as observed later in this study, is basically about making the best of oneself that is possible given one's circumstances and capacities. This orientation towards moral self-development already presumes a teleological orientation, since self-realization aims at an ideal purpose (becoming who you are, realizing the best in you, et cetera) to be reached somewhere in the future. On the other hand, the account of self-realization that this study advances shows a significant focus on the importance of translating one's identity-constituting teleological orientation into action, by granting a central role to the concept of moral agency. Thus, while this study's main affinity is with substantive and teleological, rather than procedural, approaches to moral philosophy, and it certainly does not aim to come up with universal moral rules or principles, it does acknowledge the relevance of paying ethical attention to acting in a morally right way. However, this attention should always be embedded in the overarching ethical concern with the question what it means to lead a good life (Ricoeur, 1992; see also §5.4).

In addition, the argument developed in this study sympathizes with those approaches in moral philosophy that take the context and situatedness of human beings into account, rather than developing a strictly theoretical abstract understanding of morality that is detached from the reality of people's daily struggle to function as moral agents. In this sense, the study should be positioned in the realm of what M. Walker (2007) has called the *expressive-collaborative* understanding of morality, which is presented as the opposite of so-called *theoretical-juridical* models (p. 7-14). Importantly, the expressive-collaborative view perceives morality as something that emerges and is continuously transformed in the context of human moral practices. A similar position on ethics and morality is defended in the reframed account of self-realization that this study develops.

1.6.2 Positioning in gerontology

Gerontology is the scientific study of aging in all its facets. Consequently, many disciplines co-exist in gerontology, with corresponding and sometimes conflicting perspectives on reality and very different approaches to acquiring knowledge. The third edition of the *Handbook of theories of aging* (Bengtson & Settersten, 2016) gives a variety of scientific perspectives on aging, ranging across biological, psychological, social-scientific, practice and transdisciplinary perspectives. Note that humanistic perspectives are rather underrepresented in this overview. In the diverse realm of perspectives making up the field of gerontology, this study can best be situated in the field of *cultural and critical gerontology*.

According to Twigg and Martin (2015a), the field of cultural gerontology that has emerged in recent decades particularly focuses on four themes: 1) sub-

jectivity and identity, 2) the body and embodiment, 3) representation and the visual, and 4) time and space. Cultural gerontology aims to "produce a fuller and richer account of later years [...] one that places the subjectivity of older people, the width and depths of their lives, at the forefront of analysis" (Twigg & Martin, 2015b, p. 2). This quote underscores the affinity between cultural gerontology and the perspective advanced in this study, which focuses on aging well, and thus on matters of meaning and morality, on those things people regard to be of fundamental importance in their lives. Cultural gerontology can be seen as the representative of a broader "cultural turn" in aging studies (Twigg & Martin, 2015a). This cultural turn has both an epistemological side, which is based on poststructuralist theories and focuses on the many ways in which culture is constitutive of our identities and our social relations, and a historico-social side, which asserts that certain societal developments have made the constitutive role of culture in our identities and social relations much more prominent compared to earlier eras of history. Importantly, Twigg and Martin (2015b) state that the most distinguishing feature of cultural gerontology is its concern with meaning. In this sense, cultural gerontology is representative of the third discourse on aging distinguished by Baars (2006b, 2012a; see §1.5), which concerns itself with aging as a social-existential process, in contrast with the discourse on biological senescence and the discourse on old age as a societal issue, raising political and policy questions. The general concern with meaning presupposes a relatively large input from the humanities, which further underscores the importance of the cultural-gerontological perspective for the current, philosophically oriented study.

For the purposes of this study on self-realization and aging, cultural gerontology's occupation with the theme of subjectivity and identity in relation to its broader focus on meaning is of course the most important, although the other themes distinguished by Twigg and Martin (2015a) also have relevance. The focus on subjectivity and identity implies a shift of attention towards matters of agency, and away from dominant approaches in critical gerontology that tend to focus on social structures and the way they influence the life-reality of aging people (Phillipson, 1998, 2013; Baars et al., 2006). However, although the current study is best positioned in the cultural-gerontological field, critical gerontology has influenced the argument in this study as well. The awareness raised by critical gerontology about the impact of societal scripts and structures on people's agency is indispensable for developing an understanding of self-realization that is not naïve about people's room for maneuver in formulating their own aspirations and value orientation in the complex and dynamic context of a late modern world.

Another reason to position the current study primarily in the realm of cultural gerontology is the fact that cultural gerontology (together with aging studies which seems to be its natural ally) brings into high relief the socio-cultural

constitution of aging that is also assumed in this study. Cultural gerontology and aging studies have undertaken important work in recent decades to illustrate how aging is in fact not the value-free biological category connected with our chronological age upon which societal policy seems to be based, but a deeply normative, culturally influenced and socially constituted life process. We are being "aged by culture", to use Gullette's (2004) words. As embodied, socially constituted and "cultured" creatures, we have internalized dominant cultural imaginaries about old age, which necessarily shape the expectations we hold regarding our own later lives, and the opportunities we perceive ourselves as having (Andrews, 2012). When these dominant cultural imaginaries are predominantly negative and based on assumptions of decline, it creates problems for experiencing later life as a meaningful and integral phase of our life, with the potential for development, progress or "becoming" (Gullette, 2004, 2011).

It is important to note, however, that this study does not share the strong social constructionist position that is taken by some representatives of aging studies such as Gullette (2004, 2011, 2017). Socio-cultural constitution is perceived as a fundamental, but not the only influence that shapes our identity. Principally, a study about self-realization should always account for the important role played by people's individual agency, which enables them to relate to the ways in which they are socially and culturally positioned. Also, the role of our embodiment should be taken into account. Consequently, though this study shares the cultural gerontological view that our identity is fundamentally socio-culturally constituted, this social identity should always be perceived as formed in "an ongoing tri-partite relationship between social environment, human agency and the body" (Hockey & James, 2003, p. 135). Despite the pervasiveness and the often stereotypical character of cultural images, there is a remarkable amount of diversity in the way these images mark people's existence and identity (Meyers, 2002). Importantly, it is in this individual diversity and the assumed capacity of individual moral agency to resist its own socio-cultural positioning that the seeds for the desired transformation of oppressive, marginalizing or stereotypical cultural narratives can be found.

1.7 Chapter outlines

This study is organized along the following complex set of argumentative steps: clarifying the background assumptions and concepts central to this study; providing argumentative underpinnings for the claims that are assumed in the guiding questions and objectives of this study (regarding the shortcomings of cultural narratives about aging and the shortcomings of the late modern self-realization discourse); and formulating a viable substantiation of the alternative set of cultural narratives this study suggests, as well as of the reframed

interpretation of self-realization that such counter narratives can draw upon. A brief outline of the individual chapters follows below.

Chapter 2 gives an analytical sketch of the specific features of the late modern world that impact the life-reality of aging people in multiple ways. Drawing on both sociological and philosophical sources, it is argued that late modernity harbors a specific interpretation of self-realization that serves as one of its most dominant moral ideals – ideas about what it means to lead a good life. The typical features of this late modern interpretation of self-realization are summarized, and some problems that arise when this interpretation is applied to the context of aging are discussed.

In *chapter 3*, a theory about cultural narratives and their function in identity is introduced. It is argued that in the case of identity-damage by marginalizing, oppressive or stereotyping cultural master narratives, cultural counter narratives are called for that enable people to restore their opportunities to exercise moral agency. Next, the discussed theory about cultural narratives is applied to the context of aging. Cultural gerontological discourse is probed to arrive at a categorization of two dominant contemporary cultural narratives about later life: decline narratives and age-defying narratives, which are then critically analyzed. Finally, a tentative outline of a new set of cultural counter narratives about aging and later life is suggested, called "narratives of becoming". This alternative set of narratives is introduced as an opportunity to remedy the suggested shortcomings of existing cultural narratives about aging and later life. The rest of the study is then dedicated to the question whether a reframed account of self-realization can be developed that might function as a resource for these narratives of becoming about aging and later life.

Chapter 4 sets out to formulate a broad philosophical understanding of self-realization, which is presented as a process of moral self-development in which people strive to become who they are by realizing their deepest aspirations and highest capacities. After an explication of the purpose, the underlying self-concept, the practice and the timing of self-realization, a short historical catalogue of philosophical accounts is discussed about what constitutes the "best" in human beings, which is at stake in self-realization. Overviewing the variety of philosophical accounts, it is proposed that the fabric of self-realization discourse is built of three interwoven threads: autonomy, authenticity and virtue, all of which need to be considered and reframed to answer the objectives in this study. The chapter concludes with a reflection on two potentially problematic issues that may arise when applying self-realization to the context of aging: the fact that one's future time-perspective is shrinking, and the fact that one is increasingly radically confronted with existential vulnerability in later life.

Before proceeding to a more detailed consideration of the three constitutive threads of self-realization identified in chapter 4, *chapter 5* will first consider in more detail which understanding of identity matches the reframed understand-

ing of self-realization advanced in this study. I will argue that for several reasons, a narrative view of identity is most suited to the purposes of this study. One of the most important reasons for this preference is that the narrative interpretations of identity that are discussed provide the opportunity to illustrate the intrinsic connection between our identity and our moral orientation. This connection is vital to the reframed interpretation of self-realization developed in this study, the purpose of which is formulated in terms of an optimization of moral agency. Chapter 5 therefore concludes by explicating this study's account of moral agency, which forms a central link between the discussed theory about cultural narratives and identity, and the suggested reframed account of self-realization.

Chapter 6 explores the first constitutive thread of self-realization, namely, autonomy. First, a selection of relevant philosophical interpretations of this concept are discussed and evaluated in light of the aims of the current study. Then, it is discussed how gerontological discourse has so far included the concept of autonomy in its reflections about aging. Finally, based on the discussion of the strengths and shortcomings of existing views of autonomy, an alternative interpretation of this constitutive thread of self-realization is proposed, that can contribute to the objective of reframing self-realization for its application to the context of aging.

Chapter 7 discusses the second constitutive thread that weaves self-realization discourse, namely, authenticity, while *chapter 8* focuses on the third constitutive thread, namely, virtue. Both chapters follow the same structure as the discussion of autonomy in chapter 6: first an overview and evaluation of a selection of relevant philosophical accounts, then a consideration of the way the thread has been applied in gerontological discourse so far, and finally a proposal for a reframed interpretation of the concerned thread.

In the concluding *chapter 9*, the overall argument of the study is shortly recapitulated in order to formulate an answer to the guiding research question. This is followed by a consideration of some relevant objections that can be made towards the self-realization discourse in general, and a discussion of their possible refutation by the account proposed in this study. Finally, some suggestions for further research are formulated, and the study draws to a close with an epilogue covering some personal reflections on the value of self-realization.