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No country for old men
An ontological
questioning about old age

Toward an Historical Psychology

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Renewing the Encounter between Human Sciences,
the Arts, and the Humanities

“Because we are also what we have lost”

In the memory of
Zora and Osman AKHOUN
Loved grand-parents

Abstract:

“That is no country for old men”, wrote William Butler Yeats on the year 1926, in his poem called “Sailing to Byzantium”. In reading this metaphorical travel beyond agony and death to a spiritual pursuit through art and immortality, one wonders how modern civilization deals with old age ? What does “being old” actually mean ? What a trivial question yet remains obscure.

Western thought trapped in a naturalistic human view rejects the elderly outside the boundaries of our identity, as a radical otherness. In fact we think of the elderly as a medical research theme, completely isolated from human dwelling world. One cannot doubt our era fears death and old age, yet they remain such an impasse for the empirical sciences. They have become a secret enemy, rendered invisible, banished from public life.

Nevertheless there is a fundamental gap between Proust’s poetic old age portrayed as a human encounter engraved in time, and the natural sciences’ view of the elderly as a weakened biological process. “Our world is not primarily a conglomeration of objects that can be described scientifically, our world is our home, a realization of subjectivity” says VAN DEN BERG, to underline the contextualized and temporal nature of our existence, as always related to our daily-life. Here is a truth that poets know so well, and scientists forgot long ago: in this pre-reflective world, things speak to us, therefore we should care for experienced, for the physiognomy and values of things where elder reveals himself, as a being-in-the-world.

The silent world

What does Karl Jaspers meant when, almost a half century ago he said: “we may be living the last historical man’s period”. This caveat would certainly embody one of the strongest criticisms of modernity. The western man’s search for meaning in sciences and technologies, in order to master nature, has resulted in the estrangement of man from his world and from himself. Grievous rationalism reigns, that twentieth century man has witnessed, trapping us in over-dependence on calculative and empirical thinking. We may be faced nowadays with the great danger of dehumanization, as pointed out by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard about two hundred years ago.

As a being, as a real living, we are now walking through darkness in such a world where neurophysiological brain activity and factor analysis have replaced faith, religion, values and old grand parents’ story-telling. Convergent thinking has overcome the whole of our pre-scientific human heritage, without which life could not really be possible. The world where we live, meet, love, and die has become meaningless. We now live in a silent world. So the will to bridge the gap between Humanities and Sciences could embody a formidable endeavor to get man back from the unenlightened and cloudy hole where he has fallen since Descartes discovery of dualism. That’s the reason why I would like to leave the realm of rationalism for a moment, to come back to the larger world. My talk takes its roots in three philosophical attitudes in order to throw light on the ontological concern of old age: first, Existentialism, which is deeply concerned with ontology (science of being), then Phenomenology, which invites us to leave the laboratory and dissecting table to reach pre-reflective daily life, so that we can describe how things appear to us, and finally Metabletics, which studies the change in man and the way he relates to the world.

An increased distance: the not-knowing

How do modern societies deal with old age? What does being old mean for us today? It makes no sense to reflect on this question as if it were no more than just an intellectual or an expert’s task. As Rollo May said “ when we are dealing with human beings, no truth has reality by itself, it is always dependent upon the reality of the immediate relationship”. So to understand elders’ dwelling, let us hold fast onto the nature of the dialectical relationship between young and old.

The esthetic social puritanism doctrine is pretty clear about old age: above all, do not grow old, do stay young. Just about the same time, elder began to disappear from houses to hospitals and specialized house-cares. We are less and less present with the elderly. But why do Westerners flee old age like a frightening thing that should remain apart from public place ?

If we seek a definition of aging in any dictionary, we will surely find a “multidimensional process characterized by physical, psychological and social loss”. Let us dwell one moment on this definition. The words that often come are “biological decline”. In fact we are focused on an elder pictured as uselessness, decay, decline, sadness and paralysis. Here is a paradox, for the first time in human history, men live older and older, however the relationship between young and old is ruled as never before by distance and fear. In fact nobody knows any more how to act in the relationship between young and old. A deep and widening gap is appearing between our seniors and us, a gap characterized by a not knowing. At some point people begin to ask questions to wise men, like physicians, psychologists, to bridge this new not knowing : what should we do about aging? how could we help the elderly to cope with anxiety and loneliness ? What could we do to heal the elderly’s boredom and suffering.

The changing nature of man

Old age has definitively left the realm of daily life care to become an autonomous field of science. Elder is now treated like an object to be isolated, and predicted by abstract conceptualizations and empirical technics. Nevertheless this dubious emerging bridge between young and old has remained an impossible equation for science, and the reason why is that elder’s existence must be understood as nothing but a kind of disorder or the result of a disrupted physiological activity that could be cured by a causal chain of natural events or hidden laws. So we remain in a deadlock. We could hardly doubt Max Scheler’s statement, that “ in no other period of human knowledge, has man become problematic to himself than in our days “.

In the same way Van Den Berg talk about a “modern inability” when he describe almost a half century ago man’s relationship to his world which has been broken. In deed Van Den Berg asks the fundamental questions: “Why and When do people begin to ask question to physicians and psychologists? What have made us need the expertise of a physician concerning the elderly, children, wedding commitments and professional careers? What happened this knowledge has been lost? What caused such a gap between old and young? What happened to this relationship? What happened to us? As long as these questions are not answered, said Van Den Berg, “every scientific advice will remain floating in the air”. To understand what has happened, we first have to admit an unfortunate and painful reality underlined by Martin Buber: that wise men like physicians and psychologists, who deal with inner dysfunctions, do not know. Thus we could not deny anymore that a change in the relationship between young and old has indeed occurred yet something has changed in the nature of man himself in modern societies. The gap appeared because there has been a change in the way man sees himself in relation to the world, and thus to himself.

The Lost Generation : from metapherein to metaballain

William Butler Yeats, an Irish poet, wrote in 1926 at the beginning of his poem called "Sailing to Byzantium" : "That is no country for old men". With this metaphorical trip beyond agony and death, Yeats portrayed the distance from which modern man now observes the elderly. But how have we made the world uninhabitable for the elderly? The change in this relationship probably took root in the change in man himself, which appeared with the birth of dualism in the seventeenth century. Descartes's introduction to the lethal split between subject and object opened the era of rationalism and condemned man to become an object observed from rooms with a one-way screen. This period is considered as the beginning of the empirical sciences, which try to enlighten existence by means of isolating factor, universal laws and the pursuit of substances. According to Husserl, the European crisis of existence is a symptom of dehumanization and compartmentalization of modern culture governed by a wild rationalism. The separation of subject and object led to the separation of man and his world, and deeply altered the human landscape. Old man's existence became no more than a metabolism change toward decline, and no longer a metaphore of wisdom who shares his life's history with next generations to perpetuate human customs. However, metaphor create a world where young can meet old, where past can meet futur, making the present habitable for Humanity. An only "metabolic truth" reduces love, body, encounter to biological and inanimate vapid activities, far from the truth that "holds our world together" said Bernd Jager. So, an emotional, cultural and spiritual disintegration, observed with the dislocation of the family, religion, philosophy and values, also called anomy by Durkheim, led modern man toward an endemic anxiety, loneliness, and a self estrangement from another. Ernest Hemingway popularized the term " Lost Generation " in his novel " The Sun Also Rises" to refer to the generation of young people who came of age during World War I and USA's great Depression. This generation is so called because they lived the worst time in man's history through destruction, famine, and cruelty. But this term could best be applied to us today who grow up in such a world without values, life's history and familiar meetings, living as homeless strangers in our own countries. Twenty first century Man has lost his world, experiencing his existence as if it were a "thoughtless accident", according to Kauffman.

The Missing Death

The change in western man can also be observed with the change in the way man relates to death. The disappearance of death from the public place, like the elderly, illustrates those hundred years of endeavour to set man apart from the objective world. Death's negation is best represented by the heavy secret that surrounds funerals nowadays, in contrast with the

former visibility of this ritual years ago. The dead sink now into oblivion, because death itself has become incommunicable for our society. In fact we run away from “non-being” and the tragic dimension of life, because science can not cure us from death. We could here compare the two fundamental attitudes that separate the sciences and humanities with regard to death. Metaphysical sciences cannot predict or control it, so it leaves us no other choice except to render the dead body invisible. The funeral becomes a gloomy and frightening event, like the graveyard, which has been definitively abandoned. This attitude leads us to repress our ontological concern and finiteness. The Sciences neglect the “Non being” and invisible world’s tributes, which still constitute the deepest human basis according to Rollo May. On the other hand, ancient myths that stem from the origin of western tradition, do not reduce death to an impossible explanation, they rather try to make it familiar and less frightening to us. Ancient myths used to tell us a narrative human experience that holds intersubjectivity and a fruitful description of being with others. We have lost this in modern times, above all with the elderly. For example, we could quote the death of Patrocles in “The Iliad” that ended a friendly relationship with Achilles, or the same for Ekidou’s death in The Epic of Gilgamesh. Myths have always referred to a mens’ community and dialectic relationship, far from monological metabolism of organs . The humanities throw light on death, suffering and the cosmos, whereas the Sciences, hidden in obscurity, keep their distance, and stand apart from human dwelling in the search for objective variables allowing the transformation of human experience into abstract mathematical entities.

Psychopathology as a science of loneliness

Van Den Berg has clearly described the effect of the disintegration of society on the individual like no one else has done. In doing so, he invites us to reconsider psychopathology as a science of loneliness, to set aside for a moment our sterilized categorical approach consisting in an endless monological search for universal and biologic symptoms’ collection. In his opinion, the loneliness of modern man, as a consequence of anomy and lost of community , “is the central core of illness, and the nucleus of psychiatry”. Thus he points out that man’s fragmentation, which stems from social inner breakdown, has led to a loss of the sense of being, loss of life’s uniformity, and has clouded people’s consciousness. Rollo May embraced a similar point of view, saying that man’s loss of community, and home, could directly be related to pathology.

Therefore, there is a fundamental consequence of this new definition of psychopathology, since it leads us to consider differently the patient sitting in front of us in the consulting room. Patients may consult because they are ill in the way they initiate relationships with their fellows, thus recovering health involves first recovering fruitful relationships. To be ill, says

Erwin Straus, “means to the patient in the first place a new, sick physiognomy of the world”, so, to quote Frieda Fromm-Reichmann: “The patient needs an experience, not an explanation”. Mental states, said Van Den Berg, “never stand by themselves and are never abstractions, but they ceaselessly reveal themselves in the reality of the surrounding world”. This is why he rejects explicative methods as Jaspers, and prefers descriptive approach which takes its roots in the end of dualism and a phenomenological investigation of life history. Like the Humanities, psychology should be deeply concerned by I-world relationship as a unity of signification. This change in the way of being with patients in therapy stems from a change in the way we understand the beautiful complexity of human experience as a totality that no empirical method can dissect into elements. Our patient is no longer an isolated object, but an experiencing person who understands himself as historiologically and continuously emergent, according to Straus. We are now able to understand Bernd Jäger’s definition of psychology as being a “discipline capable of laboring the arts and the humanities toward a phenomenological and narrative understanding of the human world “. So our task could be to invite people to consider again the beautiful complexity of the experience of the elderly as a living, as a being with other and not just seeing them as a frightening dead body. The humanities could play an essential role in this task. For example we would do well to follow Proust’s poetic portrayal of old age, describing the elderly first as beings who can be encountered only through time and their subjective life history, far from reductionist boundary of the esthetic reduction.

Epilogue: those who know

The world’s flight towards progress and technology goes on and on, so we are always busy. We no longer have time to waste with old men. They precisely embody the past, a lower level of life’s evolution, whereas we are the future, those who build scientific knowledge and develop rationalism in order to harness the whole natural world. My aim is not to reject all the tremendous medical and scientific progress done those last decades. Rather, it is a call to get back to our old daily life, because something is going wrong in this so elegant and polished calculated plan : we no longer know how to begin and maintain intimate relationships. If we want to help the elderly to cope with loneliness and anxiety, we should first ask ourselves the question: “How do I act and how do I relate myself with the elderly? ” That is a fundamental issue based on ethic and not just on epistemology.

I began my talk with the question “what does being old actually mean?” Although I have pointed out the increased distance which accompanies the change in the way man relates to the world in modern times, please realize that I ‘m not able to answer this question because I just do not know either. Maybe we should ask it to the elderly, and carefully listen to what they have to say, because, in fact, they could be the only ones who know.

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