



Aging as a Normative Phenomenon

ABSTRACT: Many philosophers have discussed the normative significance of personal relationships. The implicit focus of most of these discussions is on the normative significance of active, ongoing relationships. But, of course, all relationships end eventually. This article focuses on relationships that end through the death of one of the participants. A relationship that has ended in this way can still be a source of reasons for the surviving participant. This represents a different dimension of the normative significance of personal relationships, and it is a dimension that tends to become increasingly salient as one ages. Indeed, aging is in part a normative phenomenon, because it involves significant changes in the kinds of reasons people have. This article explores some of those changes and the distinctive questions to which they give rise.

KEYWORDS: normative ethics, moral psychology, practical reasoning

Introduction

Many philosophers have discussed the normative significance of interpersonal relationships. The implicit focus of most of these discussions has been on the significance of active, ongoing relationships. But, of course, relationships end. All relationships end. And a relationship that has ended can still be a source of reasons of various kinds. Or so we seem normally to suppose. If we are right, then this represents a different dimension of the normative significance of personal relationships. It is this dimension that I want to discuss.

Personal relationships end in different ways. Relationships of certain kinds, such as friendships or romantic relationships, sometimes end by explicit mutual agreement of the participants. Some friendships end gradually, without any explicit agreement, but with the tacit acquiescence of the participants. They grow apart or drift apart. Sometimes their external circumstances change in ways that make it difficult for them to sustain the relationship: someone moves away, someone changes jobs, and so on. Relationships that end with either the explicit consent or tacit acquiescence of the participants I will call *completed* relationships. Relationships that are terminated by one of the participants, even if against the

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wishes of the other, also count as completed relationships in my sense. However, many relationships are never completed but end in a different way, through the death of one of the participants, and I want to consider what becomes of the reasons generated by such relationships. I will call these relationships *archived* relationships. Both completed and archived relationships count as *inactive* in the sense that is relevant to this discussion, but my focus will be exclusively on archived relationships. (Of course, a relationship can be inactive without having ended. The participants may lose touch with one another for a certain period of time, and their relationship may become inactive during that period, but they may later reestablish contact and resume the relationship.) Although there are interesting questions about the normative significance of completed relationships, I will not consider them here.

My use of the term ‘archived relationship’ may seem comically euphemistic. Worse, it may seem misleading, even perverse. Items in an archive are normally accessible and retrievable, at least in principle, and an item that is retrieved from an archive is the same item that was put in the archive in the first place. But an archived relationship cannot be retrieved at all. It is over and can never again be active. Access to it is available only via memory or through external evidence or records of its history, such as documents, diaries, photographs, and the like. I persist in calling such relationships *archived* relationships for two reasons. The first is to emphasize that, although these relationships are inactive, they may nevertheless remain important to the surviving participants and continue to have normative significance for them, although the nature of that significance is not easy to characterize and is one of the central issues I want to investigate. The second reason is precisely to highlight the importance of issues of access, availability, and retrievability as they apply to such relationships. These issues are clearly relevant in thinking about the kinds of normative significance that relationships of this type can have.

If one is fortunate, then over the course of one’s lifetime one will have many valuable personal relationships. Although it is possible to participate in a valuable relationship without actually valuing it, I will for simplicity limit myself to those valuable relationships that the participants do value. And although there are some relationships, such as purely biological relationships, whose existence is completely independent of the participants’ attitudes toward one another, I will limit myself to relationships whose existence is dependent on those attitudes. These ‘attitude-dependent’ relationships include, most obviously, friendship and romantic love. By contrast, whether someone is one’s biological sibling is an ‘attitude-independent’ question. Still, one can speak of having a good or bad relationship with one’s brother or indeed of having no relationship with him at all, and here one is using ‘relationship’ in the attitude-dependent sense. One means that one has an attitude-dependent relationship with one’s brother that is good, bad, or nonexistent, whatever the biological facts may be (on the distinction between attitude-dependent and attitude-independent relationships, see Kolodny [2003: especially 149]). I will stipulatively refer to relationships meeting these conditions—relationships that are valuable, valued, and attitude-dependent—as *important relationships*. Important relationships may be of many different kinds, and the number of important relationships that different people have during their lifetimes varies. Moreover, importance comes in degrees. Not all important relationships are equally important.

Partly for this reason, there is no fixed number of such relationships that is required in order to lead a good life. Some people have just a few important relationships. Others have many more. Despite these variations, it is fair to say that a life that lacks a sufficient number of important relationships is thereby impoverished.

Consider now the set of important relationships that one has over the course of one's lifetime. As one ages, an increasing number of these relationships will become archived. If one lives long enough, one is likely to reach a point at which the majority of one's important relationships have become archived. By this I mean, more specifically, that the number of one's important relationships that have been archived exceeds the number of such relationships that are now or will in the future be active (this calculation excludes from consideration those important relationships that have already been completed). This is surely a fateful moment in one's life, although we have no name for it and may never be in a position to recognize it when it comes.

Of course, one should not place too much emphasis on the significance of this particular moment. The phenomenon of having an increasing number of one's relationships become archived is a scalar phenomenon, and there is no sharp discontinuity between the point at which, say, 50 percent of one's relationships have become archived and the point at which 51 percent have. Instead, the scalar phenomenon becomes gradually more important as the percentage of one's relationships that are archived increases. In addition, the fact that the importance of any relationship is a matter of degree and that some relationships are much more important than others means that the mere percentage of a person's important relationships that have been archived is, at best, a crude proxy for the underlying phenomenon I am trying to identify. Still, as a rough and ready expository device, focusing on the moment at which a majority of one's important relationships have become archived is a reasonably effective way of calling attention to the significance of that phenomenon.

I will stipulatively call people who have reached this point *old people* (or *older people*) and people who have not reached it *young people* (or *younger people*). And I will describe the process of having an increasing proportion of one's relationships become archived as the process of *becoming older*. All this *is* stipulative. Some people who are chronologically old are not old in my stipulative sense, and some people who are chronologically young are not young in my stipulative sense. But it seems safe to say that there is a strong correlation between chronological aging and becoming older in my stipulative sense. So my stipulations transform the apparent tautology that people of advanced age tend to be old into a plausible substantive observation.¹ In so doing, they highlight something that is easily overlooked, namely, that although aging is a biological and chronological phenomenon, it typically brings with it some dramatic normative changes.

¹ As already noted, we may never be in a position to recognize the exact moment at which we have become old in my stipulative sense. The older we get chronologically, however, the stronger our reasons normally become for believing that we have reached that point. Still, we may never know for sure when we have become old. And a person of advanced years might never become old, if most of her important relationships did not begin until late in her life.

This fact is obvious once mentioned, but it tends to be hidden from view when philosophical discussions of the normative significance of personal relationships focus exclusively on active relationships. Insofar as those discussions are motivated, as many of them are, by a concern with issues of partiality and impartiality in ethics (this is true of my own previous writings on the topic, such as Scheffler [1997] and Scheffler [2010b]), the focus on active relationships makes sense. Personal relationships have an important bearing on issues concerning partiality because it is frequently the case that the participants in valuable relationships have reasons to give one another's needs, interests, and desires a special place in their practical deliberations and, in particular, to give them priority over the needs, interests, and desires of other people. Accordingly, these reasons represent a form of partiality that may seem in tension with ideals of moral impartiality. But it is primarily in active relationships that such reasons arise. The dead have no needs, nor any current desires, and whether they have any interests is debatable. So it is unclear whether the surviving participant in an archived relationship has any reasons of partiality of the kind that are such a prominent feature of active relationships. Insofar as discussions of the normative significance of personal relationships are concerned with issues of partiality and impartiality, then, it is natural for them to focus on active relationships.

However, the normative significance of personal relationships is not exhausted by their bearing on questions about partiality and impartiality. As I have said, aging brings with it dramatic normative changes, and some of the most dramatic of those changes become evident when one thinks about the normative position of *older people*, for whom most of their important relationships are archived relationships that lie in the past. What is striking about their position has little to do with issues of partiality and impartiality.

1. The Threat of Normative Poverty

For older people, perhaps the most notable feature of their normative position is that they are threatened with a growing normative vacuum. As more and more of their important relationships become archived, fewer and fewer of the reasons previously generated by those relationships persist. Older people no longer have reasons to spend time with their deceased friends, to seek advice from them, to make plans with them, to help them, and so on. Yet the reasons generated by our important personal relationships are among the most significant reasons that we have. They are responsible for a great deal of our voluntary activity, supplying the basis on which we allocate a large proportion of our resources of time and energy. So one question that arises for older people is how this looming normative vacuum can be filled or avoided.

There is an interesting contrast between this problem and the problem of partiality and impartiality. The problem of partiality and impartiality, as it is often conceptualized, might be thought of as a problem produced by *normative affluence*. It is, in a sense, a problem that comes from having an overabundance of reasons. These include 'relationship-dependent reasons', which are reasons of partiality

arising from valuable personal relationships. They also include ‘project-dependent reasons’, which are reasons of partiality arising from valuable personal projects (I use this terminology in Scheffler 2010b). And they include reasons to treat other people in general in certain ways, whether or not one has any special relationship with them. The problem is how to integrate all of these disparate reasons. This is a problem that is characteristically faced by younger people who have a rich array of valuable relationships and projects. By contrast, one of the problems faced by older people, who often have fewer active relationships and projects, is the threat of *normative poverty*. The problem is that they may not have enough reasons. (Of course, they may still have some reasons, just as those who are economically impoverished may still have some money.) As I have indicated, my primary focus here will be on personal relationships and on the threat posed by a shortage of relationship-dependent reasons.

How might this threat be overcome? Or is it, perhaps, not really a serious threat at all? One immediate reply is to say that the way for older people to meet the threat, as more and more of their important relationships become archived, is simply to find worthwhile activities in which to engage; even if they need new reasons, those reasons need not come from personal relationships. Some older people, for example, may be able to develop new personal projects and, in so doing, they may offset the decrease in their relationship-dependent reasons with an increase in project-dependent reasons. In addition, there are many impersonal values or causes that people at all stages of life have good reasons to serve or support, whether or not those values or causes have the status in their lives of ‘personal projects’. Thus, older people need not face an overall shortage of reasons even if they have fewer relationship-dependent reasons than they once had. In general, however, personal relationships are a sufficiently important element of a satisfying life that a shortage of relationship-dependent reasons is itself a form of normative poverty even if one has many reasons of other kinds. From now on, when I speak of ‘normative poverty’, this is the kind of poverty I will have in mind. And it is important to ask how the threat of this kind of poverty might be overcome. To this question I see two primary responses. The first response is that the threat can be overcome by developing additional active relationships that can serve as new sources of reasons. The second response is that archived relationships continue to be sources of reasons, so that the threat is less severe than it may initially seem. Let us consider how each of these responses might be developed.

According to the first response, normative poverty is a condition that results from an insufficiency of important, active relationships. The fact that a large proportion of one’s important relationships have been archived is not itself a source of normative poverty. It is a fact that may, if one is aware of it, affect the way one thinks about one’s life and one’s place in the world. But when it comes to avoiding normative poverty, it is not strictly relevant. Instead, all that matters, at any given time, is whether one has a sufficient number of important relationships that are active. If, as more and more of one’s important relationships become archived, that ceases to be true, then what one needs to do in order to avoid normative poverty is to develop new relationships to take the place of those that have ended. If one succeeds in doing this, then the new relationships can provide a fully adequate

source of relationship-dependent reasons even if the majority of one's important relationships have been archived. Granted, it may be difficult for some older people, especially those of advanced years, to develop new relationships, but people at all stages of life encounter such difficulties. And even if statistically it is more difficult for older people to form new relationships, the fact remains that if they fail to do so, it is the paucity of important active relationships that is responsible for their normative poverty and not the proportion of their relationships that have been archived.

According to the second response, meanwhile, it is a mistake to think that an important relationship must be active in order to be a source of relationship-dependent reasons. After all, an action performed in the past can give one reasons to perform additional actions in the present. The fact that one made a promise yesterday can give one reason to fulfill the promise today. The fact that one wronged someone last year can give one reason to make reparations this year. And just as something that one did in the past can give one reasons for action in the present, so too a relationship that was active in the past can give one reasons for action in the present. Important archived relationships, in particular, continue to be rich sources of reasons even though they have become inactive. By virtue of having participated in such a relationship when it was active, one may have reasons once the relationship becomes inactive that one would not have had in the absence of one's participation. At the most basic level, one may have continuing reasons to value the relationship, and normally people do continue to value such relationships, even to treasure them. Moreover, to value something is, *inter alia*, to see it both as a source of reasons for holding various other attitudes toward that thing and as a source of reasons for action in relevant deliberative contexts (here I draw on my discussion in Scheffler 2010a). When what is valued is an important, active relationship, these reasons for action include reasons deriving from the needs, interests, and desires of the other participant in the relationship. When what is valued is instead an important archived relationship, the reasons in question change, but they do not disappear.

That, at any rate, is what most people seem to suppose. At the very least, people usually think it is important to remember their deceased friends and loved ones. Many also see themselves as having reasons to honor their loved ones and to commemorate their lives in various ways. These commemorative practices may be formal and ritualized, or they may be informal and consist in little more than talking about the departed, telling stories about them, or sharing memories of them with others. Beyond this, people sometimes think it is important to fulfill wishes expressed by their loved ones during their lifetimes or to finish tasks that they left incomplete or to sustain values or contribute to causes that were important to the departed. Of course, the content of the reasons that people take themselves to have varies considerably from case to case depending on the nature of the relationship in question; on prevailing social practices and norms; and on the temperaments, characters, and histories of the people involved. The important point, according to the second response, is just that archived relationships do not cease to be sources of normative reasons. So the fact that a large proportion of one's relationships have become archived does not mean that one is threatened with normative poverty.

Neither of these two responses seems to me fully adequate on its own because each neglects a point that the other emphasizes. We can bring these deficiencies into view by considering the reservations people sometimes express about the types of behavior that the two responses respectively recommend. If older people are too ready to develop new relationships to take the place of those that have become archived, as the first response encourages them to do, some may suspect that they do not properly value—and perhaps never did properly value—the old ones. The second response, in emphasizing their continuing reasons to value the old relationships, highlights this concern. Yet, if people devote themselves too single-mindedly to acting on reasons provided by the old relationships, as the second response encourages them to do, some may feel that they are ‘living in the past’ in a way that involves an undesirable retreat from engagement with the world. The first response, in emphasizing the desirability of developing active new relationships, highlights this concern.

However, even if neither response is fully adequate on its own, it is clear that there is also something right about each of them. If one were giving practical advice rather than engaging in philosophical inquiry, one might well encourage people to find ways of combining the two responses. The best thing to do, one might say, is to honor one’s archived relationships and to take seriously the reasons they provide while at the same time seeking to develop some active new relationships and to respond to the reasons they provide. Both kinds of relationship and both kinds of reason must have their place in a successful life, once one has reached the point at which most of one’s important relationships have become archived.

I am sure that, in general, this is sound practical advice. But it also obscures certain difficulties, and those difficulties suggest that, despite its soundness, there is nevertheless something unsatisfactory about the advice. The difficulties can be approached by exploring further the two responses that the sound practical advice urges us to combine. Once we do this, we will see that the two responses do not fully remedy each other’s deficiencies. If it is still sound advice to combine them, then that is because, as a matter of human psychology, combining them is our best response to some fundamentally unsatisfactory features of our situation. But the deficiencies of the two responses are real, and there may ultimately be no way of eliminating them. What we can do, however, is to try to understand them.

2. Two Responses Revisited

So let us look again at the two responses, beginning with the first. I noted that, if older people are too quick to develop new relationships to take the place of those that have become archived, other people may suspect that they do not properly value—and perhaps never did properly value—the archived relationships. The worry, it seems, is that these older people are treating human relationships as fungible and that this reveals a deficiency in the way they value those relationships.²

²No similar suspicions arise when people develop additional friendships while their existing friendships remain active. In such cases, there is no reason to think they are treating their friendships (or their friends) as

But why should this suspicion arise? Consider the seemingly analogous case of developing new personal projects to take the place of old ones. Offhand, it does not seem that doing this demonstrates an insensitivity to the value of the old ones. But the analogy is imperfect. In order for the two cases to be relevantly analogous, we would have to compare people's attitudes toward their archived relationships with their attitudes toward their *archived* projects in particular and not toward their previous projects in general. Once one frames the question in this way, however, one can see that there is no genuine parallel in the case of personal projects to the category of an archived relationship. Projects can be successfully completed. They can also fail in various ways. But as a general matter, they cannot become archived in the way that personal relationships can. If one's relationship with someone has become archived, that is because the other person has died. Although personal projects are sometimes constituted to one degree or another by relationships with other people, and although those relationships can become archived, projects need not be constituted by relationships with others and projects *qua* projects cannot, in general, become archived. If my project is to build a house or knit a sweater, the project can fail, but the house or sweater cannot die. Of course, the house or the sweater, once created, may be *destroyed*, but that is different.

When a project fails, one does not demonstrate an insensitivity to the value of the failed project if one moves swiftly to develop new projects. Of course, if a person develops a new project that exemplifies values antithetical to the ones exemplified by that person's previous projects, that may raise questions about the person's integrity or depth of commitment. But the mere fact of developing a new project to take the place of a failed project does not by itself lead us to suspect the person of inappropriately treating personal projects as fungible. Nor are such suspicions aroused if someone who successfully completes a project is able to develop a new project immediately. If anything, such a person may strike us as unusually enterprising or imaginative.³

So we have found two relevant differences between projects and relationships. There are, strictly speaking, no archived personal projects, and when a project comes to an end either via failure or via successful completion, a person who moves swiftly to develop new projects is not thought to demonstrate an insensitivity to the value of the old ones.

There is another difference too. If projects cannot in general become archived in the way that relationships can, relationships cannot in general be *successfully completed* in the way that many personal projects can. Still less does one aim at the successful completion of one's personal relationships. I may aim to finish building

fungible because the acquisition of the new friends is not motivated by the death of the old ones. So there is no reason to suspect they are simply exchanging one friend for another.

³ These claims may be overstated. There might be cases in which a person who quickly develops a new project after an old one fails does seem insensitive to the value of the old one. Still, these seem to me to be special cases; the mere fact that one quickly develops a new project when an old one fails does not in general arouse suspicions of insensitivity or disloyalty. However, my overall argument does not depend on there being a contrast of this kind between projects and relationships. The reason for drawing the contrast is simply to highlight the point that such suspicions do arise in the case of relationships. If the same thing were true of projects, that point would be no less secure.

a house or knitting a sweater. Doing so does not indicate a failure properly to value those projects. But I do not aim in the same way at the successful completion of a friendship or family relationship. Doing so *would* seem to reveal a failure to value those relationships properly. Important personal relationships do not have the kind of telos that many (though not all) personal projects have. They are instead open-ended.⁴ They are constituted to an important extent by the reciprocal attitudes and dispositions of the participants. If the attitudes and dispositions of one or both of the participants change, then a relationship may be altered in its character, or it may come to an end. But so long as the reciprocal attitudes and dispositions of the participants remain unchanged, there is no reason internal to the relationship for it not to continue.

These considerations help to explain what lies behind the suspicion of a person who is too quick to develop new relationships to replace his or her archived relationships or is insufficiently conflicted about doing so. Of course, such suspicions may not always be justified. It is sometimes possible for people to develop new relationships very quickly even though they genuinely value the old ones. The complexities of human psychology elude capture in any simple generalization. Even so, the fact that such suspicions sometimes arise may teach us something about the normative significance of archived personal relationships. Those suspicions are connected with the collaborative and open-ended character of relationships. Unlike personal projects, important human relationships are essentially collaborative undertakings that normally have no determinate goal or endpoint and are constituted to a significant extent by the reciprocal attitudes and dispositions of the participants. And although the death of one of the participants brings the relationship to an end, it does not do so by effecting any change in the content of the participants' attitudes and dispositions. This means that, despite the deceased participant's death, there is no reason internal to the relationship itself why it should not persist. That is why archived relationships frequently continue to be seen by the surviving participants as sources of reasons for action and attitudes of various kinds. It is also why someone who has no hesitation about embarking on new relationships to take the place of his or her archived relationships may arouse suspicions. Such a person may seem insensitive to the reasons still generated by the old relationships. The person may seem disloyal.⁵

4 Some role relationships are exceptions. Think, for example, of the relationship between a thesis advisor and her advisee or between a therapist and his patient. In such cases the relationship does have a telos or goal, and achieving the goal marks the end of that relationship (although, at least in the advisor-advisee case, it may then be transformed into a different kind of relationship). Even in these cases, however, the goal is not to complete the relationship. The goal is specified independently (to write a dissertation), and the end of the relationship is a by-product of achieving the goal. I am grateful to Kathryn Lindeman for discussion of this point.

5 It may seem that suspicions of disloyalty can arise only with respect to relationships that have a presumption of exclusivity built into them, such as marriages or equivalent partnerships and perhaps nonromantic friendships of some kinds (confidants, 'best friends', and so on). If a relation was exclusive when it was active, then to develop a new relationship of that kind as soon as the old one becomes archived may seem disloyal or insensitive to the value of the old relationship; it may seem to violate—or at least to sit uncomfortably with—the condition of exclusivity that characterized that relationship when it was active. With nonexclusive friendships, things seem different. There is no disloyalty involved in acquiring a new friend while one's old friend is still alive, and so, a fortiori, there can be no disloyalty if the new friendship develops right after the old one has become archived. But

The basic point is that death terminates an archived relationship without altering the content of the reciprocal attitudes and dispositions that were constitutive of the relationship. Because there is no change in the content of those dispositions and attitudes, such relationships continue to engage the emotions of the surviving participants and to be experienced by them as having ongoing normative reality. The relationships continue, we might say, to cast a normative shadow. After all, the survivor's attitudes and dispositions had previously been nourished by the reciprocal attitudes and dispositions of the other participant, and those attitudes and dispositions never changed. Accordingly, there is no reason for the survivor's attitudes and dispositions to change. It is not as if the deceased participant developed hostile feelings toward the survivor or wanted to discontinue their relationship. In the absence of changes in content of that kind, it would seem like a mistake if the survivor's reciprocal attitudes were suddenly to cease. This would be to mistake a metaphysical and biological change—the death of the other person—for a normative one, a change in the content of that person's attitudes.

These reflections help to illuminate the deficiencies of the first response to the threat of normative poverty. At the same time, they appear to strengthen the case for the second response. If archived relationships continue to generate reasons—if they continue to cast a normative shadow—and if it would be a mistake to neglect those reasons, then perhaps the threat of normative poverty is, after all, illusory. An archived relationship remains a rich source of reasons for the surviving participant because the end of the relationship does not result from any change in the reciprocal structure of attitudes and dispositions that helped to constitute it in the first place. So the surviving participant has no shortage of reasons to which to respond. Yet as we saw when we first considered this response, it too has its deficiencies. People who devote themselves too single-mindedly to acting on reasons provided by their archived relationships may strike others as 'living in the past' in a way that seems undesirable. Living this way may seem to involve a retreat from engagement with the world.

What is the source of this perception? Why should people who single-mindedly embrace the second response seem to be 'living in the past', and why should living in the past strike anyone as an undesirable thing to do? To live in the past, in the way that makes some people uneasy, is to give the reasons generated by archived relationships a central role in one's life—a role as great as the one usually played by

I think this is not quite right. What is true is that when an archived relationship had a presumption of exclusivity built into it, then if the survivor moves quickly to develop a new relationship of the same kind as soon as the original one becomes archived, it is natural to assume that the motivation is to fill the void left by the old one. Had the relationship not become archived, the survivor would not (and perhaps could not) have acquired the new spouse or partner or best friend *in addition to* the old one. With nonexclusive relationships, however, we cannot be sure. Perhaps the survivor would have acquired the new nonexclusive friend even if the old friendship had not become archived. If so, there is no reason to suspect him of treating his friendships as fungible. But if we were convinced that the motivation for developing the new nonexclusive friendship was to take the place of the old one, the suspicion of disloyalty or of treating personal relationships as fungible might arise here too. To put it another way: *all* friendships are exclusive in the sense that they are nonfungible. What is difficult is to say what exactly 'nonfungibility' amounts to, and why some ways of engaging in personal relationships strike us as violating (or as coming close to violating) the nonfungibility condition while other, somewhat similar, ways of engaging in such relationships do not.

active relationships. And that makes people uneasy because even though archived relationships continue to be sources of reasons, they cannot generate a supply of reasons that is as rich or as varied as the reasons generated by active relationships. This is not just because the dead have no new needs or desires that are capable of generating reasons. It is also because the reciprocal structure of attitudes and dispositions that constitutes an archived relationship cannot grow or be modified or enriched through continuing engagement with the world. In an active relationship, the participants do not simply act on a fixed set of attitudes and dispositions toward one another. Instead, each participant acts on attitudes and dispositions that evolve in response to changes in the participants and in the circumstances they face together as time goes by. In so doing, the participants enrich and renew their relationship, adding to its history and sometimes modifying its character. But an archived relationship cannot be renewed in this way. Its history has come to an end. And so people who devote themselves too single-mindedly to the reasons that such relationships continue to generate must turn away from the ongoing flow of human experience, from the never-ending succession of new events. They must in that sense disengage from the world. The sources of their reasons are now fixed and unalterable and are not affected by changes in circumstances, by the continuing course of human history. The world now has nothing new to offer them.

This can seem a diminished way to live. Despite the fact that archived relationships continue to be sources of reasons, to respond too single-mindedly to those reasons is, we sometimes think, to lead a truncated or reduced life. And so, although we may be suspicious of people who are too quick to replace archived relationships with new ones, we are sometimes uneasy about people who *never* do so. To do so too quickly or in too unconflicted a way suggests an insensitivity to the value of the old relationships. But not to do so at all suggests a retreat from active engagement with the world and, perhaps, a failure to appreciate the differences between the kinds of reasons generated by active and archived relationships.

Is this reaction fair? To me it seems most appropriate when the surviving participant in an archived relationship is relatively young chronologically. As people age chronologically and as more and more of their important relationships become archived, I find myself wavering. I am less surprised—and made less uneasy—when such people become gradually more disengaged from the world. In part, of course, their gradual disengagement and my own lack of surprise can be explained by reference to the purely causal factors—such as illness, limited mobility, lack of opportunity—that make it difficult for many people as they age chronologically to develop active new relationships and to remain fully engaged with the world. In part, the explanation may appeal to prudential considerations. With increasing age and with diminishing expectations of future longevity, some people may judge that the probability of developing valuable new relationships is sufficiently low that it is not worth the effort to try, even if the purely causal obstacles to success are not decisive. But there is also a component of the explanation that is neither causal nor prudential. This component appeals to the cumulative normative weight of archived relationships and the reasons generated by those relationships. If people genuinely and appropriately value their important relationships, it strikes me as unreasonable to expect of them—as the years go by and as more and more of those relationships

become archived—that they should seek to develop new relationships. It is not unreasonable for them to feel instead that their lives as social creatures are primarily defined by their existing interpersonal histories and slowly to withdraw from active engagement with the ongoing social world. Doing this can be a reasonable way of responding to the cumulative normative significance of their archived relationships, the cumulative normative significance of what they have lost.

To say that this response is reasonable is not to say that it is rationally required. On the contrary, I think there is something especially admirable about people who remain actively engaged in the world throughout their lives, who never lose their interest in the new or their appetite for participation in social life. But at the same time, it does not surprise me or seem inappropriate that as one ages and as the proportion of one's relationships that have become archived continues to grow, the space in one's life that is occupied by reasons deriving from those relationships and the attitudes and actions that those reasons support should also expand.

It is tempting, despite what I have said, to interpret this in purely causal and prudential terms. Given the practical limits that make it difficult for people of more advanced years to develop active, new relationships and given the lower probability of success if they attempt to do so, it is only natural that the reasons generated by archived relationships should rush in to fill the void. It is unfortunate, perhaps, but nearly unavoidable, and these people deserve our compassion. If only it were easier for them to develop new relationships, they would not need to dwell so much on their archived relationships. Like people of less advanced years who suffer a grievous loss, they would be able to move on.

But one could look at it the other way. The fact that people who suffer a grievous loss early in life manage to move on is itself to be explained largely in causal and prudential terms. It is, so to speak, the response of a healthy organism. One cannot make a flourishing life for oneself by 'living in the past', and it is in our nature to seek to flourish. So chronologically young people who are bereaved must eventually emerge from the normative shadows. They must spend less time dwelling on what they have lost and become less responsive to its value. It is overwhelmingly in their interest to do this. They must learn to deflect more of their attention away from the normative force of the relationships that have ended and to seize the opportunities they are likely to have to develop new relationships. By contrast, it is people of more advanced years, whose temporal horizons have shrunk and whose social world is increasingly populated by the ghosts of the past, who are in a position to confront the normative significance of archived relationships most fully.

We might think of it this way. Human life presents us with many normative questions and problems. But some of these problems loom larger at some stages of life than at others. This means there are different normative challenges associated with different stages. Many philosophical discussions of the normative significance of personal relationships implicitly adopt the perspective of adults who are mature but still relatively young chronologically, with most of their important relationships still active or lying in the future. So such discussions focus primarily on questions about the kinds of reasons that active relationships give their participants and about how to integrate those reasons with reasons of other kinds. They devote less attention to the equally important problems that tend to arise as one ages

chronologically. The threat of normative poverty is one such problem, and it is a mistake to think of it solely in causal or prudential terms.

3. A Deeper Problem

There is, however, another, deeper problem that underlies the threat of normative poverty. This helps to explain why neither of the two responses to that threat is entirely adequate on its own and why the ‘sound practical advice’ that combines them is not fully satisfactory either. The underlying problem is that there is something dissatisfying, even perverse, about our attempts to respond to the value of archived relationships. Our most important active relationships both define and exemplify our engagement with the world. It is in the company of the people who matter most to us that we experience and interpret the world around us. This does not mean that these people must always be physically in our presence. But to experience and interpret the world ‘in their company’ does require that we have periodic communication or at least the possibility of such communication with them. This is a requirement for having an active relationship in the first place. And it is, to a great extent, through communication and interaction with the people who matter most to us that we make sense of the world and our place in it (hence the phenomenon described in footnote 6 below). This is not just a matter of trying to understand an independently given experience. Instead, our relationships with the people to whom we are most deeply bound serve to structure and to shape our engagement with the world. They help to transform the mere succession of events into the coherent narrative of a life. I do not mean that people who have no important active relationships have no lives at all. The point is rather that for those who do have such relationships this is an important function they serve. (This is not to say that it is the only function that they serve or that it is the only thing that is valuable about them or that all of their value must derive from some function or functions they serve.) For those who lack such relationships, the function must be served, insofar as it can be served, in other ways.

When an important relationship becomes archived, it can no longer play the same role. The surviving participant can no longer engage with the world in the company of the participant who has died. Yet in most cases the surviving participant continues, appropriately, to value the relationship, and this means, *inter alia*, seeing it as a source of reasons for actions and attitudes of various kinds. But what kinds of actions and attitudes are these? Typical examples, as we saw, include such things as remembering the person who has died, sharing these memories with others, and commemorating the person’s life. But unlike the activities undertaken in the context of an active relationship, these commemorative activities are not part of a shared attempt to engage with the ongoing flow of human experience. They do not exemplify one’s engagement with the world or one’s dynamic efforts in the company of others to make sense of the never-ending succession of novel events and experiences. Although these activities are undertaken in the name of a relationship that previously exemplified those very things, they themselves represent something different. They reflect the survivor’s need to revisit and reaffirm the value of the past,

and as such they represent a deliberate turning of attention away from the world and its relentless novelty. Yet, as a way of reaffirming the value of the archived relationship, there is something about this that is unsatisfactory, even perverse. Much of the value of the relationship derived from its role in structuring and extending and giving character to the participants' engagement with the world. But in order to honor and acknowledge the continuing value of that relationship, one is moved to act in ways that represent a kind of disengagement from the world and so seem antithetical to the very value one is trying to honor.

The point is not that it would be better to give up on trying to honor archived relationships or to neglect the reasons to which they give rise. That too would be unsatisfactory. It would involve a crass insensitivity to the value of what has been lost. The point is rather that our best ways of acknowledging that value, as we have every reason to want to do, seem incongruous with the value itself. This is one of the cruelest aspects of personal loss. Our best efforts to acknowledge the value of the relationships that death has ended involve acting in ways that are antithetical to some of the most important functions those relationships served when active. In so doing, they not only underline the magnitude of our loss but may actually increase it.

But are these commemorative activities really our best response to the value of the relationships that death has ended? Sometimes, as we have seen, people respond in other ways. They take on tasks that the deceased participants were unable to complete, or they take up causes that were important to the deceased. They try to internalize values or to emulate traits of character that the deceased participants exemplified and to live their own lives consistently with those values or traits. If a loved one died in a particularly traumatic or unusual way or in a way that might have been avoided with better research or better policies or better information, the survivors may dedicate themselves to activities designed to produce such research or such policies or such information. None of these ways of responding involves a disengagement from the world. Perhaps the lesson is that we do a better job of acting on the reasons to which archived relationships give rise when we engage in forward-looking activities of this kind rather than in purely commemorative activities.

Perhaps so. But even forward-looking activities of this kind do not duplicate the function of active relationships. They may be good ways of honoring the value of the relationship itself and keeping the memory of it alive without disengaging from the world. Still, such activities do not and cannot sustain the relationship's previous function of enabling one to experience and interpret the world in the company of the other. One can, of course, draw on one's memories of a departed participant as a resource to help one experience and interpret the world. One can speculate about what the departed participant might have said or thought about some new event. But one can just as well speculate about what a fictional character or a public or historical figure might have said. This is a far cry from the dynamic and interactive process by which the participants in active relationships rely on those relationships to structure and make sense of new experiences together.⁶

⁶It is telling, I think, how often people who have lost a spouse or close family member report that they continue to *talk* to their loved ones. The wish that animates these one-sided conversations, which is as

Furthermore, these forward-looking responses are, for good reasons, usually reserved for a small number of intimate relationships. Many of these responses require that there be some specifiable value or cause or trait of character that was distinctively associated with the deceased participant, that was not already shared by the surviving participant, and that is both feasible and desirable for the surviving participant to sustain or to emulate. This will not always be true of important relationships. And many relationships, although important, are not such that one would seek to alter one's character or one's values or to rechart the course of one's life in order to honor them. When people who are bereaved express the intention to live differently in the future as a way of honoring the deceased, this is often purely aspirational and sometimes it is just pious nonsense. In any case, there are only so many times one can do this sort of thing. If one does it too often or in response to too many different losses, then the coherence of one's own character—not to mention the status of one's prior activities and commitments—may be called into question. Thus, these responses tend to make the most sense when reserved for a very small number of especially salient relationships: a relationship with a spouse or a child or a parent, perhaps. As one ages and the losses of valued friends begin to mount up, they do not represent a viable general strategy of response.⁷

The difficulties I have been rehearsing may seem overblown. Even if the reasons generated by archived relationships lead us to act in ways that are antithetical to some of the important values and functions those relationships served when active, this does not present most people with insuperable problems. They just muddle through. They make time to commemorate important archived relationships, and they also respond in a variety of other ways to the reasons those relationships generate. Yet, except in cases of extreme trauma, they do not disengage from the world. They go on living active lives. They accumulate new experiences and struggle to make sense of those experiences and of the world around them. Often they do this in the company of others with whom they have new or continuing active relationships. For many, the role of grandchildren and other new family members is especially important in this connection. In practice, then, many people manage

understandable and as moving as it is unsatisfiable, is to keep the relationships active even when they no longer are.

⁷ On the issues discussed in this paragraph, consider the opening lines of Lydia Davis's 'How Shall I Mourn Them?' (Davis 2009: 697–99):

- Shall I keep a tidy house, like L.?
- Shall I develop an unsanitary habit, like K.?
- Shall I sway from side to side a little as I walk, like C.?
- Shall I write letters to the editor, like R.?
- Shall I retire to my room often during the day, like R.?
- Shall I live alone in a large house, like B.?
- Shall I treat my husband coldly, like K.?
- Shall I give piano lessons, like M.?
- Shall I leave the butter out all day to soften, like C.?
- Shall I have problems with typewriter ribbons, like K.?
- Shall I have a strong objection to the drinking of juice, like K.?
- Shall I hold many grudges, like B.?

to have it both ways, just as the ‘sound practical advice’ urges them to do. And if they manage this in practice, then it is not clear what problem remains in theory.

The difficulty is that ‘muddling through’, or following the sound practical advice, works best when people are effectively motivated to develop active new relationships and have good opportunities to do so. But as people age chronologically, these conditions often fail. With advancing years, people may have fewer opportunities to develop important new relationships, be less powerfully motivated to do so, and have fewer prudential reasons to try. The most fortunate among them will still have important active relationships, and so muddling through—following the sound practical advice—will still make sense. But for those who are ‘doubly old’—that is, for those who are older both chronologically and in the sense that most of their important relationships lie in the past—the normative significance of the reasons deriving from archived relationships comes perforce to occupy an increasingly central place in their practical lives.

This ‘perforce’ has both negative and positive sides. Negatively, there are likely to be fewer reasons deriving from active relationships with which the reasons deriving from archived relationships must compete. Positively, the absence of competition makes it easier to attend to these reasons and to appreciate their genuine force. Muddling through involves allowing the strong imperative to develop and sustain active relationships to divert one’s attention from the value of what one has lost. But as the losses keep increasing and the pressure to divert attention from them begins to lose its grip, ‘living in the past’ may no longer be an unreasonable thing to do. And then the unsatisfactory character of our best responses to the value of past relationships becomes more difficult to avoid noticing. The reasons that were generated by those relationships when they were active were, in their effect if not their content, reasons to act in ways that would sustain the relationships and enable them to keep serving the function of structuring and shaping the participants’ engagement with an ever-changing world. But now the reasons generated by the same relationships lead the survivor to act in ways that involve a kind of disengagement from the world and its changes. The primary way to respond to the value of those relationships now, as one has strong reason to do, is to turn away from the world in which they helped make it possible for one to live. This is something that the doubly old have fewer reasons and fewer opportunities to avoid seeing.

When someone they love dies, people sometimes say that a part of them has died too. This may seem like sheer sentimentality. But it is an implication of what I have been saying that it is importantly and almost literally true. When someone with whom one had an important relationship dies, one loses the ability to make sense of one’s experience in the company of that person. The portion of oneself that was constructed and sustained through collaboration with the person who has died is terminated and can develop no further. And if, recognizing the value of what one has lost, one tries to act on the reasons still generated by the relationship, one only underlines the loss and even risks compounding it. Nevertheless, people usually muddle through, at least at first. The imperative to live is too strong for them to do otherwise. As time marches on, though, the losses increase, and they may find themselves increasingly diminished in consequence. Like the Black Knight

in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*—“Tis but a scratch!”—most people persevere for as long as they can. But eventually they may have to acknowledge that the role of personal relationships in their lives has been profoundly transformed. Most of their important relationships now lie in the past, and most of their relationship-dependent reasons derive from those past relationships. So acting on relationship-dependent reasons, which was once a way of immersing themselves in the world, is now a way of withdrawing from it. The same relationships that exemplified their engagement with the world now underline and reinforce their isolation, and the threat of isolation keeps growing as more and more of their important relationships recede into the past. Eventually they may find themselves wondering, in certain moods at least, how much of them remains.

Perhaps this is too gloomy. People’s temperaments vary. But even if the doubly old do not find their thoughts moving in this direction, they are more likely than other people to experience as salient some questions about the normative significance of past relationships that have no clear or easy answers. On one level, as I have been arguing, the question is whether and in what way one can respond to the reasons generated by archived relationships without subverting some of the very values those relationships previously exemplified. On another level, the question is about the normative reality of the relationships themselves. The fact that archived relationships continue to generate reasons for the surviving participants can be a great comfort. It seems to confirm the ongoing importance of the relationships and to give them a continuing normative reality that is both life-affirming and death-defying. But if the reasons they generate tend to subvert some of the primary values the relationships served when active, this may only be an illusion. Rather than confirming the relationships’ continuing normative vitality, these reasons may simply emphasize the finality of the survivors’ loss. Alternatively, we may begin to wonder whether it really is true, as I have been assuming, that archived relationships can still generate reasons. Perhaps these relationships have no continuing normative reality at all. This would serve even more emphatically to confirm the finality of the survivors’ loss.

4. Conclusion

Whatever the answers to these questions may be, they are questions that are likely to seem increasingly pressing as one ages chronologically. That fact illustrates the two most general themes of this essay. The first is that aging is in part a normative phenomenon because it involves significant changes in the kinds of reasons that people have. I have been focusing on changes in the kinds of relationship-dependent reasons they have and on the way in which those changes bring to the fore some issues about the value of past relationships. These issues are relevant to people of all ages, since people of all ages suffer terrible losses, but for the reasons I have discussed they tend to become more salient to people with the passage of time. And that illustrates my second general theme, which is that because different normative questions seem salient to people at different stages of life, philosophers should not unreflectively take for granted the perspective of any one stage or suppose that

the questions that seem salient at one stage exhaust the set of questions worth investigating.

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