The Phenomenology of Aging

Institute for Hermeneutic Phenomenology
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Syllabus

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The Phenomenology of Aging

This course offers a phenomenological and hermeneutical account of aging. The course will focus on the deleterious health effects of ageism in our own youth obsessed culture, explore the ways in which the structures of human experience and our relationship to the world are modified by the aging process, and examine possible ways in which the inevitability of aging and death can be genuinely integrated into one’s life. The course will draw principally on Simone de Beauvoir’s masterwork The Coming of Age and supplemented by the phenomenologies of Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg-Gadamer, and some contemporary hermeneutic philosophers and social theorists.

The course begins with a critical interpretation of ageism as a cultural mood that manifests death denial and flight from impending disability and examines the psychic and somatic costs of this denial for the elderly. We then turn to an analysis of the ways in which the aging process transforms lived-experience by altering the phenomenological structures of embodiment, relationality, temporality, and self-understanding. We conclude with an account of ‘authentic aging’ and the possible ways that growing old can be existentially edifying and enriching.
Day 1: Ageism as a Cultural Mood

In this session, we examine ageism from a phenomenological perspective as a cultural mood by drawing on Heidegger’s account of Stimmung in Being and Time. We then explore the underlying motivation for ageism as a form of death/disability denial, and identify some of the toxic effects of ageism on the elderly.

Key Questions

1. What is the phenomenological conception of mood, and how does it inform ageist attitudes in Euro-American culture?

2. What is it that motivates our ageist tendencies, and what does it have to do with the myth of control over the body?

3. What does it mean to refer to human existence in terms of ‘being-towards-disability/death’?

4. At what point in life does one become aged or elderly in today’s world?

Session Readings:


Day 2: Aging as Structural Breakdown

In this session, we examine the phenomenological structures of human experience—focusing specifically on embodiment, intercorporeality, temporality, and understanding—and the extent to which these structures are modified and breakdown in the aging process. We will offer some critiques of biomedical gerontology and discuss how a phenomenological approach to aging helps to illuminate the experiential aspects of this structural disruption.

Key Questions

1. Explain the phenomenological distinction between the corporeal body (Körper) and the lived-body (Leib). Why is this distinction important in understanding the experience of aging?

2. Why does Beauvoir refer to boredom as the core mood of the elderly?

3. How does the disruption of our structural constitution in aging alter our self-interpretations?

4. How might the insights of the phenomenology of aging be incorporated into mainstream healthcare and gerontology research?

Session Readings:


Day 3: Aging and Authenticity

If authenticity, as the Greek word authentikos suggests, has something to do with being ‘genuine’ or ‘true’ to one’s self, and the self is not just who we are today but who we will be, then ageism looks like a form of dishonesty or self-denial. In this session, we will explore the ways in which we can overcome this self-denial and come to authentically accept our future selves. We will draw on some narrative conceptions of selfhood to frame the conception of authenticity and how this conception might be integrated into contemporary gerontology.

Key Questions

1. What does it mean to be authentic? What are some of the ways that authenticity has been conceived in the classical and modern traditions?

2. How does Heidegger’s existential phenomenology and narrative conception of self allow us to re-envision our understanding of authenticity?

3. How can authenticity be successfully integrated into discourses of gerontology, and what kinds of socio-historical obstacles must be overcome for this to happen?

4. To what extent can the acceptance of aging and death shake us out of inauthenticity?
Session Readings:

Aho, Kevin. “Temporal Contraction and Existential Awakening: A Phenomenology of Authentic Aging” (draft)


**Day 4: The Value of Aging**

In an ageist culture, the question of what it means to grow old in a way that is existentially edifying and enriching becomes increasingly problematic. In this concluding session, we draw on different cultural traditions and some examples from our own history to creatively re-envision the aging process so that we can begin to regard the elderly (and our own future selves) with the respect and dignity they (we) deserve.

**Key Questions**

1. What does it mean to age successfully in our Euro-American context? How might this version of success be viewed as detrimental to what we have called ‘authentic aging’?

2. Are physical health, financial prosperity, and the experience of pleasure essential to aging well?

3. How does popular culture often prevent us from seeing alternative visions of successful aging? What might this have to do with death/disability denial?

4. What are the some of the gendered dynamics at play that shape our conceptions of aging well? How is growing old for a woman, for example, experienced and interpreted differently than it is for a man?

Session Readings:

Aho, Kevin. “Temporal Contraction and Existential Awakening: A Phenomenology of Authentic Aging” (draft)
