“When I Was Young” The Idealization of the Interchangeability of Phases of Life

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Abstract This paper presents the concept of the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life as an enhancement, or rather as a further development of Alfred Schutz’s general thesis of the reciprocity of perspectives. It claims that the according figure of thought is a constitutive part of acts of understanding in everyday life where, in order to understand each other, individuals of different age-groups have to overcome the difference of perspectives that are attached to their particular ages. This is accomplished by a specific assumption that is also applied in the case of intrasubjective, autobiographical understanding. By discussing its sociological significance as well as its philosophical background, this paper introduces the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life as a fundamental and universal figure of understanding.

Keywords Aging · Phases of life · Understanding · Reciprocity · Alfred Schutz · Switching perspectives

Introduction

Do you recognize this?

When I was young, it was more important

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Pain more painful
 Laughter much louder
 Yeah, when I was young

If so, then it is highly likely that you have already passed the age of 60, were socialized in the Western hemisphere, and consumed certain illegal substances in your youth. Or none of this is the case and, like me, you are someone with a soft spot for classic rock—in this case, for the song *When I was young* by Eric Burdon & The Animals, released in 1967. The lines above are taken from the chorus of this song.

The personal significance this song might have for you or me is of minor interest here. The subject of this paper is rather to elaborate on the ‘objective’ meaning of the above lines, that is, on their construction of a specific typicality as well as on the insight they hold for a theory of understanding. The main thesis presented here states that Burdon’s song provides a vivid example of an idealization which is a constitutive part of every day acts of understanding, and which I will call the *idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life*. This somewhat intricate title constitutes a direct continuation of the general thesis of the reciprocity of perspectives introduced by Alfred Schutz, whose work is the most important theoretical reference point of the following line of argument. In addition, it draws from various thinkers such as Theodor Litt, Max Weber, Erik Erikson, Karl Mannheim, Arnold van Gennep, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and more.

The Reciprocity of Time Perspectives: Intrasubjective

Let me start with a basic observation: the quoted song lines reflect an act of understanding. At first glance, this act is of an intrasubjective nature: by remembering an earlier stage of his life and describing a way of feeling which was characteristic of his former ego, the singer reflects upon himself. He tries to understand a bygone person who he once was, but no longer is. In the past, things seemed more important, pain was experienced more extremely, and laughing was more passionate—in short, feelings were more intense than they are now. By giving just a few significant examples, the singer constructs a typicality of his former self. It is striking that this typicality is educed by comparison with the present self; the characteristics of the former self are not described by essentialist, but by relativistic concepts. From a phenomenological point of view, this comes as no surprise as remembering one’s bygone self is an act of consciousness of the present self, and also the incentive to engage in such an act is a motive owned by a person living now. Therefore, it seems only natural to conceive of the person one once was by putting that person in contrast with one’s present self. This is because it is the only self which involves originary perceptions and the one self within which one’s actual motivations are constituted. The memories of the former self are reconstructions performed by the present self, and they are mere adumbrations characterized by a minor degree of evidence.

A concept introduced by Schutz in his paper *The Problem of Personality in the Social World*¹ provides a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon in question. Starting from the perception that the individual's identity is principally constituted by its temporality, he distinguishes between three temporalities of the ego and their pertinent perspectives. The present ego ("Ich im Jetzt") is the one tempus of the ego that acts in the world of working, which is why it is the reference point of the individual's relevances, in a way the 'locus' where relevances emerge and are modified. Current relevances also motivate the fictitious turning back of time which we come across in Burdon's song, and which in the end always aims at finding out something about one's present self. The past ego ("Ich im Früher") is the biographical pool of the individual's stock of knowledge, his/her social identity, and his/her system of relevances. Thus the recollection of this former self provides insight into the genesis of dispositions that structure the individual's current behavior.

The past ego is again partitioned into three aspects: the former self to which the current one stands in direct continuity, and which, in a sense, lingers on; the former self which has passed, but which can be recovered again; and finally the former self which is bygone and can never be recovered. Schutz's differentiation is instructive insofar as it tells us something about the nature of the act of self-understanding under scrutiny. This act is more than a mnemonic performance of the brain which, as a rule of thumb, turns out worse the further the remembered events, feelings, etc. lie in the past. A performance of this kind is the necessary precondition for taking over the perspective of a former self, but not a sufficient one, as Schutz's argument shows. We may well remember the experiences of our childhood, yet nevertheless the particular way of seeing things as a child might have become alien to us. Vice versa, the nostalgic romanticization of an earlier stage in our life may well be of advantage for fictitiously switching to the according perspective.

The third temporality described by Schutz is the future ego ("Ich fortan") which we imagine in the process of projecting future actions. Schutz states that action plans are projected "modo futuri exacti" (see Schutz 1997: § 9), and part of this modus is a notion of our future self as influenced by our current decisions to act. Projecting implies the fictitious turning forward of time that rests on two of the basic idealizations of the life-world: the idealization of "And so on" and the idealization of "I can do it again" (see Husserl 1969: § 74). Their performance means to imagine the future in accordance with a typical style experienced in the past, and thus the future ego always refers back to the past one. This is shown by the circumstance that in-order-to-motives, which govern the individual's projects of action, always refer to antecedent because-of-motives in which they are rooted (see Schutz and Luckmann 1974: 222 f.).

The introduction of the future ego as a particular temporality shows that intrasubjective understanding can have two directions. Apart from turning back, as was just explained and is the topic of the song *When I was young*, the ego can turn time forward. He/she can imagine a future self. One of the main differences between these two directions can be explained by using a concept of Schutz's sociology of knowledge: remembering one's former ego draws from one's own experience, while

¹ Published so far only in German as „Das Problem der Personalität in der Sozialwelt“ (Schutz 2003).

projecting a future ego draws from socially derived knowledge (see Schutz 1964: 131). At least theoretically, we can call to mind a former self without referring to somebody else's stock of knowledge because we have lived through the pertaining phase of life ourselves. In order to imagine the way we will be at a future stage of our life, however, we have to use the knowledge of others who have reached this stage before us, and from whom we can learn about the corresponding experiences and feelings.² Nevertheless, the distinction is not that straightforward, insofar as the memory of our former self is usually drawn from other people's knowledge as well, mainly from the knowledge of our relatives and friends who knew us at the time in question. Our knowledge of the way we used to be as children, for example, is heavily influenced by the narratives of our parents and grandparents, preferably told when leafing through old photo albums. Thus, our own knowledge and external knowledge combine to create an inextricable notion of what was once me.

Besides Schutz's theory of different temporalities of the ego, there is another phenomenological concept that needs to be mentioned in the present context. In his book *Individual and Community*,³ the German philosopher Theodor Litt describes a fictitious statement of the ego, who remembers a former self or imagines a future self, saying that "this was me or rather this will be me some day".⁴ His according concept of the reciprocity of perspectives is turned against a particular figure of thought, namely the equation of the subject and the current self which in consequence would evaporate the past as well as the future self to mere contents of the consciousness of the present ego. This line of argument is obviously directed against time concepts like the one of Augustine who found it "clear and unmistakable ... that neither things past nor things future have any existence, ... for the present of past things is memory, the present of present things is attention, and the present of future things is expectation" (1997: 300). Unlike this approach, Litt's use of the term reciprocity is meant to emphasize the being-in-itself of the perspectives of yesterday and tomorrow. As a phenomenologist, he agrees that they are conceptions of a current ego, but he refuses to conclude from this immanence that they are relative in an ontological meaning: "It is imminently clear to me and previous to any reflection imaginable thereon that this which is currently present within me as a 'yesterday' has not been a yesterday 'by itself,' but rather that it was thoroughly founded in itself, was itself in such a way that it was equally rightly entitled to declare my actual 'today' as *its* 'tomorrow'".⁵ When the present ego takes over the perspectives of the past or future self, it constructs them as temporalities of their own in the course of this very performance. In the same way as

² Here it becomes clear that intrasubjective understanding leans on social typifications (which are centered in the subsequent chapters).

³ Translation by the author; the German title reads: "Individuum und Gemeinschaft".

⁴ Translation by the author; the German original reads: „das war ich einmal bzw. werde ich einmal sein“ (Litt 1926: 84).

⁵ Translation by the author; the German original reads: „Es steht für mich in der denkbar unmittelbarsten Weise und vor jeder erdenklichen Reflexion auf diesem Punkte fest, daß das, was heute als ein 'Gestern' in mir gegenwärtig ist, nicht auch 'an sich' ein Gestern war, daß es vielmehr so durchaus in sich selbst gegründet, in sich selbst war, daß es dieses mein aktuelles 'Heute' mit gleichem Rechte zu *seinem* 'Morgen' erklären durfte“ (Litt 1926: 85; original emphasis).

the constitution of the alter within the ego's consciousness provides the former with the sense-content alter ego, the constitution of the perspective of the past or future ego creates it as *altera praesentia*—as presence bygone or as presence to come.

From the point of view of an empirical science, Litt's emphasis on the equal status of past, present and future ego has the advantage that it can explain the phenomenon of self-commitment, which essentially consists in the obligation of the future ego by the present one (or of the present ego by the past ego). For example, by making a pledge, a person determines a current motive of action and thereby constrains the freedom of action for his/her future self. Such an act can only take effect if the future self whose freedom is restricted by the bygone declaration of intent accepts the former ego which made the pledge, as a discrete temporality and not just as a more or less opaque content of his/her present consciousness.⁶ The same seems to be true of contracts where observance is indeed controlled by external institutions. Yet this form of control alone could not possibly guarantee the general observance of contracts if it were not supported by the described act of self-commitment.⁷ Another phenomenon that can only be explained by assuming a strong reciprocity of the temporalities of the ego is the construction of a personal identity, understood as a meaningful synthesization of the individual's biographical time. The different biographical stages one lives through can only be connected to a coherent entirety if all those stages are accepted as real on their own. Otherwise, the past egos would be mere chimera of the current self and would be on the same level as dreams or fantasies which we usually do not make parts of our identity and which we would certainly not allow to determine our future actions—at least not in the rationalized Western culture.

The Reciprocity of Time Perspectives: Intersubjective

Taking a second look at the chorus quoted in the beginning, it becomes clear that there is another level of understanding involved, namely an intersubjective one: the singer

⁶ The readiness to allow the former ego to determine one's present actions will typically decline when the particular past ego falls in to the last category differentiated by Schutz, when it has already 'died off'.

⁷ The relation of pledge and contract is aptly exposed in the conversation between Faust and Mephistopheles in the 4th scene of Goethe's *Faust* (Goethe 2006: 53). When Mephistopheles asks Faust to write down a contract stating their famous bet, the latter replies:

Demand'st thou, Pedant, too, a document?
Hast never known a man, nor proved his word's intent?
Is't not enough, that what I speak to-day
Shall stand, with all my future days agreeing?
In all its tides sweeps not the world away,
And shall a promise bind my being?
Yet this delusion in our hearts we bear:
Who would himself therefrom deliver?
Blest he, whose bosom Truth makes pure and fair!
No sacrifice shall he repent of ever.
Nathless a parchment, writ and stamped with care,
A spectre is, which all to shun endeavor.
The word, alas! dies even in the pen,
And wax and leather keep the lordship then.

addresses an audience by whom he wants to be understood. The typicality he composes concerning his earlier self is one of a social nature—not only, as we have seen above, insofar as it (presumably) draws from the knowledge of others, but also insofar as it is supposed to be understood by those who listen to the song. Burdon’s lyrical description of his younger self delineates a type of social genesis and social validity. World literature is full of such types, and some of the names they have been given by their authors have become famous like Tom Sawyer or Holden Caulfield. When reading about their adventures as an adult, a process of understanding takes place that implies a changing of perspectives which is instructed by remembering one’s own childhood or youth. An essential aspect of reading pleasure is to find oneself—more precisely: one’s former self—in the description of the protagonists.

In the case of arts, the person who is supposed to be understood is fictional, whereas in everyday life it is a real being of flesh and blood. When people of different ages meet, the difference between the world views connected to each age constitutes a potential barrier for intersubjective understanding. This barrier can be overcome by a fictitious switching of perspectives which rests on the supposition that these perspectives are reciprocal. The colloquial phrase “I was like you when I was your age” epitomizes a successful act of understanding of an older person towards a younger one. The other way around, a young person can take up the point of view of an older person by imagining his/her own future ego. Understanding each other in this way rests on the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life. It claims that if I exchange phases of life with a fellow-human in thought, so that their age becomes mine, I shall regard things with the same typicality as they do. The formulation by Litt already quoted above expresses the same if, instead of interpreting “this” as a reference to the past or future ego, one interprets it as a reference to a different person: “this was me or rather this will be me some day”.

The described concept directly refers to Schutz’s general thesis of the reciprocity of perspectives.⁸ The general thesis describes a supposition which is implicit in daily acts of intersubjective understanding and which is only called into question when there is a specific cause to do so, that is, when understanding fails. This supposition states that in everyday life individual perspectives are conceived as reciprocal. Thus,

the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives leads to the apprehension of objects and their aspects actually known by me and potentially known by you as everyone’s knowledge. Such knowledge is conceived to be objective and anonymous, i.e., detached from and independent of my and my fellow-man’s definition of the situation, our unique biographical circumstances and the actual and potential purposes at hand involved therein. (Schutz 1962: 12).

The wording illustrates the fundamental significance of the general thesis for the emergence of a common cultural world, as it turns private experience into social knowledge. For Schutz, the general thesis consists of two idealizations. The first

⁸ Which may have been inspired by Litt; with respect to content the most important influence was Husserl. Schutz knew the work of Litt and he mentions *Individuum und Gemeinschaft* in his *Phenomenology of the Social World* (1997: § 1); for Husserl’s influence see Folter (1983).

idealization reacts to the fact that the here of one person is the there of another person, so that individuals always perceive objects from a different angle and distance. The so-called idealization of the interchangeability of the standpoints claims that I take it for granted that, if I change places with my fellow-human so that their here becomes mine, I shall perceive objects with the same typicality as they do now, and vice versa.⁹ The second idealization answers to differences in perspective which are due to the singularity of biographies. The so-called idealization of the congruency of the system of relevances claims that I take it for granted that such differences in perspective are irrelevant for the purpose at hand, and that my fellow human and I have selected and interpreted the common objects and their features in an empirically identical manner.

The idealization of the interchangeability of periods of life is to be understood as a third idealization within the general thesis. At first sight, it seems to only apply to a specific category of intersubjective understanding, and therefore it seems to lack the significance required for involvement in a *general* thesis. Yet I would argue that the concept is principally extensible to other forms of social relations rather than just the one between members of different age groups. For example, by replacing life as a reference quantity with school time, one may apply the idealization to the relation between, let's say, a first-grader and a pupil in Junior High. Similar transfers can be applied to social units such as administrative bodies, company departments, or sports clubs where people are frequently categorized as newcomers or old stagers. Such units are characterized by a temporality that principally differs from the individual's inner consciousness of time, so that both cannot be analyzed by using the same empirical methods. Yet in social reality these time constructions are interrelated to each other,¹⁰ and the idealization can therefore be applied to any social body in which the individual passes through definite phases or periods which imply a typical way of conceiving certain aspects of life and the world.

Adopting an idea of Radcliffe-Brown (1987), who invented the term "social fatherhood" (in contradistinction to biological fatherhood), one may introduce the term "institutional age" (in contradistinction to biological age) for the phenomenon in question. At least with a view to job histories, the according idealization of reciprocal institutional ages seems to become less and less widespread nowadays: whereas formerly the length of stay in one and the same company frequently expanded over the greater part of a lifetime, processes of flexibilization in the field of work have considerably reduced this length on average. The consequence may be a general loss of importance as well as an increasing difficulty in performing the idealization, as workers who stay for a long time in one company find it hard to take the perspective of those who stay only for a few years, and vice versa. Bourdieu et al. (1999: 257 ff.) have impressively depicted the consequences communication breakdowns of this kind can have for the social coherence within staffs.

Thus, within institutional contexts the individual can try to switch to the perspective of his/her counterpart by fictitiously turning time backwards or forwards. In line with

⁹ An idealization which in fact implies a set of further idealizations (Folter 1983: 167 ff.).

¹⁰ This is simultaneously the reason why the concept of biography is a social figure (see Rosenthal 1995: 12), thus turning biographical research into a socio-scientific discipline rather than a psychological one.

what has been stated with regard to intrasubjective understanding, the two possibilities differ from each other with regard to their mode of evidence again: re-living is based on our own experiences and falls into the category of “emotionally empathic” understanding (Weber 1978: 5). Phenomenologically speaking it has—at least potentially—the richness of polythetic reconstruction, whereas imaginative empathizing, making use of knowledge which is socially derived, is more or less restricted to the poverty of monothetic reconstruction.¹¹

At this point a few words must be said concerning the specific fragility of the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life. Karl Mannheim rightly points out the perspectivity of acts of understanding between individuals who are of a different age. He writes that “at each age level one will grasp just that character trait or aspect [of the person to be understood] which is accessible at that level, and ... the characterization which has the best chance of being recognized as most ‘comprehensive’ ... is the one arrived at when the interpreter is of the same age as the person characterized” (1952b: 62). Mannheim’s consideration does not principally refute the possibility of a change of perspectives between young and old, but it hints at its general fragility. The colloquial rebuke “Just wait until you’re my age ...” illustrates this circumstance, especially with regard to the time-forwarding form of understanding. Nonetheless, fragility applies to the general thesis as a whole, and this is why Schutz basically restricts its scope to the “relative natural world-view” (Scheler 2008: 60 ff.) of the in-group. As for the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life, the subjective consciousness of time constitutes a fundamental boundary, insofar as every person experiences the process of aging individually. Furthermore, three specific limitations can be depicted: (1) the ego’s supposition of reciprocity becomes problematic when the alter ego’s socialization has been affected by experiences that are unique to his/her generation—in other words, when the ego and the alter ego belong to different “generation locations” in the sense of Mannheim (1952a). (2) This can coincide with the case of the ego and the alter ego living in different historical epochs, when they are not contemporaries. According to Thomas Luckmann, “the general theory of the reciprocity perspectives ... is, strictly speaking, not applicable to the precedent world” (Schutz and Luckmann 1974: 90).¹² (3) Finally the idealization is especially fragile when the ego and the alter ego originate from different cultures. The reason for this last boundary hints at a general issue of highest sociological importance: the question as to where to draw the line between natural givenness and cultural interpretation.

Aging: Anthropological Fact and Social Construction

In his book *Ending Aging*, the English biogerontologist Aubrey de Grey advances the “view that we can probably eliminate aging as a cause of death this century” (2007: 8). He declares that biomedical advancements in the nearer future will “allow us to stop

¹¹ For the differentiation between monothetic and polythetic reconstruction, see Husserl 1980: §§ 118, 119.

¹² In this regard, Simmel (1980) identifies a particular type of understanding which he calls “historical understanding”.

people dying of aging at any age” (2007: 14). Their implementation, however, would be impeded by what he calls the “Pro-Aging-Trance,” that is, the (erroneous) belief that aging is a mystical phenomenon which principally resists biological elucidation and is therefore irremediable, which is why people accept it as inescapable fate. Opposing this pattern of thought, Grey intends for readers to accept that aging is a malady among others, what means that it can be cured—in this specific case by biotechnology. He regards the according change of thought as a premise to be fulfilled before the “war on aging” (2007: 311) can be fought.

As I am not a biologist, I am in no way able to judge the natural scientific argument presented in Grey’s book. In any case, the idea that a shift in the (bio-)technological basis of society would change social patterns of thought is anything but implausible, if historical materialism is at least in the slightest bit correct. From the viewpoint of the sociology of knowledge, the possibility of changes in the sense of Grey can hardly be argued with—whether they are probable is a different story. What can be said for sure is that an evolution in that direction would mark a real epochal change, as it would overthrow a paradigm of thinking which has been cultivated since the beginning of time. Death by old age has always been seen as being a part of the human condition; entire philosophical theories are based on this presumably anthropological fact. None other than Max Weber emphasized the general importance of aging and death for Interpretive Sociology: “Human mortality, indeed the organic life cycle from the helplessness of infancy to that of old age, is naturally of the very greatest sociological importance through the various ways in which human action has been oriented to these facts” (Weber 1978: 7). Schutz takes the same line:

One of the most fundamental experiences is that of growing older, the transition from infancy, adolescence, maturity through the declining years to old age. This time-experience is certainly connected with the physiological events within my body, but not restricted to them. Subjectively seen, it is an event in inner time. I was born, I grow older, and I have to die are three expressions for a single metaphysical fact determining the experience of our existence within this world. Yet this *metaphysicum*, which even the most inveterate behaviorist would hardly deny, is one of the elements accepted by any human being as an unquestioned and even unquestionable fact. Our growing older is of the utmost relevance to us; it dominates the highest interrelation of the system of our motivational relevances, our life plan. Experiencing our future as an undisclosed open horizon of the present (from which one single fact stands out in certainty, namely that we have to die, not knowing when); our conviction of this certainty eventually translated into the feeling of our finity (‘So little time,’ ‘It is later than you think’); these are perhaps the experiences of each human life which are of paramount relevance. This relevance is imposed upon us in virtue of our human condition, as is the awareness of the irreversibility and irretrievability of time as such imposed upon us. (Schutz 2011: 197; original emphasis)

Following Schutz, the ramifications of aging can be described as follows. The awareness of our mortality imposes a relevance upon us which occupies the highest place in our hierarchical order of motivational relevances. As we grow older, this

imposed relevance becomes more and more important, as it changes our life plans. The future, understood as the undisclosed open horizon of the present, shrinks bit by bit, and the implementation of certain projects is no longer realistic. In other words, the idealizations of “And so on” and “I can do it again” are called into question. This consequence is intensified by the decline of the human body. In the terms of Schutz, this means that the domain of our free motivational relevances—of our in-order-to-motives, as he alternatively calls them—is constricted. Correspondingly, the domain of our bound motivational relevances—of our because-of-motives—expands and becomes more important.¹³ The dispositions of our character, understood as the individual set of because-of-motives, become more stable; our recipes for acting become more and more saturated with experience and therefore more settled; the process of sedimentation of our knowledge dates back further and therefore our stock of knowledge is viewed as consolidated.

To conceptualize the phenomenon of aging by describing the according shifts in the individual’s system of relevances elucidates an important point: aging is not only the physical process which Grey focuses on,¹⁴ but also a meaningful process which partly is a reflection of physical changes, but is at the same time independent from them – an individual can be old in one sense without being so in another. The handicaps caused by physical decay are certainly of great significance for our system of motivations, yet the metaphysical side of aging—as Schutz calls it—is too. To grow older means to enhance one’s stock of knowledge, to tighten one’s routines of action and interpretation. From this perspective, old age means that within an individual’s system of relevance, the weight of accumulated experiences has become predominant in the course of time, and this development is independent of whether the average life span is 80 years or more, as Grey announces.

A literary description which cuts straight to the core of the matter can be found in Max Frisch’s *Homo Faber*, where the about 50 year old protagonist describes the difference between himself and his lover, a girl of about 20:

In general, only the future counted for her, and to a slight extent the present; but she had no interest at all in past experiences, like all young people. She didn’t give a rap for the fact that there was nothing new under the sun, and for what had been, or could have been, learned from the past. I took careful note of Sabeth’s hopes for the future and soon realized she didn’t know herself what she hoped for, but merely looked forward to it. Could I expect from the future anything I didn’t already know? For Sabeth it was all quite different. She looked forward to Tivoli, to seeing her mother, to breakfast, to the time when she would have children of her own, to her birthday, to a phonograph record, to definite things and especially to indefinite things; she took pleasure in everything that lay in the future. (Frisch 1959: 112)

At this point we can retain that aging is a basic anthropological constant—if de Grey’s theses should prove to be correct, not necessarily as a physical but surely as a

¹³ For Schutz’s concept of in-order-to- and because-of-motives see Schutz 1997: §§ 17, 18.

¹⁴ Refer to the glossary of Grey’s book where aging is defined as a word “used in many senses, but the one that’s important for our purpose is *biological aging*” (2007: 364; original emphasis).

metaphysical process. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger has described this process as being-toward-death, which is essentially characterized by the notion of care (Heidegger 1962: § 41). The lesser known thesis of Oswald Spengler recognizes the concept of care as typical in Occidental, Egyptian or Chinese culture, but not e.g. in Indian culture: “The Indians ... have no sort of time-reckoning (the absence of it in their case expressing their Nirvana) and no clocks, and *therefore* no history, no life memories, no care” (Spengler 1926: 133; original emphasis). Irrespective of whether Spengler’s historical interpretation is valid, it points to the important fact that the anthropological datum as such is meaningless and needs to be interpreted. This interpretation varies between different cultures, and this is the moment where cultural sciences come into play. The necessity of this interpretation has been pointed out by Heinrich Popitz who described aging as a “universal field of norms”. That is, as a topic which no culture can ignore in terms of standardization: “in every society, some form of behavior is normatively bound to specific stages in life”.¹⁵ Drawing from results of ethnologic studies, Popitz distinguishes at least one universal dividing line within societies which refers to age: the differentiation between adults and adults-to-be.¹⁶ And he suspects a second general feature of societies in this context: the division between adults and once-were-adults. The subsequent thesis would be that in every society we find two or three different age groups (depending on how far one follows the argument of Popitz), yet most historical cultures have further sub-divided this basic scheme. Take, for example, the antique Roman culture with its notions of *infantia* (or *pueritia*), *adolescentia*, *juventus*, *maturitas*, and *senectus*.¹⁷

Consequently, the differentiation of stages of life must be regarded as a social universality—with varying subtleties and appreciation of course. Within the social sciences, the best known conceptualization in this context is arguably Erik Erikson’s notion of a life cycle. Erikson distinguishes between eight phases of life and allots a characteristic psychosocial crisis to each one of them (Erikson 1956: 75). The notion of phases of life essentially involves the complementary idea of transitions between them. The latter was the research object of Arnold van Gennep’s famous book *Rites of Passage* where he stated:

The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another ..., so that a man’s life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined. (Gennep 2004: 2f.)

¹⁵ Translation by the author; the German original reads „In allen Gesellschaften sind einige Verhaltensweisen normativ an besondere Altersstufen gebunden“ (Popitz 2011: 114). In the same vein, Eisenstadt (2003: 22) remarks that “we know of no society which does not differentiate between various ‘ages’ and does not define them through the norms and values of its cultural tradition”.

¹⁶ Popitz’ observation may allude to a structural functionalist necessity: every society must divide between those who are in charge and those who have yet to be raised to bear responsibility in the future.

¹⁷ See also Irmhild Saake’s instructive considerations on the topic (2006: 70 ff.).

The importance of the social construction of biographical phases—described by Genep by means of cultural anthropology—does not solely derive from the necessity of standardization which is the point made by Popitz. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann emphasize the symbolic significance by highlighting its function of providing meaning and legitimization:

the individual passing from one biographical phase to another can view himself as repeating a sequence that is given in the ‘nature of things’, or in his own ‘nature’. That is, he can reassure himself that he is living ‘correctly.’ The ‘correctness’ of his life program is thus legitimated on the highest level of generality. As the individual looks back upon his past life, his biography is intelligible to him in these terms. As he projects himself into the future, he may conceive of his biography as unfolding within a universe whose ultimate co-ordinates are known. (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 92)

Consequently, the social determination of phases of life plays an important role for the objectification of inner time: fulfilling the stages of a socially accepted life cycle allows the individual to add ‘higher’ meaning to his/her subjective biographical experiences. On the other hand, if he/she fails to do so, this failure can lead to mental disruptions. And when the according cultural world of meaning as such is plunged into a crisis, the consequences are of existential nature. This exact crisis is diagnosed by Byung-Chul Han regarding our current time: “because of its diffusion,” says Han, “time no longer deploys a regulatory force. In this way, no formative or crucial breaks in life emerge. Life-time is no longer structured by episodes, completions, barriers, and transits. Instead, one hastens from one presence to the next. And so, one ages without growing *old*”.¹⁸ If one follows the thesis of the universality of the social construction of biological phases, one must interpret Han’s diagnosis as describing a tendency towards one extreme on a variable scale, rather than as accounting for a principal turn. Nevertheless, it provides a concrete example of the essential significance of the social construction of phases of life.¹⁹

Two Implications

The above considerations have highlighted the overall fragility of the general thesis: if the social backgrounds of the ego and the alter ego differ from each other to a too

¹⁸ Translation by the author; the German original reads: „Aufgrund ihrer Zerstreuung entfaltet die Zeit keine ordnende Kraft mehr. So entstehen keine prägenden oder entscheidenden Einschnitte im Leben. Die Lebenszeit wird nicht mehr durch Abschnitte, Abschlüsse, Schwellen und Übergänge gegliedert. Vielmehr eilt man von einer Gegenwart zur anderen. So altert man, ohne *alt* zu werden“ (Han 2012: 17; original emphasis). The concept of temporal diffusion (“temporale Zerstreuung”) is an alternative draft in contradistinction to Hartmut Rosa’s (2010) notion of acceleration. In Han’s opinion, the latter is only one symptom of the former phenomenon.

¹⁹ Realizing that the determination of biographical phases is socially constructed raises the question whether the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life is to be conceived as some kind of a priori knowledge, or whether it has to be learned in the course of socialization. This question applies to the general thesis at large. An answer requires extensive reflections on ontogenesis that indeed would go far beyond the scope of this paper.

high degree, the supposition of reciprocal perspectives is likely to fail.²⁰ This is why Schutz restricts its validity to individuals who share similar systems of relevances, and this inversely means that it is doubtful whether it would work in the case of intercultural understanding. The same can be said of the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life, as the notions of what it means to be a child, an adult or a senior can vary considerably among different cultures. On the other hand, they can also converge. Thus the basic assumption on which the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life rests—namely, that similar biographical phases create world views that are typically similar—can, vice versa, facilitate intercultural understanding (youth culture provides concrete examples, e.g., in the hippie era).

Moreover, within social discourse the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life is frequently applied to intercultural relations by means of a specific adaptation. The historical notion of a process of civilization facilitates an assumption on the level of nations or cultures, which is equivalent to the case of individuals: when culture A reaches the stage of development which culture B has already reached, then representatives of culture A will see the world in the same way as representatives of culture B already do. This notion implies a parallelism between ontogenetic and phylogenetic process which has been a widespread pattern of thinking within the social sciences for a long time. In this manner, the cultural scientific discourse during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century was dominated by the idea of a universal process of civilization. This has been widely displaced by the awareness of cultural relativity by now,²¹ while the assumption of a parallelism between ontogenetic and phylogenetic process has also largely lost its appeal. Similarly, the idea of cultural hierarchy (which is linked to the idea of a universal civilization process) is no longer in line with the nowadays dominant notion of political correctness. However, on the level of empirical observation it is exactly political discourses where this ethnocentric figure of thought still stands its ground. A relatively recent example is the political debate on the Third Gulf War. In this debate, the strategy to legitimate the military campaign against Iraq as a form of development aid for an underdeveloped nation was regularly used by former US President George W. Bush (Göttlich 2012).

This consideration hints at another important aspect of the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life, which I will only discuss briefly: the moral impact. Thomas Luckmann described the reciprocity of perspectives as “a universal human source of morality” (2002: 21) insofar as it allows the idea of empathizing with our fellow humans, without which the ethical command of universalization could not be complied with. The particular relevance of the idealization of the

²⁰ This is firstly true of the idealization of congruent systems of relevances, rather than the idealization of interchangeable standpoints.

²¹ Perhaps the most influential conceptualization in the former context is the one of Morgan (1964) who differentiated between savagery, barbarism, and civilization as the three universal stages of cultural development. The aforementioned Spengler likewise uses a tripartite scheme. However in his theory it describes a process which each particular culture has to perform on its own terms: “For every Culture has *its own* Civilization” (1926: 31; original emphasis). Spengler can therefore be said to be one of the first cultural relativists. See also Fabian’s (1983: 37 ff.) reflections on coevalness as a specific problem of anthropology.

interchangeability of phases of life for moral behavior is captured by a quotation by George Washington Carver: “How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these.”²² The general idea behind Carver’s motto implies that switching to the time perspectives of others, as described above in this essay, enables sympathizing with them and consequently leads to appreciative and thus moral actions.²³

The example of Bush, however, shows that the very same figure of thought can lead to conclusions that are almost diametrically opposed to those depicted by Carver. The notion that one has reached a superior stage of development encourages the idea that one knows better – after all, one has been through the lower stages before and can estimate them with the gift of hindsight. What may sound peculiar to some in the context of intercultural politics, and especially when considering war, is a constitutional element of each and every educational system, be it school, kindergarten, or family. Parents may well ask their children about their wishes, but when these wishes contradict their idea of what is good for the children, then it is clear who makes the decision. This entitlement for ultimate authority is legitimized by superior circumspection which is meant to go hand in hand with growing experience.²⁴ This circumstance is illustrated by the vernacular phrase already cited above—here with a slight enhancement: “I was like you when I was your age, but now I know better”.²⁵

Summary and Conclusions

The idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life introduced in this paper has to be seen as a universal figure of understanding. Aging is part of the human condition. Even if biogenetics succeed in bringing the biological side of the process

²² Note by the author: Although Carver’s dictum is well known, I was not able to find an official quotation.

²³ This is of major importance e.g. for the debate on generational equity (see Williamson et al. 1999). As Dallinger (2000: 168) argues, the acceptance of a governmentally organized intergenerational contract depends on its degree of justice. From the point of view taken in this paper, one must add that a basic prerequisite for such acceptance has to be seen in successful acts of intergenerational understanding.

²⁴ A passage from a speech by former US Senator Albert Beveridge pinpoints the structural similarity between the raising of children and a particular understanding of politics: “The Opposition tells us that we ought not to govern a people without their consent. I answer, the rule of liberty that all just government derives its authority from the consent of the governed, applies only to those who are capable of self-government. We govern the Indians without their consent, we govern our territories without their consent, we govern our children without their consent” (Beveridge 1968: 49).

²⁵ It may be worth mentioning that the moral imperatives involved in the notion of switching perspectives vary with the theoretical concept one uses. When arguing on the basis of Schutz’s general thesis, the resulting maxim of action is located somewhere near the Golden Rule, as the process of universalization principally refers to an individual’s consciousness and will. By contrast, if one implies Mead’s concept of taking the role of the other, then the consequences converge with the model of supererogation, as the point of view of the other is adopted in the constitution of the self from beginning on—as illustrated by Mead’s example of the Good Samaritan (1967: 258).

to a halt, its metaphysical side will remain. And so will the existence of different age-groups in society which are characterized by particular rights and obligations as well as by typical world views.²⁶ These constitute a barrier for interpersonal understanding between representatives of different generations. In order to overcome this barrier, people in everyday life assume that the appertaining perspectives are reciprocal and can be taken over by fictitiously turning time backwards or forwards.

Some philosophers have explored the process of aging as an existential condition, the ramifications of which can be described in terms of universal validity. Cultural sciences, however, highlight the different interpretations of the anthropological fact, and the cultural variety of such interpretations is enormous: differences can be found concerning the number of phases into which life is partitioned, the strictness of the borderlines between them, the features and traits a typical representative of an age group is supposed to have, his/her rights and duties, the rites that mark the passage between phases of life, and also the question of when one switches over to the next age group. When Eric Burdon recorded *When I was young*, he was twenty-five which means that he perceived a man of that age as no longer young—who would agree with that nowadays?

The example from the beginning thus indirectly hints at the “accent on youth” (Parsons 1979: vi) prevailing in contemporary society, and therewith at the question of empirical, socio-cultural preconditions that favor or hinder the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life. Today’s obsession with youth may be regarded as an extreme case, as its one-sided orientation towards one particular phase of life threatens to superimpose the others. One might conclude that in contemporary society, the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life is exposed to a specific problem. By contrast, one might argue that in a society where people grow increasingly old and where more generations live side by side as contemporaries, the idealization becomes more relevant than ever before. In order to find out what actually is the case, empirical research that focuses on the concrete determining factors which influence acts of understanding between persons of different age is needed. To begin with, this concerns the quantitative aspect. In this regard, one has to determine the contact zones where young and old could meet. Different sociological disciplines contribute to this task, such as industrial sociology insofar as working life provides such opportunities—as has been discussed earlier in this paper. This applies above all to family sociology, insofar as the family is the paradigmatic social venue where individuals of different generations meet. With regard to family structures, there are indeed considerable differences caused by cultural or economic factors. For some time now, an ongoing tendency to spatially segregate the aging generation into retirement homes can be observed in Western countries; a tendency which one might interpret as part of the general “colonization of the life-world” described by Habermas (2002). On the one hand, this trend diminishes the chance of intergenerational contact within the family. Yet on the

²⁶ The idea of an age-homogeneous society may be an interesting topic for utopian novels (like William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*).

other hand it gives way to new contact opportunities beyond family relations, that is, between inhabitants and institutional staff.²⁷

Thus, the allegedly simple counting of intergenerational contact zones is not that simple at all, and things become even more complex when looking at the qualitative side of it. Coming back to the case of retirement homes once more: whether the very contact between inhabitants and caretakers results in real opportunities for communicating and understanding each other depends on the concrete setting, which is influenced, for example, by timing. If the working schedule of the caretaker allows for only a few minutes of contact, then it is hard to understand the perspective of the other, simply because there is no time for a knowledge transfer to occur. The same can be said of schools where the agglomeration of curricula reduces the time left for communication between teachers and pupils that is not directly associated with teaching contents. Such reflections remind us that the idealization of the interchangeability of phases of life is not just basic 'knowledge' we all acquire as children and then possess for the rest of our lives, but also a social practice that has to be maintained over the course of time. To what extent we want to allow systemic imperatives to push aside such communicative resources of the life-world depends on our understanding of morality. However, issues like this are beyond phenomenological reflection which was the main purpose of this paper. However, they may illustrate the empirical usefulness of the concept presented above.

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²⁷ This is a point where socio-political considerations come into play. The discussions in Germany concerning the abolishment of military draft and its substitution with civilian service are an example from the more recent past.

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