Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Jan Baars. *Aging and the Art of Living*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2012.

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Writing in 1874, the Swiss philosopher, poet, and critic Henri Amiel said, "To know how to grow old is the master work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living" (Ash, 2003, p. 78). Nearly a century and a half later, Baars takes up this challenge in his deeply philosophical reflection on the art of living and, in doing so, adds significantly to the gerontological discourse. *Aging and the Art of Living* revitalizes the origins of philosophy which began with the search for the good life (e.g. what, if anything, makes life meaningful). The book provides a masterful synthesis of ideas about aging that draws from classical philosophers –such as Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and Cicero, among others – to modern-era philosophers including Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Hannah Arendt. This well-written and clearly organized book weaves poetic insights with precise reflections on topics that include living in time; wisdom; and the meaning of aging.

This book makes significant and unique contributions to gerontology by challenging assumptions, articulating alternative perspectives, and inspiring new possibilities for aging and living fully. Aging is about time, and the ways that we measure, analyse, and experience time are explored using the tools of philosophy. A key argument is that the emphasis on chronometric time is misplaced and has led to a focus on living longer in which aging well is equated with staying young. Chronometric time leads to generalizations about aging that reinforce prejudices in social policies (e.g., mandatory retirement) and ignores the personal experience of living in time in which awareness of temporality is subjective and reflexive. Other aspects of measuring time, including whether time might be reversible or irreversible, are examined. This thoughtful analysis explores how "objective" measures of time neglect the lived experience of time which is more relevant to human endeavors and to understanding aging.

Until recently, science has focused on extending life, rather than on improving the quality of living. This focus has underpinned the development of an anti-aging industry to delay senescing and dying. The desire to live longer presupposes that a longer life is intrinsically better and fails to recognize that "it is not only possible to die too early, but also to die too late" (p. 83). This sense of finitude has profound meaning for living as well as for how we think about dying. Baars is compassionate in acknowledging why we all want to live longer, but his assessment is clear: a longer life is still finite and has value only if that life is of good quality and is not being endured primarily because of a person's desire to delay death.

Much can be learned about the art of living from ancient Greek and Roman cultures. Cicero, for example, was one of the first philosophers to apply a long tradition of thinking about the art of living to aging as a stage of life with its own value and meaning. Old age has its merits and qualities just as do other phases of life. As Seneca noted in *Letters from a Stoic*: "We should cherish old age and enjoy it. It is full of pleasure if you know how to use it. Fruit tastes most delicious just when its season is ending. The charms of youth are at their greatest at the time of its passing" (Seneca, 1982, p. 58). In classical philosophy, old age is considered a meaningful part of life rather than merely a time of disengagement and waiting for death. Age brings a certain intensity to being alive – one is more conscious of transience, and having a lived sense of history can enlarge, rather than shrink, perspective. The urgencies of youth have passed, and if one is in reasonably decent health with the leisure and freedom to spend the days as desired, then one can feel "glad to be alive" even when life is almost over. This vision of a "good old age" suggests the possibilities although it doesn't address an old age that reflects the impact of cumulative disadvantages acquired over the life course. How does one realize the potential of later life if one begins with inequities related to race, gender, and socio-economic status?

Classical philosophers are credited with proposing that education should go beyond what is needed for a career; the goal is to educate for a whole life. The familiar idea that education should be lifelong is enriched by the belief that it should also include education for a long life in all its aspects. This approach to education helps one to see the possibilities of aging and achieving a good old age, rather than regarding aging as a collection of inevitable losses and burdens. One of the possibilities that Baars sees in aging is the search for wisdom, in which "truth" is ageless. In the Socratic ideal, wisdom is not acquired simply by growing old, although it is more likely to accumulate with age. Because deep understanding takes years to develop, those devoted to philosophy are respected as teachers. Baars contends

that defining the aging process in terms of mental and physical declines and the onset of disease has contributed to a declining interest in acquiring wisdom and in a loss of respect for aging.

Western philosophers reflecting on time, such as Heidegger, have typically developed a philosophy of death that examines the finitude and meaning of life. Baars shifts this focus by suggesting another facet of finite living: time as hope. According to the philosopher Ernst Bloch, time experienced as hope reaches beyond death if what we have not achieved on Earth is taken up by others who make it their own and continue to pursue a better future.

A particularly interesting discussion in *Aging and the Art of Living* focuses on our personal identity as conveyed through narratives. Stories are not meant to provide empirical descriptions of events and actions but rather to be a medium for reflection—an interpretation and reinterpretation of one's personal identity by recalling actions and experiences. Baars connects the use of narratives to reflection and the ongoing search for wisdom by examining what one can learn by coming to terms with previous actions. Stories about our lives are necessarily selective – what we focus on depends on what we remember, our interpretation of reality, and more. Stories are not simply informational; what is important varies with the context and present situation of a given person's life. Baars questions the assumption that older adults need to come to terms with their lives through activities such as life review but does find value in the reminiscence which can interest others in aging and influence the way aging is seen.

Questions such as "why do we age" and "is it good to live longer" are examined to illustrate the distinction between a causal "why" and a "teleological why" that focuses on meaning. Another distinction is made between contingent and existential limitations. *Contingent limitations* are those that are not inevitable to aging. Scientific and technological progress has eliminated many of the contingent problems of later life such as access to healthcare and economic security. By contrast, *existential limitations* are a natural condition of human frailty and involve vulnerabilities that are inherent and must be accepted. It is in this realm that the humanities can help us acknowledge limitations and cope with difficult circumstances. Approaches that emphasize creativity, reflection, and meaning can increase resilience in meeting challenges and improve the quality of life. Baars contends that gerontology requires approaches taken from both sciences and humanities (p. 244) to avoid distorting the reality of aging which involves both contingent and existential limitations. For example, poverty in later life is a contingent limitation that should not be accepted—the situation can be improved. However, frailty associated with aging may have to be accepted as an existential limitation.

The final chapter offers a vision of an art of aging infused with hope and possibilities for living meaningfully by moving beyond understanding the aging process as pathological. Baars criticizes approaches that identify finitude with dying and suggests that a transpersonal orientation involving goals and participation that transcend individual plans and embrace goals that extend beyond one's own life. With aging can come a transgenerational perspective that he contends can bring a widening concern for and interest in others and a sense of responsibility to guide the next generation.

Gerontologists have generally devoted themselves to addressing the specific issues and logistical – as well as physical – problems of aging and aging populations. Baars argues that we need to think more deeply about aging and about how to develop a culture that values old age to both inspire and support older adults to lead full lives until the end. He suggests aging can inspire a deepening receptivity that brings a "new openness of experience, giving, and receiving" (p. 252).

This book highlights the important contributions that philosophy can make to the complex questions of aging for which there are often no definitive answers. Unfortunately, efforts to infuse the humanities into gerontology over the past half century have met with little progress (Ansello, 2007; Kivnick & Pruchno, 2011). Gerontologists, philosophers, and graduate students will appreciate this text, which is certain to trigger many discussions. The dense content makes it challenging but gratifying because the book integrates continental philosophy, contemporary social theory, and classic texts. Key strengths include (1) its examination of chronometric time and the implications for modern views of aging; (2) a critical examination of discourses on aging in relation to efforts to control aging through science and technology; and (3) envisioning an inspirational view of aging in which older adults can aspire to wisdom and meaningful participation in life on this earth until death.

References

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