

[SLIDE 1]

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**Aging Just Is:
Illuminating its That-being, How-being & What-being**

Valerie Wright-St Clair

[SLIDE 2] Introduction

Aging is part of life. Its natural occurrence means that, by virtue of living, each and every one of us exists toward being aged. It just happens. In the usual course of life it cannot, not happen. Aging is always already there within our human finiteness. Thus, as something which is unremitting, the being toward aging is present from the event of coming into the world to the moment of going out of it.

[SLIDE 3] I offer here a glimpse at a hermeneutic interpretation of the phenomenon of aging. Philosophically, Heidegger's understandings of the 'that-being,' the 'how-being' and the 'what-being' of phenomena are used to illuminate the notion that 'aging just is.' The deep soil in which the interpretation is grounded is the everyday stories told by 15 New Zealand elders. An outline of the study's design and methods is given in the abstract for this presentation. The photographs shown are not those of the study's participants.

At this point I pause to acknowledge Dr Ngaire Kerse from the University of Auckland and Dr Liz Smythe from AUT University who were my doctoral

thesis supervisors, and who journeyed with me along this interpretive phenomenological pathway.

[SLIDE 4] Let me open with some of Frank's words:

I am 97 and a half, don't forget the half. Like climbing a rope, you go up a foot and you hang on, so I've got to 97 and a half. It's only a number isn't it? It's like the sun and the tide. I can't stop them; you know they are going to come and go, come and go. Age is going to go on, so I just forget about it and let it do its own thing. I haven't worried about anything I have got no control over, like dying or whatever. When your time comes you drop so it's no good worrying about it. Nobody knows how long you will be around. And at home I am free to do what I want to, when I want to, and let age look after itself [Frank, 97].

As Frank speaks, we hear a taken-for-granted-ness of his aging. His aging just is; it is just there, as it has been, as it will be. His words merely allude to what aging is, yet its wholeness remains in the shadows.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Looking philosophically, Heideggerian phenomenology offers an understanding of what is meant by 'aging just is.' **[SLIDE 5]** Interpreting aging as a phenomenon implies "it is something that proximally and for the most part does *not* show itself at all: it is something that lies *hidden*" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 59). Hence, "the being of [aging] is always absent; it labours silently in invisible depths" (Harman, 2007, p. 2). **[SLIDE 6]** So saying aging 'is' means it exists phenomenally; "that it is really there among the all of things, that it occurs, that it can be found somewhere in the natural universe" (King, 2001, p. 12). It can be known, or felt or experienced in some way. Therefore aging is "evidently

something and not nothing, although not a concrete sensible thing in the primary sense of the word” (King, p. 9).

[SLIDE 7] At 97 Frank shows the hallmarks of living long; his hair is grey, his skin is wrinkled, and his body is not as upright as it once was. Yet these things are merely appearances of aging; aging itself remains covered over, concealed within. So although the phenomenon of aging does not make itself manifest in readily knowable ways, it still ‘is.’ **[SLIDE 8]** “But for the kind of thinking that Heidegger urges, the ‘is’ remains a mystery. It refers to a swirling, turbulent absence from visibility that can never be clearly defined. Everything that appears must have arisen from a deeper concealment” (Harman, 2007, p. 149). And the “concealment guards what is secret” (Harman, p. 93). This means aging cannot be understood simply by its characteristics. Its subtleties and deep complexities mean it can never be entirely revealed or known.

[SLIDE 9] Heidegger distinguishes three different understandings of being. ‘That-being’ or “*that* something is” (Inwood, 1999, p. 26) refers to a thing’s existence. And a thing that exists can be understood ontologically in terms of its “How-being, its type, manner or mode of being” (Inwood, p. 27). Whereas ‘What-being’ “says *what* something is...its essential features” (Inwood, p. 26). **[SLIDE 10]** Therefore, phenomenally, the ‘is’ of aging may only be encountered amid everyday dealings through which its ‘that-ness,’ ‘how-ness,’ and ‘what-ness’ may be revealed.

[SLIDE 11] That-being

Returning to Frank’s story, in saying *97 and a half is only a number*, he brings into language the ‘that-ness’ of aging. As he ‘is,’ so is his aging; one points to the other’s existence. There is nothing in particular ‘doing’ the aging, it “is just *happening*” (Crowe, 2006, p. 186). So the number, 97 and a half, merely stands for the fact that aging ‘is;’ it does not say what or how aging is. And in saying it

is *like the sun and the tide* Frank discloses his knowing “that it is and has to be” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 174). Hence, the metaphor is Frank’s way of indicating the ‘that-ness’ of his aging. **[SLIDE 12]** Phenomenally, “formal indication is a kind of knowledge that hints at some deeper reality....It is a way of making things present without making them present. It does this by means of suggestions, hints, or allusions to the being of things” (Harman, 2007, pp. 27-28). Using metaphorical symbolism is Frank’s way of expressing what is concealed.

[SLIDE 13] In saying he *just forgets about it*, Frank lets his *age look after itself*. He lets it *do its own thing*. He speaks of purposively not attending to the ‘that-ness’ of aging. His words indicate ‘not-letting’ aging come into the things he concerns himself with. In Heideggerian terms, it is a mode of concern characterised by “letting it go” (Heidegger, p. 83). **[SLIDE 14]** So in forgetting about it and letting it go, Frank abandons himself to the thrownness of whatever his aging brings. He is “just living along in a way which ‘lets’ everything ‘be’ as it is” (Heidegger, p. 396).

[SLIDE 15] How-being

Now listen to Madge’s words. She’s 95 and tells of going to do her shopping:

I did a short trip to get some ingredients for making the cake on Wednesday. It was a necessity trip, a quick one, not poking around. So I drove down to the shops and was able to park out on the beach frontage, by the toilets. There is mobility parking there. I didn’t get into that but I got one next to it. And walked to the post office and then I left there and drove back the other way, through the town centre, and I found a park to go to the chemist; only a query. And again I moved the car around to New World and got parking almost at the door. Getting in and out of my car doesn’t

worry me, it just doesn't worry me. It is the walking upright, the feet mostly. My feet are a big worry at the moment because I can't walk very well. But it wasn't a hurry [Madge, 95].

In her story Madge recounts the detail of her shopping trip and, in the telling, the 'how' of going shopping is revealed. Toward the end of her story, Madge happens to mention it is *the walking upright, the feet mostly* which are her *big worry*. This disclosure reveals the meaning behind Madge's way of going about her shopping. As she tells of the *not poking around* trip, the *moving her car* from shop to shop, and the *parking almost at the door*, Madge's words speak of not being able to count on her feet and her walking as she goes about getting the *necessities*. **[SLIDE 16]** "Not counting on...is a mode of taking into account what one cannot hold on to" (King, 2001, p. 260). In other words, with not being able to count on her walking, Madge finds a way of reckoning with that which is no longer there for her; the things which slowly slip away with aging. She is "in charge of its How-being, not its That-being" (Inwood, 1999, p. 60). Yet in her day-to-day reckoning, aging still 'labours silently in invisible depths.' It is almost imperceptible in its life-long 'continuousness.' **[SLIDE 17]** Hence the How-being of aging is its 'uninterrupted-ness;' invisibly connecting one moment in time to the next.

[SLIDE 18] What-being

Hearing Merrill's story throws some light upon understanding what aging essentially is.

I think that aging is what people make it. I have got half an acre here and I do all the garden. So long as it is fine I still go out most days for a while, doing something. I was out in the garden a couple of days ago. I had a look to see if I had any tomatoes left. I have got grapefruit at the moment and mandarins and things like that. I

went around with my basket bringing in whatever I could collect, silverbeet and so forth. Yes, I am just used to doing things. I don't think it has stopped me doing anything. But the age is getting a bit more into my back; more now I am getting older [Merrill, 89].

Merrill says she thinks *that aging is what people make it*. She points to aging as something which does not have the substantiality of other things which are constantly present, like trees or the human body itself (King, 2001). Merrill attempts to express what she 'makes' of her aging by still tending to *all the garden*. Yet although she keeps doing what she has always done, she indicates she is *getting older*. Her words 'getting older' allude to being aged 89 as being not yet old. **[SLIDE 19]** The 'not-yet' is "that which is constantly still outstanding" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 286). Heidegger (1927/1962) indicates that "any Dasein always exists in just such a manner that its 'not-yet' *belongs* to it....[However] the 'not-yet' diminishes as the concealing shadow disappears" (p. 287). Merrill's 'not-yet' diminishes as she moves towards oldness. And in saying her *age is getting a bit more into her back now*, Merrill alludes to how her aging announces itself in mysterious ways. **[SLIDE 20]** In everyday encounterings, the 'what-ness' of aging is in its mysteriousness.

[SLIDE 21]

Aging is that it is, its
 that-being, the that-ness of aging is
 that it exists, it is something in this natural world
 not nothing,
 that it is and has to be means aging happens,
 forgetting about it in the everyday is
 a letting it be

[SLIDE 22]

Aging is how it is, its
 how-being, the how-ness of aging is
 how it is in an everyday way, its mode is
 its continuousness
 almost imperceptible, the taking account of
 how it is, is a reckoning with aging
 for the sake of carrying on

[SLIDE 23]

Aging is what it is, its
 what-being, the what-ness of aging is
 its mysteriousness,
 what aging essentially is, is not merely
 its facticity, its facts are known yet it is only understood
 amid everyday events, agedness is a
 not-yet-oldness.
 Aging just is

[SLIDE 24] Questions and Discussion

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