

Afterword

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In dialogue with the articles in this volume, this afterword takes up the relation between temporality, ageing, and models of the good. In particular, it will consider the diverse models of time that are present in each place studied by the contributors, examining how they shift in relation to one another as people age. I also explore how changes in people's time horizons as they age can shape the prospective component of models of the good. Do values change over the life-course, or do models of their realization change? Whose models of the good should take priority in decisions about what constitutes successful ageing? These and other considerations aim to bring temporality into the centre of current discussions of values, ethics, and ageing.

Definition of 'For the Time Being':

'Used to say that although one set of conditions exists now, the situation could change.'

Cambridge Dictionary (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/for-the-time-being>)

I begin with this definition of the phrase 'for the time being' because it nicely captures one of the major inspirations of this collection on how time beings age. The wider project on ageing and ethics of which this edited collection is one fruit was in part motivated by an interest in discovering diverse cross-cultural models of good old age in the hopes of gaining a critical vantage point on the by now globally diffused 'successful ageing paradigm', also known as the model of 'active ageing'. This paradigm presents an understanding of what old age should be that increasingly makes it difficult to approach the upper reaches of human maturity in a good way anywhere. As Lone Grøn and Lotte Meinert put it in the Introduction to this volume, using terms echoed by several other contributors, this vision of ageing is shaped by 'four cultural historical values: individual agency and control ... maintaining independence and avoiding dependence; the merit of productive activity; and a version of permanent personhood or not ageing at all.' Fully and at all times living in terms of these values, social scientists among others are apt to point out, is likely an impossibility for people of any age anywhere, but even if there are rare cases in which it might be a realizable goal, it is certainly the case that this is an

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ideal almost everyone will fall short of if they are lucky enough to make it to advanced old age. No wonder, then, that in the face of these kinds of value expectations elderly people around the world often complain that being old is a frustrating state for time beings, one where they fail to achieve the good more often than they succeed. Might anthropological work contribute to a world in which this situation, which holds in so many places for the time being, 'could change'?

Before beginning the various fieldwork periods that provide the materials for many of the articles collected here, the researchers in the project were excited to approach the critical task of unsettling the successful ageing paradigm by finding out what made for a good old age in the wide range of places they were going to carry out research. In a later meeting however, held after they had all begun fieldwork, one after another reported that when they asked people what was good about their experience of old age, time and again the response was 'nothing'. In the global shadow of the successful ageing paradigm, to bend a phrase of David Schneider's (1967: viii), it seems that there may be almost nowhere in the contemporary world where we can find models of old age worth looking forward to.

To be effective in motivating change, critical interventions in present conditions need to be accompanied by positive visions of potential good lives (Mattingly, this issue; Cooke 2006, Robbins 2023). It is therefore lucky that the articles collected here have been written at one dialectical remove from the rather bleak mid-project conclusion that such alternative models of good old age were not exactly thick on the ground in the contributors' contemporary field sites. As analyses deepened, and the plurality and complexities of the temporalities that shape the experience of ageing came into closer focus, ways of finding at least hints of good old age in the project ethnographies began to reveal themselves. I build on the rich theorizations and ethnographic exemplifications of these hints in what follows. As someone who comes to this project from the side of an interest in the good and in those cultural definitions of the good we can call values, rather than from the anthropology of ageing, I will develop my brief comments mostly by putting those hints in dialogue with resources drawn from more general discussions of values and the good rather than from other work focused on ageing.

Yet as a starting point that derives from an interest both in values and in ageing, we can note that the philosopher and bioethicist Nancy Jecker (2020: 7-8) argues that the successful ageing paradigm is a clear case of what she calls a 'midlife bias' in the formulation of values. This is so because it presents autonomy as the normatively highest value for the elderly. Autonomy, on her account, is an appropriate highest value for those who are in the middle of their lives. It is not an appropriate value for children (whose ideal core values she takes to be caring and trust) or the elderly, for whom she offers 'dignity and respect' as appropriate highest values. As it happens, dignity does not figure very heavily in these papers, perhaps counting as too much of a Western ideologue to attract anthropologists (Zigon 2014: 750). Jecker is not bothered by such potential ethnocentrism. While she is attentive in parts of her discussion to cross-cultural issues, she is aiming for a universal ethical theory of good old age that can challenge the equally universal assumptions that underlie the successful ageing paradigm. But we do not need to take on board Jecker's promotion of dignity to learn from her work. The idea that values are, as she puts it, 'life-stage relative' is quite portable, and helps us to understand how a plurality of values, including those related to ideas about ageing, are organized within various societies in ways revealed by these articles (Jecker 2020: 6).

The articles collected in this issue, I want to suggest, implicitly attend to life-stage relative values and the plurality of values this phenomenon generates by considering diverse formulations of time in each of the places they study, and by exploring the way various of these can come in and out of play in social life as they are drawn from what Meinert (this issue) calls societies' 'carrier bags' of different temporalities. Thus in Grøn's (this issue) study of a Danish dementia ward, we learn about institutional time, frictional time, still time, and ritual event time among others, while Janelle Taylor's (this issue) study of the use of the clock drawing test in diagnosing dementia alerts us to a different if equally wide-ranging diversity of times involved in clinical encounters around this condition. In her article on the perplexity of Christmas trees, Cheryl Mattingly (this issue) weaves accounts of American dream time, chronic crisis time, God's time of rupture and natality, and errant or fugitive time throughout her discussion of Mama Summer's life rhythms. Among the Ik, Meinert (this issue) documents a 'time poetics' that includes the time of the sundial, of the watch and mobile phone, of governmentally recognized ageing (which comes with the possibility of cash transfers), as well as the time of 'enough', which refers to the moment when a particular kind of time has ceased to be important. For elderly Kyrgyz studied by Maria Louw (this issue) who are ageing mostly alone, there are also a number of different temporalities. There are Soviet times and post-Soviet times (the latter of which it is difficult for the elderly to get in step with), and the time (perhaps out of time) in which they engage with the spectral presence of their relatives who have predeceased them. There is also the time of 'what-might-have-been', the 'unlived lives' that they draw on in conversation (and likely in silent thought) to shape the present (see also Mattingly, this issue).

Similar observations about temporal complexity appear in the other articles in the issue as well. I want to propose we approach this temporal complexity, wherever it occurs, as a matter not just of time, but also of values and notions of the good. Different kinds of time, that is to say, can provide frameworks in which to pursue different values. This is so because values take time to realize or produce (which are not the same thing, but that need not detain us here – see Robbins 2019). Some take a long time to bring to fruition, coming at the end of extended chains of what Nancy Munn (1986) calls 'value transformation', or through processes in which a person aims at realizing a number of intermediate instrumental values as conditions for finally realizing a value that is good in itself, rather than for the other values to which it can give access. One of the tricky things about ageing is the way such long, temporally stretched-out chains of value transformation become more difficult to successfully operate or even imagine, and the kind of planning that goes into traversing them becomes harder to manage. The Ik elder Komol, who appears in Meinert's article, illustrates the ways that switching temporalities can also allow an ageing person to pursue values they have a better chance of realizing. For him, this means giving up on maintaining the social force of the sundial time in which he is expert – an expertise that helps him realize values of power and respect from others for his wisdom – and instead opting to learn how to operate in the time of governmentally defined ageing, which allows him to realize different kinds of power and respect by collecting and redistributing Ugandan government cash transfers available to the elderly. The Japanese recidivists discussed by Jason Danely (this issue) likewise deal with the difficulty of realizing the value of neoliberal success, a difficulty that leads them to being 'out of time with others' when they are not in prison, by engaging in a carceral circulation that allows them to achieve valued care by means of their own successful agency.

Even in the dementia ward studied by Grøn, where planning to realize values can be especially difficult for residents, one can still see how different kinds of temporality allow for the realization of different values. Consider in this regard the ‘frictional time’ by which residents push back against what others say or do and thereby at least fleetingly realize values of self-assertion. Or the kind of time that allows for gardening (clearly in the case discussed the realization of a long-cherished value; see also Taylor [2008] on the preservation of value commitments in dementia), or even the still time that gives a taste of the realization of the value of being at peace with the world. Despite the absence of the carefully planned sequences of step-taking that we often associate with value-realization, crucial feelings of fulfilment, or ‘rightness’ that often signal such realization can still be reached (Robbins 2015). Even when time is short, whether because of cognitive limitations on temporal experience or constraints related to life expectancy, there are still kinds of time in which to pursue the good. And finding values and temporalities that work together for elderly people is, these articles suggest, a crucial way they make a success of such pursuits.

Despite the ways in which what we might call ‘times management’ allows elderly people to endeavour to achieve the good – a point the articles here make so successfully – there is still a sense, at least where the successful ageing paradigm holds sway, that as people enter old age something changes in the relationship they have to values. Why might this be the case?

To sketch an answer to this question, I want to turn to the work of the German philosopher Nicolai Hartmann (2004), who was influential in the first half of the twentieth century but is not so well known today outside of specialist philosophical circles. One elementary fact about values that many scholars recognize is that they are ranked in relation to one another: some are bad, some are good, and some are better or worse, and others are best or worst. Falling into ranks in this way is part of what defines values (Louis Dumont [e.g. 1980] is the anthropologist who has done the most to elaborate the significance of this aspect of values). Hartmann goes one step beyond this common observation to propose that all values are ranked along not one but two distinct dimensions. One of these, the more familiar one that I have been drawing on in my discussion thus far, is what he calls ‘height’. This refers in the expected way to the place of a value in a hierarchy of values, with the ones deemed most important being on top and others being ranked in relation to one another below them. The other, less familiar dimension of value-ranking Hartmann identifies is that of what he calls ‘strength’. This dimension has to do with how urgently a value can make itself felt in the present, how forcefully it can call people to act in ways that will realize it. The analytic payoff for recognizing these two dimensions comes when we realize that, as Hartmann points out, often the height and strength of a value are inversely related to one another. It is our lower level values, generally those fairly closely linked to ensuring our simple survival, that most consistently and forcefully solicit our efforts towards their realization, and which we are most severely sanctioned by others for failing to realize, even as we are not much celebrated when we do realize them since everyone is expected to do so in quite routine fashion. By contrast, the demands our highest values make on us are generally much weaker. We often cannot find time or energy to work steadily towards realizing them after we have attended to stronger if lower values, and we are not judged harshly for not doing so, even as the rewards for actually realizing these high values would we imagine be very great. The paradoxical, or at least frustratingly complex, relation between the height and strength of any given value is easy to illustrate from our

own lives. For example, scholars may hold contributing to and passing on knowledge as very high values, yet in a university setting administrative demands, though not very highly valued by many academics, have a strong pull, enhanced by strict deadlines and immediate social sanctions for failing to realize them.

With this point about the complex relation between the height and strength of values in place, time comes back into the picture. For one very common way people live with the inverse relation between these two value dimensions is by working carefully to coordinate the realization of values in time. They recognize the immense rewards that would come both for themselves and for others from realizing their highest values. But with more pressing lower-level values related to daily life tugging very strongly at them, and with the penalties for failing to realize these lower values very great, people frequently put off for the future the realization of their highest values, or they give them focal attention only in brief bursts. Thus research work gets done at night, on the weekends, or during the summer, and lower-level values hold sway during most of the week and the year. In this way, academics, and other people too, attend to their highest values enough to keep them alive in their worlds, yet those values rarely grow in strength sufficiently for their pull to rival that of lower ranked ones and thus become the dominant focus of their efforts.

Speaking just for the Western context in which I have lived much of my life, and which birthed the model of active ageing that this collection seeks to at least complement if not displace, one problem with old age, one reason it is not a life-stage imagined to be oriented steadily and successfully towards the good, or the best good, is that lower-level values related to getting by are seen to dominate the lives of those who enter it, all but pushing high-level values out of the picture. For myself, at least, I detect its influence in my gut response (which I recognize may be a misreading) to what I take to be the pathos of Bushalo elders' proclamation that they are 'still here', indicating that achieving this state has become a key value for them (Whyte this issue). It is also there, and cross-culturally, in Lawrence Cohen's consideration of the agonistic worlds of enmity that can focalize just going on with life as a struggle. I do not, however, want to argue that this pattern of focusing on lower-level values is the case for all older people; for present purposes it is enough to say that it is a cultural understanding of what old age can be like that casts its shadows over Western local attempts to fashion compelling models of good old age. Indeed, we see glimmers of other possibilities in these articles. Mama Summer reaches back each year at Christmas, and at some other times, to reactivate one of her unlived lives and work towards realizing the aesthetic values to which she gives a very elevated place. Komol finds a new, slightly less time-consuming way to maintain the value of being respected. And lonely Kyrgyz elders summon their ancestors to reach cherished values of social engagement. For an anthropology that wants to discover or fashion new models of good old age, attending to how older people's high or highest values continue successfully to call to them despite the growing clamour of their lower-level values aimed at getting by is, as these articles show, a key way forward.

I conclude with one final thought on values and good old age. This one draws on the work of the philosopher Samuel Scheffler (2016), who has recently developed a striking argument that all value projects share one key foundational assumption: that the human world in which the person pursuing such a project lives will continue to exist after they die. If we come to believe that as soon as we perish the whole human world will perish too, Scheffler argues that all of our goals will cease to have meaning.

Without an assumption of an afterlife of this kind, Scheffler suggests, life would not appear to human beings as worth living. I would narrow his observation to the claim that it is not that people necessarily need to assume all of humanity will continue to survive after they are gone in order to find life meaningful, but that they need at least to be convinced that their own social worlds will endure, since it is in those worlds that their values and what counts as the realization of them are defined (cf. Lear 2006). In a world in which the sense that things are constantly changing, and much is being lost, has escaped its original modernist confines to become global, and in which this sense often enough responds at least to some extent to what is really happening, it may be that older people do confront situations in which it looks like their worlds – the ones their value projects contributed to creating and sustaining – will not have robust afterlives after they are gone. This is why for Komol it is the time of ‘enough’ for the sundial. Workable models of good old age will have to confront the real threat that this kind of situation will become much more common than it once was. That is a final challenge which this original and important volume sets for us by stressing that for the time being things could always, both for better or for worse, change.

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Postface

Résumé

En dialogue avec les articles du présent volume, cette postface revient sur la relation entre temporalité, vieillissement et modèles du bien. Elle examine, en particulier, les divers modèles de temps présents dans chaque lieu étudié par les contributrices et contributeurs et la manière dont ils évoluent les uns par rapport aux autres à mesure que les gens vieillissent. L’auteur explore aussi la façon dont les changements que subissent les horizons temporels quand on prend de l’âge peuvent modeler la composante prospective des modèles du bien. Sont-ce les valeurs qui changent au fil de la vie, ou les modèles de leur réalisation ? De qui faut-il emprunter en priorité les modèles du bien pour décider de ce qu’est le bien-vieillir ? Ces considérations et d’autres visent à placer la temporalité au centre des discussions actuelles sur les valeurs, l’éthique et le vieillissement.