

Growing Old Together

A Shared Achievement

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In this essay, I account for what we mean by old, what it means to grow old, and what we might mean by a shared achievement in the case of growing old together. I turn to the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz for some early insights on the shared time embodied in growing older together and how a ‘we-relationship’ shored up by this temporal structure is the foundation for constituting the social world. I follow Schutz’s attempt to use this temporality to describe the case of making music together and conclude that what Schutz calls growing *older* together is not the same as growing *old* together which is necessarily embodied in a way his account of making music together is not. I give an embodied, enactivist account of making music together as a performance and, drawing on recent work by Shaun Gallagher, offer an aesthetics of growing old together as a performance enacted by individuals whose intimate engagements in that performance accomplish the shared achievement of growing old together. | *Keywords: Anonymity, Love, Schutz, Gallagher, Performance*

1. Introduction

I want to talk about growing old together. My interest is not in ageing but, rather, in the rich and complex process of growing old, the embodied sense of old age coming on, taking hold of you and progressing to the end. And I am especially interested in old age coming on and taking hold in the company of someone who is also growing old in the same sense. I am interested in the reciprocity embodied in caring about our own growing old in the company of someone else and in the course of caring about the growing old of that someone else. By extension, I am interested in how a concern for one’s growing old impacts this companion and about how the growing old of this companion impacts us. I will come to call this embodied reciprocity a performance that individuals enact in the company of their companions, not a performance they put on to veil the sense of growing old, but an informed accomplishment performed and achieved to contribute to the growing old of everyone involved. This performance enacts growing old, and in the company of a companion, it enacts a growing old together. The shared achievement of growing old

together, I will argue, can have an aesthetic quality evident and appreciable in its enactment.

To get at this achievement, I discuss what it means to be old, what it means to be together and what it means to enact or perform this achievement. What it means to be old and what it means to be together are both culturally defined, and these cultural designations serve as the material conditions of the performance of growing old together much as the venue and the larger social world serve as the material conditions for the performance of a play, a dance or a piece of music. To clarify what I have in mind, I appeal to the notion of growing older together introduced by Alfred Schutz to account for a shared time that, he believes, subtends the anonymous constitution of the social world, anonymous because it constitutes the world as it might be lived by anyone. This formal, structural condition for the possibility of a truly social reality will prove to fall short of what I mean by growing old together, but it points us in a promising direction.

Schutz uses this same notion to give a provocative account of the shared temporality of making music together where the performers and listeners but also the composer grow older together even when the composer lived one hundred years ago and even if the audience is listening to a recording of performers who are also dead or not the performers they once were when making the recording. This attractive suggestion belies, however, just how disembodied Schutz's notion of growing older together is, and what I have in mind with the shared achievement of growing old together is above all embodied in the very sense of how our growing old alerts us to changes in the body that sign that growing old. There is also a disconnect with Schutz's notion of growing *older* together and our notion of growing *old* together. Young people can grow older without yet growing old in the relevant sense. The population of one or another locale can grow older, China, for example, without everyone populating that environment growing old and without all of them having an embodied sense of encroaching old age.

The example of making music together, nonetheless, includes the role of performance, and if we consider the performance involved in making music together, we note, where Schutz did not, that it is positively and thoroughly embodied. We see this in the presence and arrangement of the players on a stage or occupying a remote, defined space when the performers are separated to facilitate making music in a pandemic or to share recorded music across great distances. We see it in the relation of musicians to their instruments and in the relation of the performers to a live audience (still the gold standard for playing and listening to music). So, we can say that there is music, really music only in the embodied performing of it. This embodied account of performing music together will fall short of what I have in mind, but it points us to the embodied performance of actors in the theater that will emerge as a model for the promised and shared achievement of growing old together.

The aesthetics of performance have been explored by Shaun Gallagher. And we will follow Gallagher in giving an aesthetics of growing old together as a shared performance and achievement with various possible outcomes. Like all performances, growing old together may go well or ill. In every case, where it comes to growing old together, it will be a shared achievement enacted by the parties growing old. In the best case, when the affective mesh attending this performance is enjoined by care and love, it will produce the most beautiful endings with the most aesthetically rewarding results. Such endings are a worthy goal for this performance, perhaps even the most that can be expected in the shared achievement of growing old together. I will conclude by urging that those of us fortunate enough to have someone to grow old together with commit to achieving just those endings.

2. Who Are You Calling Old

Only people who are old think about growing old. Young people may think about growing old enough to drive, old enough to vote or old enough to decide for themselves how they want to live. Generally, however, young people do not think about the process that will bring them to that state, and that state, being old enough, is not yet old. Middle-aged people are old enough to decide for themselves, say, how they want to live, but they are not old enough to think about growing old. Someone middle-aged might think about growing old in the abstract. They might think, for example, about whether they will have saved enough money to grow old or whether they would prefer to spend their last days in a warmer climate, but they will only begin to think about growing old when they are old and growing older. In fact, you know you are old when you start to think about growing old. How old is that? Old is not a number. It is closer to what the slogan – you’re only as old as you feel – would have us believe. Old is not a state of mind, however, but a sense of embodiment, a sense of how our bodies are comported or disposed to the growing old of their lives.

Social scientists distinguish between chronological age and the age people say they feel most of the time (Laber-Warren, 2019). Chronological age is a measure of the number of years someone has existed. It offers an index of what people can expect to feel after a specified number of trips around the sun. People who “feel their age” calculate that how they feel matches what a consensus holds that people who have made that many trips feel or should feel. That consensus is not arrived at by collective, deliberative reasoning. It is, rather, a representation of that feeling marketed by the purveyors of popular media that passes as consensus because there is a return on the investment those purveyors make on marketing those representations. People are shown representations of growing old that match what advertisers (and purveyors of popular media are all advertisers) predict they can reasonably persuade people to believe and consume to the advantage of the producers of the products and service their advertisements promote.

Those representations are not invented capriciously, of course, but in concert with what is predicted to resonate with the consumers of the products and

services marketed by them. Often, they seem to lag behind the trends. For a long time, the disposable income of an older population has been outstripping that of the coveted youth market, but only recently has advertising represented that population as healthy and wealthy enough to indulge spending on themselves. Those representations of healthy, wealthy old people aim to persuade people, when they are old, to spend more on themselves and to feel good about it. It also sends the message to those not yet old that they should plan for the same future, seeing old age as the beginning of a new life and not the end of life as they know it. Old age is, by one measure, a representation people are inclined to accept because it gives them reasons for thinking there is a life to live in old age that is worth living.

Of course, such representations of old age are true for a select demographic defined almost exclusively by class. There are plenty of less than wealthy people who enjoy an otherwise prosperous old age, lifted by the riches of familial affections and cultural affiliations, and their lives provide an important guide for what we have to say, in the end, about growing old together. Representations of old age as the beginning of a new life suggest that old age, and the prospect of growing old together, can be deferred by sound investing and planned access to assistance. For the very well-heeled, old age may be deferred indefinitely. Most of us, however, will grow old. Some of us who grow old will think about growing old. Some of us who grow old, whether we think about it or not, will be fortunate to have someone to grow old together with. Those of us who are so fortunate would do well to reflect on our good fortune. Perhaps, then, we will be able to participate in the mutually rewarding performance of growing old together.

Before we can discuss growing old together and how this growing old is a shared achievement, though, we have to get clearer about what we mean by 'old'. For our purposes, we will limit the discussion to a sense of 'old' embodied by human beings (so not pets or university issued laptops), and we can refine this limitation by stipulating that, in the case of human beings, 'old' refers to 'old age' or the later part of a normal life where that norm is a socially agreed upon standard subject to change. As already suggested, that agreement is forged in cultural markers distributed in advertising but also in the demographics of the workplace which trade on media representations to distinguish senior from junior partners and to distribute tasks according to their perceived fitness and experience.¹ Changes in the norm may result from enhanced nutrition and advanced medical technology or the debilitating physical and psychological impact of a pandemic. Life expectancy defines the upper-most limit of a normal life, and 'old age' is the part of a human life lived in proximity to that limit.

Life expectancies vary locally (at the time of this writing, life expectancies range internationally from 54 years of age in the Central African Republic to 85 in Hong Kong and Japan), but at every locale there is the experience of old age

¹ Media representations include visual imagery in movies, television, videos and memes, as well as narrative imagery in theater, literature and dance. Other cultural markers can be found in architecture designed to assist older people with grips and lifts, etc.

(*Life Expectancy by Country and in the World - Worldometer*, no date). Old age also varies within each locale. Among those who struggle to make ends meet, wherever they live, a normal life is regularly shorter and more fraught than it is for those who do not struggle at that same locale. Maladies may befall those who do not struggle and shorten their lives, but they are experienced as exceptions to the norm. That is to say, the life expectancy of people who struggle, wherever they live, may be shorter than that of people who do not, making old age and the experience of growing old different for different people living in the same setting, so that it is not just old age but the experience of growing old that varies locally.

Togetherness can vary locally, too, and those locales can be as expansive as a hemisphere or a continent, a territory or a population of people and as restrictive as that collectivity we call the family, any collection of people with shared goals, values and expectations for a life they live together. Within such collectives, I want to draw our attention to those who are most locally and intimately growing old together, those who have advanced to what, for each of them, is old age and who are growing old together. I am most interested in the environment created by people whose growing old is mutually a concern for others who are near and dear to them, people for whom their own growing old impacts and is impacted by the growing old of others. I am especially interested in the field of affordances sown and turned up by people related by shared plans for a life that includes growing old together.

The specific scene I have in mind involves people who have shared a life together when they were not yet old or even considering old age, who now have become old together and will live out their old age in a relationship that will be modified by the circumstances attending to their growing old. The *locus classicus* of this scene will be the married couple or the long-term relationship between two or more people who are not necessarily married, and this scene may also emerge from an association of close friends who do not share a domicile but who spend considerable time with one another and look out for each other. It will often involve an asymmetry where one of the partners is growing old faster than another for a number of reasons. These individuals may be older, in fact, or infirmed, or they may have suffered some hardship, the loss of loved ones or other resources, for example. In the best case, the scene will be characterized by care, and what I want to explore in this essay is the ecology of this care, the local environment where this care emerges, the affordances that are sown and that turn up in that environment, the skilled handling of those affordances and the dominant affective mesh that attends that care, which is akin to what bell hooks (2001) calls love.

3. Phenomenology

I was introduced to the idea of growing old together when I was too young to think about it. In an undergraduate class on Modern European Philosophy, Maurice Natanson mentioned in passing the phenomenon of growing older together, taken from Alfred Schutz, to describe a sense of shared time. Little about that sense of temporality made an impression at the time, but the idea

of growing old together, without yet knowing what to think about it, did. As it turns out, now, Natanson was referring to the account of the internal time that Schutz (1967) argued is structurally prior to a “typified” or already constituted sense of time, what we might refer to as “clock time,” that is already past. This internal time consciousness, following the idea introduced by Edmund Husserl, forms, for Schutz, the basis for our constituting and accumulating a stock of objects and schemata in a past that we draw on to give meaning to our present experiences (Husserl, 1964).

Consider an example of how we turn to such a stock and scheme. We have a present experience of a woman walking her dog, Schutz might say, by drawing on past constitutions of a certain biped as a human female, a particular quadruped as a dog and the leash connecting them as signifying a relation of ownership, dependence or control. We may be mistaken. It may turn out that it is not her dog but a dog the woman is walking as a service for someone else. It may turn out that the person is not female but male or transexual. And if either or both of these interpretations eventuate, they become a part of our stock of typified schemata that we will draw on in future experiences of comparable scenes. Nevertheless, undergirding and structurally prior to these typified experiences constituted in relation to the past, there is for Schutz, a present flow of time, a *durée* that is shared and that constitutes what he calls a “we-relationship.” A pre-thetic consciousness of time, shared by the observer and the observed, is the milieu where the experience of a woman walking her dog is constituted, and Schutz (1967, p. 103) calls this shared sense of time “growing older together”.²

One important respect in which Schutz advances on Husserl’s phenomenology is by conceiving the social world as a phenomenological given (Bregman, 1973, p. 197). Husserl posited a transcendental ego as the condition for the intentional consciousness of the world as meaningful and as mine. From the perspective of my transcendental ego, for example, I intend the scene just described as a woman walking her dog. Someone else, from their perspective, intends the same woman as rescued by a companion animal. Someone else, still, focusses on the dog and the leash and intends an animal restrained by its handler. That leaves Husserl with having to account for how my transcendental ego could have access to the others or could be absolutely confident that there are other transcendental egos or phenomenological subjects in that world. For Schutz, however, other subjects are a given. They are not independent agents needing access to one another but intersubjective from the start, necessarily linked by a shared temporal milieu.

“The ‘we-relationship,’ whose temporal mode is that of ‘growing older together’, as Schutz put it, replaces the transcendental ego as the appropriate starting place for phenomenological reflections on the constitution of meaning when the structure of sociality is to be understood” (Ibid.). There is an immediacy in this relationship that is prized by Schutz for the way it surpasses the continuum of anonymity that characterizes our everyday lived

² See also Schutz (1945; 1953; 1955) all reprinted in Schutz (1973).

experiences. The temporality of growing older together is the pre-given basis for this immediacy. With it, the we-relationship sustains a primordial vitality that resonates beneath the humdrum of human affairs, but this we-relationship in growing older together provides only the structural condition for the possibility of such an experience of everyday social reality. What interests us is the embodied sense of growing old together where individuals in associations with others materially live out the changes brought on by old age in themselves and others and physically accommodate themselves to these changes.

In a later essay, Schutz (1951) appears to make room for our more pragmatic concerns when he extends the shared temporality of the we-relationship to the experience of making music together. There, Schutz appeals to the temporality of growing older together to account for what he calls the polythetic experience of making music when composing it, performing it and beholding it. In the experience of making music, as Schutz accounts for it, we constitute the melody or the theme over time, constituting one tone as the tonic, another as the dominant in relation to a harmonizing constituted as situating these tones in a sequence that completes a musical phrase repeated with variation to establish the tune as a whole. Schutz believes that when we perform or behold a piece of music, we make music together. When we do, we share the time it takes for the theme to be constituted with one another and with the composer who likewise constituted the music over time when she scored it. For Schutz, performers grow older together with other performers playing the same music on the same stage, with the audience beholding that performance, which likewise shares it with those performers and with other members of the audience, and all of them grow older together with the composer who may have written the music one hundred years ago.

Provocative as it may seem, this model raises several challenging questions. Can it really be the case that Mozart, who never grew old in the sense that concerns us, grows older with the musicians from the Borromeo Quartet performing his *String Quartet No. 19 in C major, K. 465* (1785) two hundred years after his death? Does Mozart grow older to the same degree and in the same way when the same quartet is performed by different musicians, say those forming the Brentano Quartet? And what about the musicians themselves? Do they grow older in the same way when they perform a quartet by Beethoven as when they perform one by Mozart? We may think Mozart's music grows older (or does it grow younger) with each successive performance of it by generations of musicians who realize his music according to the musical conventions of their time (in a debate with those who believe that Mozart's music ought to be played according to the conventions of his time), but does Mozart himself grow older? Or are we to think that it's the picture we have of Mozart that grows older and not Mozart himself? But how does a picture grow older?

It seems reasonable to think that musicians who have performed together for several years grow older together. We will return to the example of string quartets in a moment, but to take an example from popular music, the

musicians known as the Rolling Stones have clearly grown older together. In Schutz's sense this shows not in their evident ageing in the public eye but in the we-relationship that subtends their palpable sense of being able to make music together more or less effortlessly even with minor changes to their personnel. They are one of a few exceptions in a pop music industry which thrives on the humdrum of anonymously sedimented culture that Schutz believes the temporality of the we-relation structurally predates. Again, however, difficult questions arise. Isn't the growing older together of a twenty-year-old fan listening to *Satisfaction*, today, much different from the growing older together of the fan who was twenty years old when *Satisfaction* was first popular and the Rolling Stones were not at all old? Again, it is provocative to think that Keith Richards grows older and older, still, with each generation that listens to his music, but it is not clear what this means.

These questions highlight the difference that emerges in the discussion above between growing *older* together and growing *old* together. As a marker of the shared temporality that subtends the constitution of social reality, growing older together is not anonymous, but it is universal. It belongs to no one in particular because it belongs to everyone. Growing older together is the structural condition for the possibility of constituting the phenomenal world as intersubjective and social. That social world is sedimented by all the ways that the world has been constituted by real individuals with know-how and skills and goals they share with others immediately and not so immediately associated with them. The shared temporality of growing older together does not, however, address the material, pragmatic concerns of people intimately engaged in the experience of growing old together. Old age, which is not always involved in growing older together, is necessarily a part of growing old together.

Lucy Bregman (1973, p. 201) alerts us, in addition, to how disembodied Schutz's shared temporality is. Her concern is with the psycho-sexual development of children and their sense of identity. Our concern is with the suggestion that the music Schutz says must be performed to make music, nonetheless, rehearses a musical idea and ignores the material exigencies of making music together. Consider the motion picture *A Late Quartet* (Yaron Zilberman, 2012), an example I have referred to elsewhere (Carvalho, 2019). In it, a string quartet that has performed together for twenty-five years plays the eponymous late string quartet by Beethoven, *No. 14 in C# minor, Op. 131* (1826). The quartet is in seven movements scored to be played without a pause. Ordinarily, in the course of performing such classical music, the quartet pauses between movements to collect itself and to tune their instruments to their exacting standards. Playing without breaks, the performers must adjust their playing to the detuning of their instruments, to the detuning of the instruments of the other performers in the quartet, to their individual and collectively strained stamina as well as to various changes in the environment where they are performing.

In this image, the instruments are extensions of the physical bodies of the performers, the musculoskeletal frameworks which likewise 'go out of tune'

with use over the course of a life just as those instruments tend to do over the course of a performance. Convalescence or sleep can give the physical body time to retune itself, but mostly, as in the performance of that late quartet, attention to and compensation for the body's going out of tune must be accomplished on the fly, in the course of pursuing other ends, without time to pause and refresh. In the course of performing that late quartet, the entire body of the musician is engaged in maintaining her instrument as a means for making the music she is playing, but this engagement is incomplete if it is not shared by the other performers. The engagement of each musician with their instrument must be shared with every other player to make music together with those instruments. Making music together is possible only when a reciprocity is achieved among the players playing it. We have here an embodied sense of making music together that surpasses what Schutz attempted by giving material content to the form of what he called growing older together.

In the film, the cellist, played by Christopher Walken, unbeknownst to the other players, is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. His flesh-and-bones body is breaking down and cannot keep up with the demands of his instrument and the music he wants to play. Walken's character is not just growing older with the others in Schutz's sense but growing old in the sense that interests us. In fact, he is the elder statesman in the quartet. The others were his students at points in their musical training. And at the end of the film, in the midst of a performance of the late quartet, Walken's character stops after six movements and announces to the audience and his colleagues, that he is too frail to finish the piece. He has arranged for a young cellist, likely another one of his students, to spell him, and he yields the stage to her. Walken's character is growing old but not yet together with anyone.

4. Performance

Walken's character's embodied sense of old age coming on and taking hold, of his body breaking down, led him to a doctor's office and a diagnosis that confirmed and gave a name to that sense. His sense of approaching old age led him to act in response to his growing old. Often, the sense of old age comes in the form of an illness or an accident and a slowed convalescence from that malady. In other cases, it is an awareness of having "lost a step." Your stamina is not what it used to be, your metabolism slows down, you are more quickly out of breath, and you do things to compensate for these changes. You give yourself more time to complete tasks and fewer things to do in the time available. You see a doctor to confirm your suspicions. You adjust your diet. You exercise more regularly, and all of these things, not least of all your embodied sense of growing old, impact you and those in your most immediate circle of companions.

The things you do in response to your body's growing old become a performance when they are enacted with an embodied sense of their impact on yourself and others, when they are undertaken with what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012, pp. 184–189) called 'style', when you enact them to navigate the

environment you share with others attuned to how your actions modify that environment for yourself and others. It may be rare when the interactions undertaken to allay the ravages of old age rise to the level of an accomplished performance. More often, people begrudgingly adapt to their limitations and those of their companions. More often, still, they complain loudly about those limitations and demand help from family, friends and healthcare professionals. But it sometimes happens that someone attuned to their own particular embodiment of old age, grows old with style and, when there are close companions involved, the performance of this attunement to their growing old will incorporate a sense of the growing old of those companions who themselves may or may not be attuned to their own growing old.

Our embodied model of making music together seems to approximate this picture, but it is worth considering whether the performance of growing old together shares more affinities with the performance of actors on a theatrical stage than with the performance of music. When making music with others, each performer strives to make music emerge from the tones she is playing in concert with her collaborators. The music achieved in this way is something other than what any one of the performers enacts alone and, even as a shared achievement, it is separable from the performers taken together. A string quartet may perform Mozart's *No. 19 in C major* and Beethoven's *No. 14 in C# minor* and many other compositions besides without becoming different musicians in each case. Rather, the music becomes different because played by this quartet and not another, and there is no exclusive connection between the music achieved by the performers playing together and any one of those performers who could be replaced, as in the example from *A Late Quartet*.

In a theatrical performance, by contrast, actors take on roles they enact in the course of a play with other actors also embodying roles. The differently embodied roles contribute to the staging of a play in the presence of an audience using props, costumes, lighting, dialogue and music (perhaps) to achieve this effect. The effect achieved is a world enacted by actors for an audience that enacts that same world in their appreciation of the play. That play exists apart from those actors and audience as a script for past and future performances of it, but the world enacted in this performance of that script is inseparable from the acting that achieved it. In fact, that world is brought to life and inhabited not by the actors but by the characters enacted in the roles those actors play. The world of the play is achieved only when the actors become something other than they are, when they become the roles that they play.

The relation of actors to the characters they play is often described as empathy (Gallagher, 2021; Gallagher and Gallagher, 2020). Empathy, an English language translation of the German *Einfühlung*, was introduced to account for the animating effect of objects such as artworks, for our way of being moved by such works and feeling or reading ourselves into them (Titchener, 1909, p. 21). Very soon, this was applied to the animating effect of other people to account for how we experience what another individual experiences by projecting our own experiences onto them (Lipps, 1906; 1909). Wilhelm Dilthey identified

two levels of empathy (Gallagher, 2021, p. 102). One turns up in elementary encounters with others where identifying their motives is indispensable for basic interactions. At a higher level, Dilthey thought, empathy builds on these elementary encounters with considerations of context and by drawing on an imaginative representation that stimulates an experience in ourselves of what we encounter with others (Gallagher, 2021, p. 103). For Shaun Gallagher (*Ibid.*), this higher order empathy involves a narrative framework that can be enhanced by the kinds of artistic expression we find in theater.

We can grasp empathy as the affective resonance that attends an actor's playing a part. This affective resonance enhances the actor's embodiment of a role. It adds something to the physical embodiment of the character she is playing with the assistance of costuming and make-up, the assumption of a posture and a gait, a dialect that colors the lines she speaks and expressions that add character to the part. These lower orders of embodiment will be informed by higher order cognitive capacities – memory, imagination, a method – called upon and formed by the embodiment specific to this performance. Gallagher appeals to the concept of a meshed architecture to account for how already embodied cognitive capacities connect with bodily enactments to fill out the actor's embodiment of her role. And he adds to the vertical axis of this architecture a horizontal axis where he positions affectivity and the larger social and cultural context, to fill out the enacting of this performance.

Generally speaking, the concept of a meshed architecture was introduced to explain how so-called higher order functions like memory, imagination and intelligence can be incorporated into patently embodied cognitive acts like playing tennis or making a meal. On this view, it is supposed that mindfulness meshes into habitual bodily behaviors thereby making those behaviors somewhat more than the mindless reflexes Herbert Dreyfus attributed to embodied cognition (Sutton, 2011).³ In the case of a theatrical performance, meshed architecture can account for how an actor's preparatory thinking figures in the role she enacts (Gallagher, 2021, p. 43).⁴ When it comes to theater, we notice, right away, that the mesh along the so-called vertical axis runs both ways, that an actor's embodied rehearsal of a role can influence the otherwise cognitive functions. Something that does not play out as planned, for example, leads to rewriting a line or reconceptualizing a scene. In addition, Gallagher's contribution to this view alerts us to a horizontal axis where degrees of affectivity enter the mesh as well as broader cultural and political economic parameters where the mindful corporeality of the role and the play are staged.

When it comes to growing old together, the embodiments of old age in the form of limited mobility and flexibility, memory and vision loss, exacerbated infirmities, and so on, intersect along a vertical axis with medical and home-spun sciences, memories of the becoming old of others, imagined scenarios for

³ Also see Dreyfus (2005).

⁴ See also Tribble (2016).

accomplishing tasks with a differently abled body and narratives about how that body will live out its growing old. Empathy resonates alongside this vertical axis in the projection of this embodiment onto the actions of our companions. Empathy signs and guides our understanding of what they are going through and is as part of an attempt to communicate to them what we are going through. To this meshed architecture we can add the larger social and cultural context – the specific locale and our history in that place, the affinities shared with our companions, the available social resources – where our growing old together transpires.

5. Aesthetics

As suggested above, the meshed architecture of growing old together rises to the level of a performance when the embodiment of old age in ourselves and our companions is enacted with style. For Merleau-Ponty (2012, pp. 187, 197) style shows up in the body's manner of relating to the world. It is given directly in the body's power of expressing itself, but we can also give style to that expression by consciously directing the manner of that expression, by giving it a lightness or circumspection, for example, in response to its material and emotional environs. An actor may affect a style to make her role more convincing, or she may embody that style in a mesh of cognitive, affective and material exigencies. Someone growing old may likewise affect a style for those in their immediate environs, to minimize or exaggerate their need for assistance, but they do not do so to act a part they can discard when their environment changes. Whatever they may affect for others, their growing old is an embodiment that stays with them wherever they go and that they can style in the company of others.

Someone with an embodied sense of old age coming on and taking hold can give style to their engagement with the cognitive, affective and material exigencies afforded by their growing old. This engagement adds an affective dimension to their style that we may compare with the empathy of an actor playing a part. Old age is both foreign and indigenous to the person with an embodied sense of its onset. It is their body that is slowing down and beset with physical and cognitive challenges, but these symptoms are new to them. Previously, their body expressed an embodied sense of vigor and agility. Now, they have an embodied sense of that same body as needing assistance and as less than lithe. This sense of their body growing old is colored by a feeling that emerges in the projection of their body onto an expression of itself it is trying to understand, and they are moved to share this affect with those who, like them, have a comparable sense of their embodying old age. They have an empathic sense of their own growing old and other than they were, and it will sometimes happen that they express this embodied sense to fit the growing old and other of their companions.

For Gallagher (2021, pp. 99–138), the presence of empathy alerts us to the potential for an aesthetic experience in a performance. He locates the aesthetic in the performer's "attunement" to the character she is playing and in her reflexive awareness of the cohesive, meshed gestalt of the performance

as a whole. He describes this aesthetic as “a mindful being in the flow where the performer’s awareness of the performance is one (unified) double attunement to what is happening and to how she is performing when the dynamical gestalt is cohesive” (Gallagher, 2021, p. 136). The aesthetic is achieved by the performer, on this view, just insofar as she enacts the unifying of this double attunement. On Gallagher’s account, this achievement is not given but precarious. It may break down at several different levels within the performance itself. (Gallagher is not concerned here with what experience the audience for this performance may have.) I suspect a performer can achieve an aesthetic experience even when Gallagher’s exacting standards are not met.⁵

The performance of growing old together seems to confirm that suspicion, and if we focus more on style than on the affective mesh of empathy, it is easy to see why. People genuinely growing old together – attuned, as Gallagher says, to their own actions and to the dynamical gestalt of the world created by their acting – share an embodied mesh of exigencies and share, it is true, an affective sense of this embodiment. They care for one another and in doing so care for themselves. In acting out this reciprocity, they become other than they are, no longer just needing assistance but also capable of assisting. They become something other for the sake of those also growing old, and this generosity redounds to them, making them more capable of caring for themselves and of offering help to others. The willingness to become other for the sake of another, again, is how bell hooks describes love (hooks, 2018, pp. 3–5).

This performance, as suggested at the start, will be complex. There will be limits to how much those growing old together can do for others and for themselves. Where love is present, it can give style to the rough patches by giving unity to the complex expressions of the body enacting its sense of growing old. This unity has to be enacted and appreciated. We need to know how to achieve it and how to appreciate that achievement. In the company of someone we love, someone for whose sake we willingly become something other than we are, that unity exhibits a style that we can appreciate aesthetically, a style we create and estimate for the extent it tends toward a loving relation that may wax and wane but consistently draws a style from our growing old that is attuned to the growing old of others. This complex process takes as many forms as there are people growing old. Whatever resources are available, whatever the exigencies attending their embodiment of old age, love will be a guide and a goal for people growing old together with the aim of achieving the most beautiful ending that can be expected from the good fortune of growing old together with someone who is fortunate to grow old together with them. The shared achievement of growing old together enacts this style and achieves this love.

⁵ John Dewey (1934) distinguishes between experience and an experience, the sort of experience that artworks aspire to and ordinary experience approximates. If aesthetics is an appreciation of the unity, complexity and intensity (to borrow Monroe Beardsley’s formula) of an artifact, a performance or a form of life, it may admit of degrees. A performance may be more or less satisfying for the performer, but no less aesthetic, to the extent that the double attunement is achieved in a part of the performance or in the performance as a whole (Beardsley, 1958).

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.8108424