

AAA panel:

Radical Uncertainty and the Search for the Good Old life.

Artistic, Philosophical and Anthropological Explorations

Organizers: Lotte Meinert and Lone Grøn

Discussants: Lawrence Cohen and Joel Robbins

PANEL ABSTRACT:

How do people who are aging under challenging and uncertain life conditions strive to achieve good lives? What can we learn about aging as a human condition through ethnographic, philosophical and artistic projects that take seriously the diversity of ways in which old age is lived?

In exploring old age as a human condition we follow a fundamental assumption shared by sociocultural anthropology and philosophical traditions of phenomenology, namely that there is no such thing as Human Nature. The human “essence” escapes any attempt at a straightforward, eternally valid, substantive universalism. What appears as “natural” is something socially, culturally, discursively constructed. In this sense, human beings are “naturally” cultural creatures. However, culture also cannot be presumed to thoroughly define our nature. Rather, there is an uncertainty and excess to human existence precisely because the human being seems to transcend or to exceed any determination. This ontological indeterminacy immediately strikes human beings and communities with a practical uncertainty that implies an ethical imperative: human beings must lead their lives, never merely live them. This indeterminacy of the human condition has inherent practical and ethical implications, and the features of uncertainty and striving in the face of excessive ethical demands are particularly central in considering the ethical dimensions of aging. They emerge in intensified forms under conditions of bodily, structural and social precarity, i.e. they emerge as radical uncertainties that characterize the life conditions under which people age, as well as the uncertainties of what life has meant, how and when it will end, who will care for them as they grow frail, and what will happen to those they leave behind.

There is already burgeoning research on the good life in old age framed as successful aging as well as critical gerontological and anthropological work on inequality and the social construction of old age. Inspired by Joel Robbins’ call for an “anthropology of the good” we take up a different approach: a comparative phenomenological approach that speaks to broad humanistic concerns and puts philosophy, anthropology and art in dialogue. The papers explore old age in artistic expressions, philosophical writings and in local settings in Denmark, Uganda, and USA by comparing two themes central to the experience of aging: the body and intimate others. How are bodily senses of aging experienced in local contexts and how do the elderly and their significant others respond to the practical and ethical demands of bodily decay and frailty? How do relationships with intimate others change with old age and what roles do family, friendship and care relations play in old peoples’ search for good lives for themselves and their significant others?

The panel, thus, invites participants to give nuanced experience-near portraits of the good old age under challenging life conditions and to reflect theoretically on finding a “middle ground” between the exploration of old age as a universal human condition and as socially, culturally and historically differentiated.