

The Irrelevance of Chronological Age

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Abstract

Ageing is, obviously enough, a process of change over time. Some of the changes involved assign individuals to markedly different groups (“age-groups”) at different stages in the process, and make social relations across age-group boundaries problematic except as they fall into conventional categories. This paper postulates and explores constant factors underlying the changes due to ageing that can minimize these problematic differences and make possible social relations transcending chronological age. Because such relations are likely to encounter cultural stereotypes establishing them may not be easy, but it can be successful and rewarding. The paper follows two distinct strategies, one testing the concept of a timeless transcendental subject not affected by ageing, the other postulating an “immediate otherness” between subjects that might bracket differences of chronological age and render them irrelevant to the enjoyment of mutual presence. The first strategy appeals to the Aristotelian analysis of change as requiring the continuity of something unchanging (the “substratum” of *Metaphysics* 983a30), which finds an echo in the contrast between the “naively interested Ego” and the phenomenological Ego as “disinterested onlooker” in Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*. It seeks to reconcile the powerful intuition of the self as self-identical from first awareness to whatever age it has attained with the equally powerful intuition of difference from moment to moment and situation to situation. The second explores different modes and settings of immediacy and intimacy, from common interest in external objects (the “parallel” case) to shared concern of the subjects involved for one another (the “diametric” case). The paper’s authors offer themselves as existence proofs of these possibilities.

Key Words: Age, (Cross-)Age-Groups, Generation, Timeless Transcendental Subject, Immediate Otherness, Presence at Distance.

“Age is something that doesn't matter, unless you are a cheese”

Billie Burke

Although there is no doubt that none of us is a cheese, reality does not hesitate to provide us with situations which tell us: Age does matter! It matters when the neighbourhood boys don't want to play with you as the little kid, or when you are a minor trying to buy a drink or to get into a club, and it matters even more when you discover wrinkles around your eyes, when you spot a grey hair that hasn't been there before or when no one understands your jokes as you refer to things that have happened half a century ago.

Situations like these teach us the merciless truth: we do age and this process is inexorable, irreversible and unstoppable. We grow from birth to maturation to maturity to decline, eventually to death. These different steps in human development mark us individually on the physical as well as on the psychological level. But as we hope to show, the psychological is less tightly tied to the physical than popular convention suggests.

Thus unsurprisingly, people tend to categorize themselves and others within certain homogeneous age-groups: children, adults, or seniors. The concept of “generations” perfectly serves this human intuition: there is the generation of hippies, the so-called “Generation Gap”, the generation who experienced WWII, the generation of the internet, etc.

There is something arbitrary and suspect about these dogmatic generalizations, and yet the temptation to make them is hard to resist. Clearly there are external indicators of age, and the impulse to classify individuals accordingly is entirely understandable. But it gives rise to the question: What is it that marks people as a member of a certain age-group, a certain generation? How and by what criteria do we recognize someone as a member of a certain age-group? The first, intuitive answer might be: the way someone looks, as age is a criterion obvious on the face and body. Usually, one is able to distinguish whether a person is 5, 25 or 50 years old, just by looking at him or her. But this is only easy in very obvious cases. We can not say so easily whether someone is 5 or 6, or 23 or 24, or 57 or 60 years old.

Our every-day-strategy to guess people's age better than just by looking at their faces and bodies is to relate to their social situation. When a child tells you that he goes to kindergarten you know (depending on the country you are living in) that he might not be older than 6, nor younger than 3. Equally for students: If someone tells you she is going to university (again depending on the educational system), you might guess he is somewhere between 20 and 27. Factors like: having children, being married, being retired, having grandchildren etc. also help when we are guessing someone's age.

So what marks someone as a person of a certain age-group is not merely her physical appearance but rather her social embedding. This becomes striking when people do not fit our expectations: a boy graduating from high school at the age of 15, a girl being a mother at the same age, a man not having graduated from university at the age of 40, a man becoming a father very late in life or a grandfather very early, etc. When people do not fit the age categories that society has established collectively we experience dissonance in ascribing the correct age.

Failure to fit into certain age groups encounters another dimension when it comes to cross-age-relations: Society allows and even demands certain social relations between different age groups: parents take care of their children, adult teachers educate minor children and teenagers, nurses care for very old people. As these relations are less homogeneously constructed, it is not only harder to guess people's age in these situations, but conflicts are also likely to arise. These problems may be inherent in the cross-age relation - what is often called generational conflict - in view of the fact that people at different ages share different views, values and interests. But some of them may have external causes, in the sense of being attributed from the outside, by people who are not participants in the relation in question.

As long as these cross-age relations have an "official", socially accepted or even required legitimation, as in the examples given above, their existence is not questioned or morally judged. But as soon as they break out of the established and accepted pattern they run up against cultural stereotypes. When a woman chooses a partner who is twenty, thirty or even forty years older than she is, people's reaction may range from being amused to being shocked, but in any case questions are likely to be raised about the sincerity and integrity of her motivations. Some critics may suspect that she is just on the make (assuming him to be rich) or accuse him of serving his own pride in having captured her youth and beauty (assuming her to be beautiful). And not all asymmetries in such relations are attributable to wealth on one side and beauty on the other - variants might include influence over against ambition, professional experience over against first apprenticeship, mature learning over against a desire for enlightenment, and so on. A case closer to home, to which we may refer from time to time, would be that of a philosophical collaboration having come into being between scholars and colleagues whose ages are separated by a half century.

It is clear that one of the biggest stereotypes confronting cross-generational relationships is the suspicion or accusation of mutual or unilateral abuse. A mere age-difference seems to be a sufficient argumentative ground to question the sincerity of feelings of affection, care and interest in the other person. This stereotype is based on the assumption that only persons of roughly the same biological age can have authentic or

disinterested non-hierarchical regard for one another, whether on the basis of attraction or love or friendship or collegiality.

Back to the cheese, then. We want to claim that this is nonsense! - that there are important ways in which chronological age really doesn't matter. There can be cross-age-relations which are based on mutual affection and shared feelings rather than on mutual (if tacitly accepted) abuse or exploitation. A woman who is marrying an older man is not necessarily hoping for his premature death in order to inherit all his money, nor has the only interest of an older man in a younger woman to be her beauty and youth. Similarly for other advantages such as age and experience on the one hand, enthusiasm and vigour on the other: we may share philosophical interests and we may "use" one another in the furtherance of these interests, but - following the good old Kantian maxim of the categorical imperative in its second formulation - we treat each other not merely as means to our selfish ends, but also as ends mutually respected as such.

And this treating of the other as an end is independent of our biological ages or the difference between them. Age may play a role, when we want to engage in activities together that are linked to certain physical or mental capacities. For example it is hard to do philosophy with a five year old brother who is still lacking the education for it, just as it would be hard to go skiing with a hundred-year-old grandmother. But this link between age and physical or mental capacities is just relative, not absolute. It is likely, but not necessary.

Over time individuals make transitions, more or less abruptly, from younger age groups to older ones. The indicators that mark these transitions - graduation, the first entry into the workforce, retirement - may be accompanied by social losses or upheavals, which may be ridden out without incident but may have difficult psychological consequences, depending on the degree of identification with the group that is being left behind. But what or who is it, exactly, that undergoes the transition? If there is any merit to Aristotle's notion, that if change is to occur there must be an underlying substratum that does not change, it would seem that under the physical conditions we have been associating with age there must be something timeless, and perhaps it is the meeting of two timeless subjects that makes possible the cross-age connections we have described. Bodies, roles, social positions and the like are assigned to age-groups, but that does not mean that the subjects who inhabit and animate them need also be so assigned. It is all too easy to identify oneself with these categorizations, but it is also possible to resist this identification - not to do so, in fact, is to fall into what Jean-Paul Sartre would call *mauvaise foi* or "bad faith."

Insisting on a possible disconnect between the subject and its body, role, social position etc. has a liberating effect, and makes possible

relationships that transcend chronological age - to which chronological age proves to be irrelevant. There is not time to go here into a full theory of subjectivity, but if we adopt the Kantian or Husserlian view of the transcendental subject we can attribute timelessness to it, a denial of change even in the midst of change, and even (to allude to an earlier paper in this series) up to the point of death. There is a provocative anticipation of this (as of so much else!) in Aristotle, who, using his own terminology of "mind" or "soul," explicitly addresses the issue of ageing: "Mind seems to be an independent substance engendered in us, and to be imperishable. If it could be destroyed the most probable cause would be the feebleness of old age, but, in fact, probably the same thing occurs as in the sense organs; for if an old man could acquire the right kind of eye, he would see as a young man sees. Hence old age is due to an affection, not of the soul, but only of that in which the soul resides [...]. Thus the power of thought and speculation decays because something else within perishes, but itself is unaffected."

So to the extent that the subject is affected by ageing (and we do not seek to deny the external realities) this need not harm the prospects for a potential friendship. In fact, this timeless transcendental subject is not only without biological age, it is detached from any kind of physical embodiment. Without going too deeply into the big problem of personal identity over time, we want to emphasize that such a timeless subject may even be necessary for the constitution of any friendship, no matter whether it is a friendship between people of the same or of different ages. In fact it is being an end as such, acknowledged by the other that constitutes me as a partner in a relation to that other. By regarding and respecting a person as an end, as something that does not need any further justification; I discover and acknowledge an unchanging moment which is stripped of any dimension of time.

To repeat: this does not only apply to cross-age relations, but is rather a characteristic of any kind of friendship. Whenever we feel friendship and closeness for another person, we automatically and intuitively detach him or her from his or her physical embodiment anyway. The discovery and the unveiling of the timeless transcendental subject in the other is not only necessary for the emergence of a real friendship, it is also the natural and automatic way towards it. It is just in cases of cross-age friendships that this becomes so obvious right from the first moment.

If two people of the same age meet and get along well with each other, it might be due to their time-related subjects liking each other. But as soon as a real friendship gets established, the time-related subject, manifested by the physical embodiment of the person, namely her body, more and more takes the back seat. Friends who are friends for years and decades do not look at the physical embodiment of each other but rather through that embodiment, at the timeless subject it carries. This gains more and more

importance for the friendship; if this doesn't happen, a real and long lasting friendship will not be established - all the changes that people go through over the years would be a threat to the friendship. All we would be left with would be a transient relationship, ending as soon as the time-related subjects underwent sufficiently drastic changes. As this kind of process is inevitable – we all develop, grow, and age -- even friendships between people who share chronological age need to be sustained by timeless transcendental subjectivity.

This perspective introduces a new and profound possibility. Relations between individuals are usually mediated by external factors. As we have seen, social expectations and cultural stereotypes trap people in age groups and also in groups constituted on other bases - gender, nationality, language etc. By transcending these categorizations a relation of what may be called “immediate otherness” can come into play. It may be quite hard, given the conditions of daily life, to achieve, let alone to sustain, this immediacy, but the effort is richly rewarding. It enables us to be with another person in complete indifference to his or her physical or social embodiment and to focus solely on the timelessness of the transcendental subject. The couple - and at this point we do not envisage immediate otherness in any situation beyond the binary, though this would be a possibility worth exploring - exists in these privileged moments outside of time.

Immediate otherness is clearly situational - it requires (with a significant exception to be noted below) that the others in question be present to one another. Two interesting variants can be distinguished, which may be called “parallel” and “diametrical” immediacy. In the parallel case the participants are side by side, so that they can attend in common to some third thing; in the diametrical case they are face to face, and are in effect attending to one another. It is obviously easier in the parallel case to ignore differences in embodiment that arise from age or gender, but even in the diametrical case these soon become unimportant.

The exception to the rule of presence arises through possibilities made available by media technology. As its name already reveals, the invention of the telephone made it possible to speak to some one absent and even far away. Remote communication was born. New technology goes far beyond these early effects. Communication via chat and email happens instantly. It enables the participants to communicate in a mode that is completely detached from their physical presence and embodiment in general, thus appearing to satisfy the conditions for immediate otherness. We can chat as if we were sitting next to one another as mutual partners, no external (physical, material etc.) factors necessarily having any influence on our conversation. External factors may have an influence on the conversation,

as well as on the friendship, but they don't have to. It's up to us to what degree we want them to become a part of it.

This fact leads to some problems that are inherent in the communication tool of chat, e.g. that older men can virtually molest younger girls by hiding their identity, or giving wrong information about their age and even more important about their intentions. But this is only the negative side of the structure of these media, not in itself an argument against using them and appreciating their advantages. It would be easy to overestimate these advantages, however. An interesting question arises about the adequacy of the relationships, especially across age boundaries that instant communication makes possible. To revert to the case we know best: in spite of what must appear to be dramatic differences in age, gender, nationality etc., not to mention physical location, we can claim, I think, a relation of immediacy that is perhaps rare even among colleagues and collaborators who are much closer in all these respects. Partly this is due to a disposition to openness and honesty that, as it turned out, we happen (among many other things) to share. But we discovered this - or at any rate came to full awareness of it - wholly through the medium of electronic mail. This paper was proposed, agreed to, submitted, and written in this mode.

The interesting question is this: had it not been for a brief period of personal acquaintance before our correspondence began, during which there were already intimations of the immediacy that would eventually be reached, would these developments have been possible? Could the presence-in-absence, or presence-at-a-distance, that we have enjoyed during this collaboration have been realized without a foundation in some moments of presence-in-proximity? I do not think at this point that there is an easy answer to this question. What can be said is that the technology has made it easier for us to encounter and recognize the timeless in one another, and thus to reach a point at which age has been as effectively transcended as we believe it has been.

So we are not cheeses. Billie Burke was right. We offer a case of an interpersonal relationship to which chronological age is irrelevant, in which it doesn't matter. Unfortunately there are plenty of people to whom it does matter. Perhaps for some of them we can serve as an existence proof.