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Towards a Hermeneutics on Ageing: Or What Gadamer Can Teach Us About Growing Old

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Abstract

Ageing is one of life's most pervasive shared experiences, and one that is imbued with social, cultural and bio-medical meaning. This paper begins a conversation on what hermeneutics and, in particular the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer, can add to contemporary understandings of ageing.

Keywords

Ageing, hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer

It was the war in the Pacific. Silk stockings and a pink slip.
A quick shimmy down a drainpipe in the middle of the night.

She had seemed so old at 92. Shrunken.
Somehow faded and less

60 years evaporated in a heartbeat
And there she was.

I saw her – finally. Shining.
Somehow so much more

Ageing is one of life's most pervasive shared experiences. From the moments we draw our first breath until we breathe our last - however long that may be - life is essentially a process of

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ageing. Indeed the etymology of age/ageing derives from the Latin *aetatem* (nominative *aetas*) meaning *a period of life, lifetime, or years*. The association of ageing with old age, in particular, dates back to the 14th Century (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ageing) though the term "old age" was not commonly used until the 1900s, with a sharp increase in usage post 1950. As such, the meaning of the word "ageing" has both ancient and contemporary roots.

Ageing is defined as an organic process of growing older over a period of time, and is akin to maturation or ripeness, a process of *becoming* old. LeGouès (in Malabou, 2012) compared life to an aeroplane flight with take-off equating to childhood and youth, cruising with adulthood, and descent with ageing. It is also defined as the acquisition of desirable qualities through being left undisturbed for a period of time, as in the ageing of a fine wine or cheese (http://www.finedictionary.com/ageing.html). However, there is also an association between the idea of ageing and decline - of fading or weathering - and the physical changes and appearance of old age that represent a palpable manifestation of the passage of time. I suggest that, in contemporary developed nations, this is the pervasive definition of the term "ageing."

Over the years of working with older people and researching in the field of ageing, I have been exposed to many understandings of ageing - some have required active interpretation, and others have been embedded in the taken- for-granted. Ageing has many guises and is understood in a variety of ways. We are aware of chronological ageing - as each year ticks by. This gives us a number that can indicate how long we have been caught up in the act of living. As a health care professional, I draw on an understanding of ageing that is biological and bio-medically framed – healthy ageing, normal ageing, and pathological ageing - and a myriad of theories that seek to explain the degradation of cells and the wearing out of body systems over time, all of which inform my understanding of a physiological process of ageing as degradation and progression towards death.

There are also social and cultural constructions of ageing - ways in which ageing has become associated with wisdom and emancipation, as well as cognitive decline, frailty and illness, and death. There are critiques of social norms that drive youth-orientation (apparently its all Elvis's fault) and its resultant impact on ageing and older people; and "grey power" movements that seek to re-associate ageing with wisdom and challenge the negative social commentaries that position older people as vulnerable and a burden on society. These interpretations of ageing serve to shape our social and individual understanding of ageing.

In this paper, I present my efforts to begin drawing together an understanding of ageing and old age, informed by the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002). In their book on Gadamerian hermeneutic research, Moules, McCaffrey, Field, and Laing (2015, p. 202) noted, "hermeneutic questions are hard questions; hermeneutic understanding is hard understanding." Accordingly, my efforts to develop a hermeneutic understanding of ageing is challenging in many ways.

First, my understanding of ageing is shaped by social and biomedical interpretations. My education and professional socialisation deeply ingrains and privileges certain interpretations of ageing over others. This is an important acknowledgement in developing an understanding of ageing. For Gadamer, any prior understanding of a topic, and the prejudices that we bring to a topic,

always inform our current interpretation and consequent understanding of it (Gadamer, 1960/1989). As with "ageing," the word "prejudice" is imbued with negative meanings in contemporary English usage. However, prejudice requires acknowledgement that we do not approach any topic as though it were a blank slate; rather, we approach a topic that is already saturated with meaning (Moules et al., 2015). The challenge in this lies in the fact that many prejudices lie hidden in the everyday and taken-for-granted.

As a health care professional in the area of gerontology, the topic of ageing is saturated with meaning, and a form of scientific political correctness that begs a counter to social and cultural discourses that still shape my understandings. So, while I have professional discourses and meanings that sit within my discipline and education, I am also aware of and subject to, at a more personal level, socially and culturally derived meanings that shape my personal experience of the phenomena of ageing. To step outside these interpretive limitations and be open to other understandings requires an openness to the other (Gadamer, 1960/1989). Davey (2006, p. xvi) noted, "openness to the other requires a particular refinement: the skill of being critically distant while remaining involved, attentive, and caring."

A second challenge in developing a hermeneutics of ageing lies in Gadamer's assertion that there can be no final word in hermeneutics and, therefore, no first word in hermeneutic understanding. Rather, Gadamer defined understanding as a relationship and as a dialogue (Grondin, 1994), less like grasping content and more like a continuous dialogue. In this respect, a hermeneutics of ageing both arises from and informs the dialogue on ageing, while claiming to be neither the first, nor final word. The meaning of ageing will continue to evolve, and grasping for such an elusive meaning may be deemed self-indulgent at best.

A third and final challenge stems from the primacy of the biomedical paradigm, which not only privileges certain lenses and interpretations of the topic of ageing, but also serves to limit our understanding of it. More concerning still is that such a dominant paradigm in ageing is self-limiting because it also constrains the possibilities for questions we might ask. For me, this has been a defining feature of this movement towards a hermeneutic of ageing, which started with a discussion with a colleague. In considering submitting an abstract for a presentation at the North American Society for Philosophical Hermeneutics (NASPH) 2015 conference, I commented to my colleague that I had nothing to present. Her rather off-the-cuff response to "write a hermeneutics of ageing" left me reeling. It was the suddenness of the recognition that, in all my many understandings of ageing and despite having a research Chair in Gerontology and considering myself a hermeneut at heart, I had never considered how a hermeneutics of ageing might add to the dialogue and understanding of the topic. It was, as Gadamer wrote, *a call to action*.

Gadamer (1960/1989. p. 299) also wrote "understanding begins when something addresses us." My professional understanding of ageing began when I was a student nurse working in a nursing home in Australia. (I use the term "professional understanding" here as, like most people, I had a concept of ageing that was socially and culturally derived, and that I brought with me into my professional role). The poem at the beginning of this paper is based on my journal notes following an evening shift where I spent time talking to Mary, a frail 92-year woman. In hindsight, the moment marked a shift; it was a profound "aha" moment that re-charted my professional course. I realised that Mary was more than the sum of her wrinkles, her pains, and her considerable

medications and, despite the ravages of time evident in faces and bodies, despite a range of illnesses and medical woes – all of which are fascinating to a nursing student – the person inside is always present and does not necessarily experience the ravages of time at the same rate and in the same way as the physical body. This was also the first time I saw Mary as less "other," and became aware of our similarities. Until then, I had been lulled by the outward signs of her age into thinking of her as somehow intrinsically different to me. Today, this has particular implications for my professional focus on the concepts of personhood and selfhood as they pertain to older people living with dementia and other forms of cognitive impairment. It also reflects what Davey (2006, p. 117) referred to as "the hermeneutic experience of being addressed," which includes a recognition that we are not as well acquainted with our topic as we assumed, and then forging ahead with a new apprehension.

Mary shared with me a story about an evening during the Second World War. Her story jolted me in much the same way my colleague's remark about a hermeneutics of ageing jolted me years later. I remember thinking, how did I not "see" this before. It changed my understanding of ageing in a profound way and started a professional interest that continues today. Davey (2006, p. 118) referred to this as a "phenomenological shift from absentmindedness to mindfulness" that occurs "when what we have unknowingly experienced as the everyday is transformed."

According to Gadamer (cited in Davey, 2006, p. 118), this transformation is associated with the Greek goddess Mnemosyne. He wrote "Mnemosyne rules everything: to keep in memory means to be human." Mnemosyne was also the mother of the nine muses, who inspire and nurture creativity through the arts and aesthetic endeavours. Gadamer's reflections in this area stimulates thought in relation to the nature of understanding ageing, and concepts of self and personhood for older people with dementia, and offer insight into how our memories and our sense of the world - or our ability to interpret and make sense of the world through our senses, as Grondin (2015) stated – appears to be both diminished and intact in someone with dementia.

While I may take some issue with Gadamer's statement that memory equates in some way to humanness, his work on aesthetics and understanding and his invocation of Mnemosyne, have shaped my work with older people with dementia through creative attempts to generate meaning and understanding. This is probably most evident through a mixed research and creative arts project that occurred in Australia in 2013/2014 (Venturato, 2015). We used an interpretive photographic approach to understand the world of older people with dementia living in a nursing home. Our project entailed collaborative work between two photo-documentarists, ten older people with dementia living in two nursing homes, and myself. This work culminated with a public exhibition and public forum, where a panel of "experts" discussed ideas of creativity and ageing. The work highlighted a number of aspects of living with dementia and served to open dialogue with families, staff, and management. It became evident that older people with dementia maintained capacity to interpret and generate meaning in their life in various ways and that memory, interpretation, and meaning were much more complex than the results of an MRI scan or a Mini Mental Assessment score.

As a researcher, it was satisfying to witness "aha" moments in nursing home staff as they reconsidered what they knew about the residents in the project, and older people with dementia in general. Perhaps more satisfying, was witnessing our participants fully addressed as whole

people, beyond the constraints of medicalised diagnoses and perceived limitations. Davey (2013, p. 68) noted that Gadamer recognises the ability of art to address those concerns that "define us as human beings" and to "transform our understanding of them." Indeed,

> art's compelling power lies in its ability to clarify aspects of our everyday concerns which, without its intervention, would remain unresolved. Unlike life, art offers meanings 'with nothing out of place'. It is precisely because of the compelling interests which shape our human horizon that we are susceptible to art's claim. (Davey, 2013, p. 68)

Moules et al. (2015) offered an important insight into the way Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics can guide further understanding of ageing through offering a number of guidelines for hermeneutic practice. In the spirit of Gadamer's reluctance to provide a methodology for hermeneutics, the authors are careful to note that such guidelines do not represent an attempt at methodological imperatives or a final word on the practice of understanding through hermeneutic explanation. Rather they offer a guide to practically derive interpretations, while maintaining a philosophical orientation towards the phenomena of interest.

The first guideline offered by Moules et al. (2015) encourages a focus on phenomena rather than method. Thus, coming to a hermeneutics of ageing requires one to go beyond method, and to be more concerned with substance than procedure. This is not to say that anything goes, but that interpretation is framed around careful attention, creative construction of possibilities, and grounded in experience.

The second guideline refers to the requirement for a disciplined focus on the phenomenon (the particular) (Moules et al., 2015). We are addressed by something, and by something that is significant. This is a complex process whereby understanding is fuelled by the particular and conversely, the particular is fuelled by new understanding. They noted "it is the detailed familiarity of the cases that strikes us; it is the detailed strangeness of the case that surprises us" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 64). This requirement for a disciplined focus on the phenomenon also entails a temporal dimension. A hermeneutics of ageing considers the past, present, and future in order to re-envision ageing in a way that is both familiar and new.

The third guideline requires vigilance and openness in our encounters with phenomena. Within this, there is recognition of the risk inherent in being open to the other, in being flexible, in opening our prejudices and pre-understandings and our assumptions to change. This requires vigilance and constant attention in developing openness. Such openness requires practice and this is particularly essential when one is embedded in knowing the phenomenon and in particular, when situated as an "expert" in the phenomenon. Rather, remaining open lies in positioning oneself as a learner, embedded in a continual process of curiosity and truth seeking.

The fourth guideline encourages us to read the self and the world differently. In this respect, they urge us to read slowly and methodically, to read for possibilities, and to allow the phenomenon to open up. This is reading in a transformative sense, rather than the digestion and interpretation of meaning and intent learnt in the traditional or technical sense of reading. Thus a hermeneutics of ageing would consider the prejudices or pre-understandings, our perceptions, and the contexts that shape our perceptions and seek to transform understanding through the interplay between

text, self, and world - a fusion of horizons that supports the movement and expansion of understanding in light of its encounter with history and tradition (recognises the present through the past) and dialogue.

The fifth and final guideline recognises hermeneutic practice as dialogical. In this respect, hermeneutics entails entering into a dialogical relationship that recognises, and is open to, the possibility that the other may be right. It maintains a continual movement between question and answer and recognises that such conversations are ongoing. In this respect, a hermeneutics on ageing does not seek to have the final word on ageing but to contribute to the on-going conversation.

There are many other aspects of Gadamer's work that offer insights into understanding ageing; in particular, aletheia and bildung offer insights into new possibilities for thinking about ageing. As Moules et al. (2015) suggested, the process of hermeneutic understanding requires patience and flexibility; it is slow, methodical, and continuously open to new possibilities. This work represents this first step into the development of a hermeneutics of ageing, as a counterweight to social and biomedical understandings.

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