A theoretical exploration of changing perspectives on the meaning of later life

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*English is not my mother tongue, so please accept my excuses for the rather awkward formulations in this text.*

It was my honour to chair, during two years, a study circle on ’Philosophical perspectives on life history and old age’. The participants in the study circle were volunteer executives of the Katholieke Bond voor Ouderen, a large roman-catholic organization of older adults in The Netherlands. We read authors like Nietzsche, De Beauvoir, Guardini and Butler. In this presentation I will try to give you an idea of our final conclusions. But, to be sure, it is my personal articulation of these conclusions. Of course, any other member of the study circle would give at least a slightly different report of our discussions.

Our point of departure was the question what underlying reasons older adults could have for active participation in society after retirement from their job and having raised their children. We expected from the beginning that in the philosophical literature there would be quite different and even contradictory answers to this ’social participation’ question. So in the first year we tried to map the main tendencies, currents in the literature. After a while we concentrated on three traditions, that still seem to influence the views on later life nowadays. We called them, hesitantly, the christian traditon, the existentialist tradition and the late-modern tradition. I will start my presentation with a sketch these three traditions.

In the second year we tried to work out our own position, against the background of these three important traditions. I will conclude my presentation with a summary of our attempt to integrate some valuable elements of the christian and existentialist perspectives in the late-modern perspective.

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Perspectives on the meaning of later life

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The Christian perspective

Let’s start with a short description of the Christian perspective on later life. In fact, this can only be a gross simplification. Within the Christian tradition, there is no single dogmatic view of later life, but a rich variation of opinions that change over time. I do not pretend to present an overview of all these opinions, but, just the opposite, to formulate what I see as the core of that rich tradition. In my opinion, the core of the Christian tradition is a double tendency, to both dis-engagement of the daily, earthly life and caring for each other. This double tendency can be for instance recognized in the two types of religious orders within the Catholic Church: contemplative orders like the Benedictine monks and charitable orders like the Franciscans.

Dis-engagement is in the Christian tradition a necessary condition for reflection, contemplation on this earthly life in the light of the eternal truth. In earlier centuries, this central idea of dis-engagement became connected to a image of the life span where the highest level of social participation can be found in mid-life. The first half of life is seen as going up a stairway, becoming more active, more engaged in life. But after midlife, you start to descend the stairway, dis-engaging again. So old age becomes the period of the virtue of dis-engagement, of contemplation, prayer, preparing for the eternal life. Another way to express it is the common image of seasons in life, where youth stands for spring, midlife for summer and later life for autumn, leading to the death in winter.

But there is also a close connection between the virtue of caring for each other and later life. Most strongly it is expressed in the traditional image of the women who are freed from the care for children and practice the virtue of caring in helping the sick, the poor and the old. But still, and in a more general way, also for older adults now, the virtue of caring is often a strong argument for taking up, after retirement of the job and parenthood, volunteer positions in the church and in health and welfare organizations.

And finally, when old age comes with sickness and infirmity, in the Christian tradition this is
often seen as an appeal on others to show the virtue of helping, caring. This is closely connected with the extensive christian thinking on the meaning of suffering. Christians tends to see suffering not just as a fate, but as something that must have a deeper meaning, that reminds us of our earthly limitations and as a source of reflection that can ennobles us. We see even traces of this view on suffering in Nietzsche’s principle of ‘amor fati’, the love of your fate, i.e. what seems to be an unlucky fate makes you in fact mentally stronger.

The existential perspective

Before elaborating on these traces of christian thinking in the now dominant late-modern view on later live, we spent in our study circle quite a time on existentialist thinking, taking, of course as our point of departure the monumental book of Simone de Beauvoir on old age (‘La vieillesse’). Existentialist thinking about (later) life can be seen as an important in-between stage in the development of thinking from the traditional christian perspective to the recent late-modern perspective.

Existentialists do not only try to think a world without God, but their thinking is also moved by a sense of a deep crisis in Western society, that triggered of the First and the Second World War. They don’t accept the idea of a heaven, but the earthly world, in their view, surely can become a hell for human beings. Therefore, instead of dis-engagement they urge the necessity of political and social action, i.e. not just reflection and contemplation, not just caring for each other, but changing political and social structures.

As said, we concentrated on the book of De Beauvoir about old age. But to understand her thinking we built on the work of Karen Vintgens that analyzes the underlying ‘existential ethics’ of De Beauvoir. Life is, according to Vintgens, seen by De Beauvoir as a project, the systematic and consequent attempt to realize a personal mission, a life task. This life task is often not always clear from the beginning, but develops in the process of realizing yourself in interaction with your environment. De Beauvoir pleas for an active, self-disciplined development of the personal art of living, ‘savoir vivre’. But, and that is essential, she thinks not so much of an esthetic savoir-vivre, but a non-esthetic, an ethical art of living.

Her defence of active engagement is not only true for the life history in general but also the base of her view on later life. She dislikes the idea of disengagement in later life. She admires the scientists, politicians, artists who have the energy to go on till their last day of their life to create, to fulfill their mission in life. She dislikes the idea of seasons in life and the idea that after midlife you start to descend the stairway of the life course. Instead she sketches, as an example for us, the career of artists who after their midlife gave a new boost to their lives, freeing themselves from the dependency, as young adults, on fame and money. She prefers to see older adults as persons that can take an independent, critical position, not any longer swayed by the issues of the day.

3 K. Vintgens (1992), Filosofie als passie, Prometheus, Amsterdam.
The late-modern perspective

During the seventies and eighties a new movement of older adults grew, both in the U.S.A. and, somewhat later, in Europe. It was accompanied by a boom of new literature on later life. Most of these authors defend the possibility of later life as a new freedom, as an opportunity for further personal growth. Because this new movement has not a label of its own yet, I will call it the late-modern perspective on later life.

The late-modern perspective formulates two intertwined long-term goals. Firstly an improvement of the social-economic position of older adults, to guarantee them a socio-economic independent position. This element is a important legitimation for the new vigorous political and economic pressure groups of older adults. Secondly the development of social-cultural provisions to facilitate the further personal development of older adults. This element is for instance very influential in many initiatives to establish new educational provisions for older adults.

But what is the fundamental, underlying philosophical base of this perspective? It is different of the christian perspective because it stresses engagement and action instead of disengagement and contemplation. But it is also different from the existential perspective, at least from the perspective of De Beauvoir, because the late-modern perspective is essentially not ethical but esthetic in character. It is, in other words, not about how to use your talents to serve the world but is about developing your self, to enjoy the world. Therefore the late-modern perspective runs the risk of hedonism. In hedonism the final answer to the meaning of life is ‘enjoying it’.

Discussion

So far a very rough sketch of three perspectives on later life. As said in the introduction, in the second year of our study circle we tried to work out our own position, against the background of these three important traditions. We gave the discussion the form of an critical analysis of the dominant thinking about social participation in later life among older adults in The Netherlands in general and among the members of our own organization, de Katholieke Bond voor Ouderen, in particular. As you will understand, we never reached, or even tried to reach, an unanimous conclusion. So, my concluding remarks, echo our discussion, but are finally just my own conclusions and not conclusions of the study circle as a whole.

1. Allthough the christian perspective seems to have lost, even in our own roman-catholic organization of older adults, much of its casualness, there are still some important and valuable remaining elements of this christian perspective. I will mention two elements. The most important one is that ‘caring for the sick, poor and handicapped’ is still for many older adults an important motive for social participation, for instance in becoming active as a volunteer in health and welfare services. Another less frequent remaining element is the interest in forms of education or religious services that offer a reflection on life, death, suffering from a christian perspective.
2. Although many older adults grew up in the historical period where existentialist thinking was widespread, you hardly find traces of this perspective in motives of older adults for social participation. There are relatively few older adults that see later life as an opportunity for independent political and social criticism and action, for instance in the framework of the environmental movement and the peace movement. This has probably to do with the general weakness of these radical and critical movements.

3. Instead older adults follow generally the more recent late-modern perspective on later life. As a consequence there is a growing participation in both activities that defend material interests of older adults and leisure activities, like education, sport, travelling. More generally spoken, older adults seem in majority to experience later life as a period of ‘regained freedom’ and are prepared to defend that freedom in the debate about the future of the welfare state.

4. There is indeed a danger of materialism and hedonism in this development, but, and that will be my final, rather personal remark, it is not just and only a negative development. Stressing personal development, self-realization, as the ultimate end in life, is also a source of fundamental societal criticism on the dominance of economical and technological thinking. Or, in other words, the shift to a late-modern perspective, also means that in the end personal development, personal growth is seen as more important than economic growth. The defence of their regained freedom by older adults could well become an historical important element in a broader development to a leisure society, where work is more balanced with other aspects in life.