Chapter 2 – Living and aging in late modernity

2.1 Introduction

This chapter intends to help us gain more clarity about the content and background of the late modern discourse on self-realization. This late modern discourse provides one of the starting points of this study, which aims to connect the theme of self-realization to the context of aging in order to explore its opportunities and serve as a resource for potentially inspiring cultural narratives about later life. Such narratives, as this study contends, are problematically absent in the late modern context.

This chapter is organized as follows. In §2.2, I start with an initial tentative sketch of the late modern interpretation of self-realization that this study contests and aims to reframe. Founding this sketch are some influential sociological and moral-philosophical analyses of late modernity by thinkers like Giddens (1991), Beck (1992), Bauman (2001, 2007), C. Taylor (1989, 1991, 2007) and MacIntyre (1984). The typical elements they observe as characteristic of the late modern outlook are discussed in §2.3.1 through §2.3.6. My next step is to connect the general observations about late modernity that form the background of late modern self-realization discourse to the context of *aging*. In §2.4.1 through §2.4.6, a number of themes are discussed to elucidate some particular characteristics of aging in late modernity that are relevant from the viewpoint of this study. Finally, in §2.5, after a recapitulation of the different facets of the late modern interpretation of self-realization, it is argued that aging provides an excellent case to illustrate the deep ambivalences that late modern self-realization discourse harbors. To preserve its value as a moral ideal for the context of aging, the late modern self-realization discourse needs to be reframed at some crucial points. This reframing entails an endeavor of refining, revising and redefining the late modern interpretation of self-realization and its constitutive concepts, in order to arrive at a view that better matches the context of aging.

2.2 Late modernity, an era of self-realization?

The ambiguous wish *may you live in interesting times*, reportedly expressed to one's enemies in Eastern traditions, would certainly apply to the current era. But how can these interesting times in which we live be accurately described? The term late modernity to describe contemporary times is drawn from the work of Giddens (1991). Just like similar terms attempting to characterize our current era such as reflexive modernity (Beck, 1992), or liquid modernity (Bauman, 2001), choosing the term late modernity suggests that modernity is not so much "over" (as for example the term "*post*modernity" would imply), but has entered a new phase. In comparison with premodern, traditional settings, the process of modernization has brought a major and fundamental transformation of the social circumstances in which the life of the individual takes place. Late modernity distinguishes itself from earlier phases of modernization by the unprecedented dynamism through which it continuously changes existing social practices (Baars, 2006a).

Following social theorists like Giddens (1991, 1994), Bauman (2001, 2007), Beck (1992), Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002), and philosophers such as C. Taylor (1989, 1991, 2007) and MacIntyre (1984), late modernity is presented here first of all as an era with a typical focus on individual self-realization. In its late modern interpretation, self-realization pertains to the idea that a life considered "good" exhibits a self-chosen, authentic lifestyle, that is, a lifestyle in accordance with the good, purposes or value orientations one reflexively identifies with. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim underscore, a "life of your own" seems to be one of the most dominant ideals strived for in the context of late modernity (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 22). It is important to note, however, that this late modern focus on individual agents and their self-fulfillment also contains profound ambiguities, as is elaborated later on. Although the self-directed life is promoted as the best possible life, this ideal often seems to function as a disguise for a decisively *de-individualizing* ideology that is based on the dominant power constellations typical of market capitalism (Baars, 2006a).

The late modern interpretation of self-realization, that is the target of reframing in this study, can be characterized along general and rather tentative lines as follows:

- The late modern interpretation of self-realization lays strong emphasis on the good life as a life of one's own authentic choice. It conceptualizes living well typically in terms of a lifestyle, a set of personally appropriated habits and practices that assist people in the reflexive organization of life choices amidst the chaotic abundance of available options in late modernity.
- Late modern self-realization discourse assumes that the individual agent is a highly self-determined, atomistic and independent creature, who is

emancipated from the restrictive traditional embedding of human lives characteristic of premodern times. It presents individual agents as the autonomous architects or directors of their own lives, who are capable of appropriating an authentic value orientation as the underlying motivation for their reflexive life choices.

- The late modern view of self-realization tends to neglect the constitutive and inescapable role that social context and relationships play in one's identity formation, focusing instead on the voluntary character of late modern social relationships.
- The late modern interpretation of self-realization is typically oriented towards obtaining mastery over one's life. This focus comes with a problematic neglect of the uncontrollable dimensions of human life that accompany the existential dimension of the human condition. Consequently, the late modern interpretation of self-realization has a hard time relating to confrontations with the inevitable vulnerability of human existence. This vulnerability, according to the late modern argument, necessarily compromises the success of self-realization.

This first brief sketch of the late modern interpretation of self-realization serves as the starting point of this study. This sketch is broadly based on a number of influential sociological and philosophical analyses of typical features and dynamics of life in late modernity, which will now be further addressed.

2.3 Features and dynamics of the late modern world

In this section, I first briefly elaborate on some characteristic features and dynamics of the late modern world. In succession, the themes discussed are individualization (§2.3.1), de-traditionalization (§2.3.2), globalization (§2.3.3), and the expression of these broad tendencies in structural and systemic influences on individual lives (§2.3.4). It will become clear how the sketched developments have resulted in an insecure and complex world, in which individuals are thrown back on their own resources when it comes to giving shape and meaning to their lives. These observations strongly influence late modern self-realization discourse's assumption that individuals are atomistic agents destined to navigate the complex circumstances of late modernity on their own. Next, I discuss how late modernity tends to repress matters of meaning and morality, by sequestering them in separate realms and emphasizing that the individual carries sole responsibility for them (§2.3.5). At this point, the sociological analyses intersect with some influential moral philosophical analyses of (late) modernity, represented by the work of philosophers like C. Taylor (1989, 1991) and MacIntyre (1984). These philosophers focus on the demise of self-evident

moral and spiritual frameworks and communities to fall back on, which in their view results in a moral identity crisis for late modern individuals (§2.3.6).

2.3.1 A life of one's own: reflexive individualization

According to sociological thinkers such as Giddens (1991), Beck (1992), Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Bauman (2001, 2007), one of the most crucial processes giving shape to late modern culture and society seems to be its struggle with the implications of *individualization* and the resulting diversity and pluralism characterizing society. The late modern version of the self-realization discourse cannot be understood without acknowledging the fundamental influence of these individualization processes. According to the definition of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), individualization brings together two interrelated tendencies. On the one hand, modernization has brought the disintegration of previously existing, traditional social forms; modes of life that were ordained by religion, tradition or the state are breaking down and people are no longer automatically defined by traditional social categories such as gender or age. On the other hand, new demands are placed upon the individual, notably the requirement to lead a "life of one's own" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 22). Giddens has analyzed how the typical late modern "choice biography" replaces the traditional standard biography. He emphasizes however, that the demands associated with a choice biography are by no means less constraining for the individual, though the pressures are of a quite different kind (Giddens, 1991).

Although it seems to be a generally accepted truth that modernization is accompanied by far-reaching processes of individualization, it is important to realize that our interpretation of this phenomenon deeply influences our evaluation of its outcomes. Elliott and Lemert (2006) distinguish three different interpretations of individualization, representing rather different views on the characteristic changes in the relation between individual identities and globalizing late modern contexts. The perspective of *manipulated individualism* stresses the exploitative and dominating forces exercised by economic and bureaucratic structures, as well as by the dynamics of mass culture, on the individual life world. The perspective of *isolated privatism* focuses on the corruption of authentic individuality and the resulting narcissistic, hedonistic attitude of self-directed consumption and instant satisfaction of desires. Both perspectives seem to regard the individual agent as an isolated, powerless pawn, vulnerable to corrupting systemic influences, moved by invisible, structural manipulating forces which overrule any chance of truly autonomous control over one's life, or of the development of authentic individual capacities. Consequently, self-realization, as the path towards a good life, seems to be a rather illusory undertaking in these perspectives of individualization.

The third perspective however, termed *reflexive individualization*, takes a different angle. It stresses the way in which the dynamics of late modern society and culture urge people to take their existence in their own hand, to become the architects of their own biography and realize their potential capacities as autonomously choosing agents. The late modern version of the self-realization discourse is most closely affiliated with the reflexive individualization-perspective. This perspective shares the observation that individuals are subjected to profound societal and cultural influences acting upon their lives. But importantly, in the reflexive individualization-view these influences strongly favor and even demand the development of individual capacities that are crucial for self-realization, such as autonomy competencies (Meyers, 1989). However, attaining these competencies is hardly a simple process.

Beck (1992) sketches how, due to the dynamics of reflexive individualization, the individual life loses the self-evident organization it had under more traditional circumstances. Although one might argue that individualization has come with an increase in autonomy, emancipation and freedom, it is equally true that the background of routines conditional for daily human activity as well as social interaction has evaporated into a cloud of possibilities. Late modern individuals live in a world infested with risks that form the flip side of this explosion of possibilities. In their striving for self-realization, they are forced to continuously reflect, calculate, adjust, negotiate and plan their lives. This suggests that the emancipation process inherent in individualization brings the individual life a set of freedoms that are precarious and vulnerable at best. The person has "no choice but to choose" (Giddens, 1991, p. 81), but there are hardly any reliable guidelines about which choices should prevail.

This brings me to the crucially important element of *reflexivity* which is regarded as characteristic of the late modern outlook by both Beck and Giddens. The term reflexivity points to the fact that almost all aspects of people's lives are susceptible to revision in the light of new information or knowledge. It applies both to institutions and to individual selves (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). While late modernity offers access to an abundance of information and knowledge not available in premodern, traditional societies, this knowledge has at the same time lost its self-evident authority and certainty. Although there exist an abundance of "expert systems" offering their support in this process, none of them can claim to provide a definitive answer (Giddens, 1991). This leaves individuals "on their own", overwhelmed by complex situations requesting immediate and sound answers, but lacking any steadfast and reliable support for obtaining them. Only their own reflexive deliberation and choice can ultimately serve as guidelines in a "runaway world" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 22).

Thus, in their efforts to manage existence, late modern individuals are ultimately thrown back on the reflexive process of self-formation and can no longer rely on objective standards. Acquiring knowledge and making decisions is no

longer a matter of taking an objectifying distance and applying determinate rules. The irony is that subjects are expected to be their own reflective rule-creators, while the features of the late modern world make this task very complicated. The fact that the world has become so complex that it cannot be overseen in a rational, detached manner calls for other forms of reflexivity than the rational reflection that underlies more traditional models of knowledge (Lash, 2003).

The sketched dynamics of reflexive individualization transforms individual biographies into personal "projects" of self-realization that are designed to express the individual lifestyle choices and value preferences underlying people's identity (Hendricks & Hatch, 2009). The typical late modern reflexivity thus does not only pertain to questions of functional knowledge and choices, such as which medical expert to trust in the case of illness, or which food to choose for good health. It also concerns questions in the existential sphere, such as what makes one's life meaningful or what relationships one feels committed to, which are crucial to self-realization.

2.3.2 Living in a post-traditional context

The sketched processes of (reflexive) individualization are intrinsically connected to *de-traditionalization*, the tendency that traditional practices, sources of knowledge, religious and moral guidance and authority are eroding and losing their self-evident status in society. The two processes have a mutual causal connection: on the one hand, due to de-traditionalization individuals are thrown back on their own resources when it comes to finding reliable answers to matters of meaning and morality; on the other hand, individualization processes have strongly contributed to de-traditionalization and continue to enforce the demise of traditional institutions. In conjunction, both processes can be said to have increased the individual freedom to shape life according to one's own choice considerably, even if the realization of this freedom can be complicated by structural and systemic impediments (see §2.3.4).

Tradition has always been an important source of identity. According to Giddens (1994), there exists an important link between tradition and the individual's sense of identity; a link which is inevitably torn by the process of de-traditionalization typical of modernization in general. He expresses this link as follows: "Tradition [...] is a medium of identity. Whether personal or collective, identity presumes meaning; but it also presumes the constant process of recapitulation and reinterpretation noted earlier. Identity is the creation of constancy over time, that very bringing of the past into conjunction with an anticipated future. In all societies the maintenance of personal identity, and its connection to wider social identities, is a prime requisite of ontological security. [...] Threats to the integrity of traditions are very often, if by no means universally, experienced as threats to the integrity of the self" (Giddens, 1994, p. 80). This

observation underscores that de-traditionalization can raise profound problems for the self-realization of late modern individuals, because it robs them of previously self-evident sources of identity.

Baars (2012a) argues that modernization processes have provided individual lives with an independent and unique "biographical dimension" (p. 16), instead of seeing them solely as parts of a larger traditional community. As a result, modern individuals increasingly see their lives as a future-oriented development of their unique qualities, according to their own choices, instead of as a standard trajectory already laid out for them by tradition, habit or convention. Obviously, this thought is strongly conducive to the late modern interpretation of self-realization. The flip side of the increased individual freedom, however, is a loss of self-evident, traditional, reliable certainties that the framework of the standard biography and the embedding in traditional communities could still provide. It is no longer self-evident that people spend their entire lives in the same location, choose the same profession as their fathers, marry someone from the same religious background, start a family, grow old and die after a life of hard work, et cetera. Life courses have become more diverse, for instance in matters of career development, patterns of personal relationships or education and learning, even though social structures tend to lag behind this development (Baars, 2012a; Riley, Kahn & Fohner, 1994).

Despite the strong influence of de-traditionalization on late modern lives it is important to realize that moral and religious traditions have not *disappeared*. Rather, people living in late modernity have to tolerate pluralism and a diversity of different, contradicting sources of guidance. No tradition can claim to be the self-evident, dominant source of epistemological and moral authority anymore, and this is a profound and far-reaching change compared to earlier, traditional and (pre)modern contexts (C. Taylor, 2007). Traditions may still play an important role in how individual people and societal subgroups perceive themselves. But religious and moral pluralism increasingly urges people to reflect on their own position and take a stand. This process of appropriation may or may not succeed. It is often a cause of insecurity and raises the need for self-legitimization. For example, I find it striking how many older people I meet feel the urge to explain themselves if they regularly attend church services and, contrary to their children and grandchildren, have maintained a religious identity; whereas this would have been self-evident in other times.

The sketched developments confirm C. Taylor's observations, which read that late modernity no longer offers a self-evidently shared horizon of values and meaning. Rather, each individual is destined to search for their own value orientation (C. Taylor, 1989; 2007; see also §2.3.6). On the one hand, this fact highly complicates processes of late modern identity-constitution and self-realization. It therefore situates "the problem of identity" among the most complex and pervasive problems confronted by late modern individuals (C. Taylor, 1989;

McAdams, 1993; Baumeister, 1986). On the other hand, however, the sketched developments potentially offer chances for a deeper, more authentic and personalized relation to oneself and to one's social surroundings which can be conducive to self-realization.

2.3.3 A globalizing world

The societal and cultural outlook of late modernity is also deeply determined by the reality of the individualized, post-traditional lives having to be lived in a context of rapidly expanding forces of *globalization*. This means that late modern self-realization takes place in a complex global context which far exceeds the individual's scope of influence and control. Both the material and emotional impact of globalization on individual lives is profound and far-reaching (Elliott & Lemert, 2006; Phillipson, 2009, 2013).

Broadly speaking, globalization is a process of pervasive, uncontrollable and continuous changes with a global scope, in the political and economic as well as in the cultural sphere. Clearly demarcated realms of influence based upon local authorities are evaporating. The nation state is struggling to maintain its traditional sovereignty. The so-called "radical" interpretation perceives globalization as a historically unprecedented social transformation, with revolutionary consequences for economy, politics, culture and society (Giddens, 1999; Phillipson, 2006).

Globalization processes tend to fundamentally transform the terms in which contemporary debates about the life course are formulated (Baars et al., 2006). Previously existing influential frameworks of analysis that have been developed to study and interpret socio-economic and political questions regarding the welfare state, such as those developed in critical gerontology and political economy perspectives (Estes, 1999; Estes & Phillipson, 2003; Minkler & Estes, 1999; A. Walker, 1980, 2006; Townsend, 1981; Vincent, Phillipson & Downs, 2006), need to be adapted to a globalized situation.

In his discussion of the transformation of welfare arrangements, Phillipson (2006) distinguishes three aspects of globalization that are particularly relevant to aging. First, globalization exerts its influence upon the ideological assumptions underlying the way aging is socially constructed. Instead of being constituted as a burden to national economies, aging populations are now perceived as a worldwide problem, requiring nation-transcending solutions. Second, globalization enforces a particular construction of aging which perceives it in terms of a new sort of risk, the responsibility for which is delegated to the individual realm. Third, globalization plays an important role in creating and maintaining global inequalities in aging.

Although globalization processes have the potential to increase connections between people, for instance through the developments in information tech-

nology, they may also lead to a loosening or even disintegration of social bonds. The transformation of welfare arrangements, for instance, puts high pressure on (intergenerational) solidarity (Phillipson, 2013; A. Walker, 1996).

On the macro-level of societal structures and political-economic arrangements, globalization makes large societal issues much more difficult to manage, since the traditional solutions offered by the structures and institutions of the nation state no longer suffice in a globalizing context (Baars et al., 2006). The resulting struggles can be observed daily in the newspapers, e.g., in reports on mastering the economic crisis, coping with the consequences of demographic developments like population aging on a global scale, or trying to manage global threats like environmental pollution, outbreaks of infectious diseases, or terrorist attacks. On the micro-level of individual lives, the reality of globalization can also be said to have a profoundly disorientating effect on people's lives. For instance, being unable to rely on welfare arrangements that used to be provided by the nation state not only puts people at risk of poverty when they are in vulnerable socio-economic positions, it also confronts them with existential questions about their societal value, the strength of their connections with others, and their human identity and dignity. This effect is reinforced by the fast pace at which their knowledge and skills get outdated as a result of the dynamics and complexity of a globalizing society and the immense and fast developments in science and technology.

2.3.4 Structural and systemic influences on individualized lives

People living in late modern circumstances are confronted with a highly ambivalent situation. On the one hand, self-realization, in its late modern disguise of the choice biography and of a life of one's own, is celebrated as the ultimate purpose to strive for in an individualized world. On the other hand, the late modern world harbors a variety of complex structural arrangements and systemic influences restricting or complicating people's opportunities to realize themselves. These influences can be traced at multiple, interacting levels: local, national and global, micro, meso and macro. Together with the influence of cultural master narratives on people's identity-formation that I will focus on in chapter 3, these structural and systemic influences form a vast array of external forces impacting the life course; external forces that potentially complicate late modern self-realization profoundly. As a result of the impact of these external forces, the agential control over one's own life that is one of the presuppositions of late modern self-realization discourse has to be constantly negotiated while facing a diversity of structural and systemic influences. For example, in the Netherlands, obtaining professional care requires getting an 'indication decision' from the relevant bureaucratic organization, confirming that one is entitled to a certain kind and amount of care. On the one hand, the care provided

supports people to lead their lives as they choose, thereby increasing their scope of agency and their opportunities for self-realization. On the other hand, the bureaucratic structures informing the indication procedure often do not match the specific individual situation. This then restricts people in their agential opportunities, by pushing them in a systemic framework that overrules their life-world reality.

Although choosing one's own lifestyle is heralded as a dominant moral value, late modern systemic structures and arrangements paradoxically also show a strong tendency towards *standardizing* people's life courses and fitting them into dominant societal "scripts". Such scripts present systemically framed models of "appropriate" social roles, age identities or modes of conduct for aging individuals (Hockey & James, 2003; Baars, 2006a). While these scripts are not necessarily fixed or static – they have transformed considerably with the development of late modernity – they do present external systemic influences which are *imposed* on the life realities of older people. In this sense, a societal script is associated with a straightjacket, a framework aimed at fitting the divergent, the individual, the unique aspects of peoples' lives into unifying, standardizing and reductionist models. The enforced retirement at a certain age which is common in several European countries provides an example of such social construction of aging (Phillipson, 2013), as does the de-individualizing identification of the frail elderly with a dependent "sick role" (Cruikshank, 2003, p. 36). Needless to say, structural societal "scripting" can be expected to create tensions with the underlying assumptions of the moral ideal of self-realization, with its emphasis precisely on the authentic, uniquely individual aspects of a person's existence that it tries to standardize.

Late modern individuals seem to be drawn into a compulsive demand to engage with lifestyles that are in fact largely prescribed by the structural dynamics of late modern systems, for instance an economic system characterized by deregulation. A good example of the latter is provided by contemporary discussions in the Netherlands about what is called the "participation society", which aims to transfer responsibilities for care arrangements to individual people and their social network (Newman & Tonkens, 2011). This transfer of responsibilities is presented as an ideal worth pursuing and naturally fitting the transformed life circumstances of late modernity. It supposedly enables people to gain more control over the organization of their lives. At the same time, however, this discourse of participation and individual freedom and responsibility functions as a cover for hardcore economic cost reduction. This puts people at risk of becoming the victims of imposed and restrictive images of the good life, instead of being truly empowered to realize their own appropriated views, developed in interaction and mutual connection with others. There is also a great risk that people in already vulnerable social positions, like psychiatric patients, disabled persons or older people lacking a satisfactory social network, will be

victimized by this system because they can't live up to the implicitly expected standards of personal responsibility and independent agency.

It is important to note that many perspectives focusing on the structural and systemic impediments to the realization of a life of one's own seem to be based on the evaluation of individualization processes which Elliott and Lemert (2006) called "manipulated individualism". In this view, the individual agent is perceived as relatively powerless in comparison with the vast forces exercised by power structures and socio-economic arrangements. Individuals might be able to exert a modest amount of influence over their own life at the micro level, but the relation with structural forces is fundamentally unequal. Dannefer and Kelley-Moore (2009) for instance, emphasize that the relationship between agency and structural factors should be regarded as an *asymmetrical* one. However, this asymmetry does not necessarily lead to the conclusion drawn by the manipulated individualism-perspective distinguished by Elliot and Lemert (2006), which suggests that agency is basically an empty, illusory phenomenon that causes alienation rather than freeing people for a life of their own. Despite the asymmetry between agency and structure, resistance to oppressive forces is possible, and people's opportunities for exercising moral agency can in fact be enlarged, as is illustrated in the discussion about cultural narratives and counter narratives in chapter 3.

2.3.5 Repression of meaning and morality

The societal scripting and standardization processes influencing how the individual's life course is organized are among the factors that expectedly influence people's experience of meaning in their lives. Regarding this influence, Honneth (2004) expresses worries about late modern consumer capitalism, which tends to use the language of self-realization discourse to strengthen its own purposes. The result is that instead of truly being facilitated to develop authentic lives that they experience as meaningful, individuals are subjected to standardization processes and the compulsive demand to experiment with lifestyles. This tendency is confirmed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) when they describe individualization as "a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it and to do this amid changing preferences and at successive stages of life, while constantly adapting to the conditions of the labor market, the education system, the welfare state and so on" (p. 4). Honneth (2004) argues that these lifestyles are in fact largely prescribed by the dynamics of a capitalistic economic system, which produces heteronomy rather than autonomy. What on the surface seems to be an authentic existence of self-realization is in fact only a shallow appearance camouflaging a deep dependency upon the capitalistic system. This concealed dependency undermines the moral stake

of late modern self-realization discourse, and results in experiences of inner emptiness, meaninglessness and instability for the individual.

What is touched upon here is the existential and moral dimension of life, addressing people's relation to the physical, social, personal and transcendent dimension of existence (Van Deurzen 2002, see also §1.5). It has been discussed in §1.5 that experiencing our lives as meaningful relies on developing and maintaining satisfactory relations with all those four realms. As is discussed later on in this study, finding a satisfactory attitude towards the existential and moral dimension is also crucial to my suggested reframed view of self-realization. Most analyses of late modernity agree that the late modern outlook gives rise to profound existential and moral questions, both for individuals and for societies at large. For instance, living in a de-traditionalized, secularized context, what is the meaning of one's spiritual and religious orientation? What is the purpose we should strive for in life, and how do we judge whether this purpose is sufficiently valuable in the absence of any broadly supported and shared common good? How should we perceive values like justice or solidarity in an increasingly individualized and globalizing situation? How do we deal with individuals and groups of people who deviate from the implicit norms of autonomous self-determination, independence and personal responsibility put forward by late modern self-realization discourse? These and many other pressing questions of meaning and morality urgently confront late modern individuals.

Sociological analyses particularly emphasize how existential and moral matters are typically repressed and delegated to the individual realm by the characteristic dynamics of late modernity. The latter's focus on risk management, control and individual responsibility causes uneasiness and tensions when confronted with the contingent, uncontrollable and often tragic existential dimension of life. Giddens speaks about the "sequestration of experience" (Giddens, 1991, p. 144): questions and dilemmas surrounding fundamental existential themes like death, aging, illness, insanity et cetera are being pushed away from sight, repressed and banned to specifically organized realms. Bauman's (2008) analyses of the late modern fear of everything that represents the "Other", also resonates this unwillingness and inability to address and deal with existential and moral matters. The potentially disturbing questions raised by these themes consequently disappear from the public realm and become the sole responsibility of the individual (Bauman 2008). At the same time however, Giddens underscores that the attempt to repress and control existential and moral matters never succeeds completely; the "repressed" returns in different disguises, raising new uneasiness and anxiety (Giddens, 1991).

2.3.6 The moral identity crisis of late modern man

The position of matters of meaning and morality in late modernity has also been discussed from a moral-philosophical point of view. Although these moral philosophical perspectives take a different angle, they are closely intertwined with the sociological observations about the repression of meaning and morality discussed in §2.3.5. Two influential authors who have written extensively on the moral outlook of late modernity have been selected to feed the discussion in this section; C. Taylor (*Sources of the self,* 1989; *Ethics of authenticity,* 1991; *A secular age,* 2007) and MacIntyre (*After virtue,* 1984). An important advantage of their work, and the reason for selecting it, is that it presents an account in which the ideal of self-realization is put into a broader historical and moral philosophical perspective.

Broadly speaking, both authors describe and evaluate the moral and spiritual outlook of the contemporary Western world that has resulted from centuries of gradual modernization processes. Since Weber, it has become common to state that modernization is accompanied by a "disenchantment of the world", a characteristic process of rationalization and decline of transcendental sources of value (Weber, 1922/1989, p. 30). Weber's classic analysis plays a foundational role in contemporary analyses of the (late) modern world as a *secular* or *post-traditional* one (C. Taylor, 2007; Giddens, 1991). Terms like disenchantment or secularization describe how in the process of modernization, traditional sources of knowledge, religious and moral guidance and authority are eroding and losing their self-evident status in society. C. Taylor (1991) and MacIntyre (1984) share a deep concern about the moral uprooting plaguing late modern man, which has resulted from this process. As a result of complex historical, scientific, societal and cultural dynamics, they argue, we have lost contact with the sources underlying our identity and our conception of morality, which according to C. Taylor should be viewed as inextricably connected. This crisis of morality should be perceived as an identity crisis suffered by late modern individuals (C. Taylor, 1989). Bereft of a sense of connection with the sources nourishing their moral identities, individuals are at a loss when it comes to the legitimization of overarching value orientations and conceptions of a good life.

In the process of modernization, there has been a growing emphasis on procedural approaches to morality based on formal principles. MacIntyre (1984) argues that moral questions and disagreements are either solved by an appeal to impersonal and supposedly rational criteria such as "duty" or "utility", or they are considered principally interminable, because morality is reduced to a matter of personal emotional preference. Both C. Taylor (1991) and MacIntyre (1984) express worries about how morality is hereby separated from its traditional role of providing guidance in matters of value and good living. This leads to a general feeling of helplessness, relativism and even cynicism towards fun-

damental ethical questions that haunt late modern individuals. Both authors are very critical about the atomistic anthropology of neoliberalism, which perceives the individual as an isolated, self-sufficient entity, whose autonomous development and self-realization forms the paramount goal to which all social interaction processes are made subordinate. It is important to realize that this is a very powerful image in late modern society and is also very influential in the dominant late modern interpretation of the discourse on self-realization.

MacIntyre in particular expresses worries about how the late modern emphasis on individual choice and personal authenticity risks losing sight of the way people are fundamentally embedded in a context of traditions, practices and social and moral communities, and are dependent on each other (MacIntyre, 1984, 1999). Correspondingly, we risk losing sight of the deeper meaning of the inter-human condition. Social relations are often solely interpreted in terms of mutual benefits or dependencies, and thereby reduced to superficial instrumental aspects. Alternatively, the way individual identities are socially constituted may be emphasized, but in such a way that the value and even the possibility of individuality is reduced or denied.

C. Taylor, on the other hand, emphasizes the lasting moral importance of the typical modern discourse of self-realization, despite his worries about the moral identity crisis of late modern people. He argues that, if re-interpreted in a different manner, the typical late modern culture of self-realization mirrored in what he calls the "ethics of authenticity" (C. Taylor, 1991) can still be a valuable ideal capable of providing moral guidance towards the good life. His attempt to explain the moral and spiritual outlook of (late) modern societies in terms of authenticity is highly relevant because it helps to legitimate the focus of this study on self-realization as a meaning-generating moral ideal (see further §7.3.3).

2.4 Implications for late modern aging

In this section I explore how the discussed socio-cultural transformations associated with late modernity have had their impact on the reality of aging. In succession, I discuss the enormous increase in life expectancy and in the number of older people worldwide, with corresponding economic, political, social and cultural challenges (§2.4.1); the typical individualization and diversification of aging trajectories (§2.4.2); the distinction between the so-called "Third Age": the phase of later life associated with a fulfilling and vital lifestyle and embraced by consumer culture, and the "Fourth Age": the phase of later life associated with inevitable decline and nearing death, which is mostly encountered with anxiety and rejection (§2.4.3); the structural and systemic factors that force aging people into societal scripts that do not necessarily cohere

with their individual aspirations and capacities (§2.4.4); the dynamics through which aging well has increasingly become an individual rather than a collective responsibility (§2.4.5); and finally, the unease that characterizes the late modern cultural response to the uncontrollable dimension of existential vulnerability one is radically confronted with in aging (§2.4.6).

2.4.1 A (much) longer life in a complex world

When considering the impact of the discussed features and dynamics of late modernity on the reality of aging people's lives and identities, it is important to realize that these influences can be of very diverse kinds, some of them touching upon very basic life conditions, others relating to highly complex and elusive dynamics. One of the most basic and obvious factors influencing the typical outlook of late modern aging is the rise in life expectancy in the last century, at least in the Western world. Not only are people reaching higher ages, there is also a higher number of older people than ever before. This rise in life expectancy can be attributed to different factors, such as a decrease in infant mortality, an increase in hygienic circumstances, and an explosion of medical and technological possibilities that have transformed formerly deadly diseases into treatable medical conditions. Although it is important to realize that the concrete increase in life expectancy can still differ considerably depending on one's socio-economic position in society (Dannefer, 2003; Phillipson, 2013), the enormous extension of life expectancy at birth that has taken place in the last centuries has had a huge impact on the reality of aging in late modern conditions.

On the individual level, the fact that people in general live much longer not only raises a variety of biomedical questions (Westendorp, 2014), but also existential questions, since the extension of later life has opened up a rather long phase of requesting meaningful content (Moen & Spencer, 2006; see §2.4.3). On the societal level, the increasing percentage of the population that consists of older individuals comes with profound socio-economic challenges for late modern societies, mostly related to how pensions and care should be financed (Phillipson, 2013; see also §2.4.5).

2.4.2 Individualization and diversification: an old age of one's own?

Hendricks rightly states that, "As the societal backdrop against which ageing unfolds undergoes change, so, too, will sense of self and perceptions of ageing actors" (Hendricks, 2010, p. 253). He goes on to argue that societal norms, social resources and collective ideologies concerning aging will inevitably influence how aging actors perceive themselves, their future life trajectories, and

their social role and position. As the pace of change in this regard hastens and insecurities and complexities grow, a development characteristic of late modernity, the stability and consistency of people's identities will expectedly suffer.

In accordance with the general late modern transition from a standard biography to a choice biography, aging trajectories too are no longer pre-shaped along traditional lines. The fact that traditional models ordering the life course in three "boxes" or well-delineated periods of education, labor and retirement, have lost considerable ground, also affects older people's lives. Although there exists a structural lag in how societal arrangements organizing the life course are adapting to this new reality (Riley, Kahn & Foner, 1994), the erosion of clearly delineated stages or boxes of life with a predictable timing and progression opens up new opportunities to shape one's later life as well. The result is an enormous diversification and corresponding individualization of aging trajectories and lifestyles (Hendricks & Hatch, 2009).

In many aspects, there is an evident increase in freedom and autonomy to organize one's own life and old age. For instance, leisure and education patterns have shifted so that many activities previously reserved for younger people are now open to older people as well. The increase in choice options to organize one's later life can also be illustrated by the time, funds and energy that are invested in enhancing the possibilities for aging people to lead self-directed, independent lives, ranging from fall prevention programs to installing home automation systems monitoring people and their care needs from a distance. Admittedly, many of these inventions are stimulated with a cost-reduction agenda operating in the background, which causes skepticism about the value that could be ascribed to the moral language of autonomy with which these policies are justified.

The emphasis on a life of one's own characteristic of late modern self-realization discourse echoes in the implicit overarching ideology that underlies many living and care arrangements for older people. This ideology states that as far as possible, older people should have the opportunity to lead self-directed lives, travel, engage in volunteer work or leisure activities, follow education and undertake all sorts of activities contributing to a satisfying and fulfilling life according to their own standards. However, there is reason for a cautionary note if we want to apply the late modern ideology of choice and self-determination to the concrete reality of older people's lives. A variety of structural and systemic factors and societal scripts about aging restrict the opportunities to realize the envisioned old age of one's own (see §2.4.4). Also, self-realization-related values such as the optimal development of personal capacities seem to have a stronger pull for the better-educated and younger members of society (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Many older people nowadays still live relatively traditional lives, although this number can be expected to decrease fast as the baby boom generation ages. This suggests that the late modern discourse of self-re-

alization does not automatically match these people's lives and should only be applied critically and with caution. Nevertheless, these people are living and aging in a world that increasingly endorses an ideal of individual self-realization as its dominant image of the good life. Expectedly, this will influence the cultural imaginaries and narratives about later life articulating what it means to age well in contemporary conditions.

2.4.3 Third Age and Fourth Age

Another typical characteristic of late modern aging is the emergence of a new distinction in the life course that subdivides later life into two phases; the Third Age and the Fourth Age (Laslett, 1989). The Third Age describes the rather long new period of life requesting meaningful content, created as a consequence of the dramatic increase in life expectancy (see §2.4.1). In most Western countries, the onset of retirement for most individuals has not kept pace with this increased life expectancy. As a result, a new phase in later life seems to have emerged between the age when one retires and the onset of age-related physical and mental decline. The length of this new period turns out to be considerable for many people. It may even equal the period of "normal", productive adulthood. This Third Age is generally associated with the enjoyment of an abundance of post-retirement leisure options and a still vital health condition. Typically, the concept is associated with baby boom retirees in relatively well-off material circumstances and still in good health, who are culturally positioned in the role of active and vital consumers (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). The ideology of the choice biography (with its corresponding pitfalls) is strongly present in the discourse of the Third Age as well.

According to Moen and Spencer (2006), the Third Age is a rather open life phase, offering lots of opportunities for individual design and activity. The exploration of these new uncharted territories of self-fulfillment can supposedly be performed in relative freedom from external constraints posed by the duties of labor and family life characteristic of earlier adulthood, due to the diversification of the life course and the loosening of traditional boundaries between boxes of life (see §2.4.2). However, as Gilleard and Higgs (2005) point out, the Third Age has also become the target of a consumerist ideology which unmasks this freedom as perverted by capitalist and economic values. After all, Third Agers represent an interesting target to sell all sorts of amenities and services to with promises of long-lasting vitality and youthfulness (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005). One of the most striking features of the Third Age discourse is that it strongly stimulates older people to engage in anti-aging strategies. A whole industry has been harnessed to help people remain as youthful and active as possible, offering products varying from anti-wrinkle creams to Viagra. Aging well is increasingly identified with staying young. The corresponding

anti-aging ideology can be argued to offer a one-sided and problematic image of old age which impedes the possibilities to infuse later life with an intrinsic meaning of its own (Baars, 2012a; see §3.3.3).

Though critical gerontologists point to important limitations of the Third Age discourse, such as its disregard for the structural power factors influencing late modern aging; its conjunction with the stereotyping anti-aging industries; and its neglect of the social inequalities inhibiting a successful realization of the Third Age ideals, Phillipson (2013) nevertheless admits that the Third Age discourse "has played an important role in highlighting the possibility for people to shape their own 'ageing' in a way which was inconceivable for previous generations. And the idea of a 'Third Age' of freedom from the constraints of paid employment undoubtedly carries many attractions. [...] the idea of people choosing to manage and control their own aging is important, even while requiring significant social interventions if it is to be realized" (Phillipson, 2013, p. 49). From the perspective of this study too, the goals that the Third Age discourse typically engages with are valuable. These goals include, for instance, self-development; vital involvement in life; remaining active and healthy and socially connected; all purposes that deserve to be stimulated in light of self-realization, despite the obvious limitations of the Third Age ideology.

An interesting example of the merits of the Third Age discourse can be found in the Universities of the Third Age movement[1] in which aging individuals join together to exchange skills and life experiences, and further their self-development by learning and teaching simultaneously. The Universities of the Third Age movement may also stimulate welcome investments in facilities for lifelong learning and intergenerational exchange. Phillipson sums up the many advantages associated with this interest in education: "Investment now in education [...] could have major benefits for individuals and for society: first, by playing a leading role in creating a new type of ageing for the twenty-first century, built around extended economic, family and citizenship roles; second, by supporting people planning the two decades or more beyond their main work careers; third, by unlocking mental capital and promoting well-being in later life; fourth, by supporting a range of professional and voluntary groups working on behalf of older people" (Phillipson, 2013, p. 160).

Initiatives like the Universities of the Third Age form a reminder of the many *potentialities* later life has to offer. These tend to be lost from sight in the context of societal discourses on aging that mostly emphasize the problematic consequences of an aging population. From the perspective of self-realization, these initiatives form a welcome correction of existing cultural imaginaries about aging. They may help people to develop themselves, but they may also

1 | See http://www.u3a.org.uk/

help societies to become more aware of the potentialities that older people have to offer, and stimulate making better use of them (see also chapter 3).

It is important to note however, that the attractiveness of the Third Age strongly relies on the contrast it represents to the so-called Fourth Age that follows it. This Fourth Age denotes the last phase of life and is associated with decline, deteriorating health and eventually death (Moen & Spencer, 2006; Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Some gerontologists have criticized the fact that the interpretation of the Third Age as a period of self-fulfillment through leisure and consumption implicitly depends on the transfer of all aspects of aging that are perceived as negative to the Fourth Age. The positioning of the Third Age as a positive image of later life, a period in which one can freely engage in self-realization, presupposes the contrasting positioning of the Fourth Age as an almost exclusively negative, deplorable socio-cultural status (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011; Grenier, 2012). This problematic positioning of the Fourth Age mirrors the general late modern tendency to meet existential questions with profound unease, and to isolate and repress anything confronting us with the uncontrollable, tragic dimensions of life (§2.3.5).

There is no fixed moment for the transition from the Third Age to the Fourth Age; this depends on one's health condition. A vital 80-year old may still be in his/her Third Age while a 60-year-old suffering a chronic disease has already entered the Fourth Age and lacks the opportunity to enjoy the freedom and possibilities associated with the Third Age. In stark contrast to the abundance of possible lifestyles that the Third Age offers to aging individuals, the options open to people in the Fourth Age seem to be restricted to images of need, lack and dependency (Grenier & Phillipson, 2013). The responsibility for older people's identities, in terms of life choices, shifts away from the individuals themselves and is transferred to families or care institutions. One might thus argue that in the Fourth Age, people are no longer considered to be autonomous moral agents capable of shaping their lives according to what they value and who they want to be, but are solely identified by their impairments. Grenier (2012) addresses the possible detrimental consequences of this when she states, "The concern is that in recognizing the Fourth Age as characterized by impairment, older people in this category become socially and culturally 'othered' – both from society and within groups of older people" (p. 174). Whereas Third Agers can count on some socio-cultural valuation as active and vital consumers, Fourth Agers, by contrast, are placed in the socially deeply devalued role of being frail and vulnerable dependent "burdens", who only consume expensive care. Consequently, they are also excluded from the influential ideal of the good life that relies on self-realization.

However, it is important to realize that in the current study the notion of self-realization is developed in directions which diverge quite radically from the individualistic perspective typical for the late modern interpretation, a perspec-

tive that underlies the individualistic Third Age discourse as well. The fact that in some cases (such as severe dementia) the transfer of responsibility for one's life choices to families or care institutions may be inevitable does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the opportunities for exercising moral agency for frail and vulnerable older people should be as limited as they are usually perceived to be. It will be discussed in chapter 5 that applying a different perspective on the nature of the self and of moral agency that underlies the self-realization discourse may nuance our view and open our minds to possibilities for exercising moral agency even in the Fourth Age, that are usually overlooked by dominant cultural discourses about aging.

2.4.4 Structural and systemic dynamics impacting late modern aging

Despite the emphasis on aging in late modernity as an individualized trajectory (see §2.4.2), it would be very naïve to present it as a mere individualistic, self-determined project. In reality, many relevant factors influencing people's lives are the result of dynamics and circumstances far beyond the individual's control. This study focuses in particular on the influence of cultural imaginaries on the identity formation and the realization of moral agency by older people (see chapter 3). However, structural and systemic forces, as discussed in §2.3.4, also have a profound impact on the life reality of aging individuals in late modernity. According to Hockey and James (2003), "the 'choice' and agency promised by postmodern accounts of ageing must [...] be tempered by the social inequalities of income and of health. These continue to produce considerable variation in the experience of ageing and thus offer rather different prospects for individuals with respect to the changing social identities which accompany the ageing process" (p. 109).

Importantly, the structural socio-economic inequalities that characterize the dynamics of late modern aging challenge the implicit assumption underlying the late modern self-realization discourse, that all individuals are the autonomous directors of their own life (Dannefer, 2008; Dannefer & Uhlenberg, 1999; Dannefer & Settersten, 2010). One's scope of self-determination is highly dependent on one's socio-economic status. The *cumulative advantage-disadvantage theory* (Dannefer, 2003; Crystal & Shea, 2003) states that people who grow up in less privileged socio-economic circumstances experience growing disadvantages regarding health and economic position with aging. The disadvantages of a bad start in life tend to cumulate during the life course. The dramatic differences in (healthy) life expectancy and in the occurrence of diseases like obesity and diabetes between members of different socio-economic classes may serve as an example. The reverse is also true; people who are lucky enough to grow up in privileged socio-economic circumstances are more likely to age well

than their less fortunate contemporaries. The influence of social inequalities on the lives of aging people implies that the characteristic changes and transitions of late modernity will have different impacts for different groups of aging individuals.

Another example of the influence of structural and systemic factors on the lives of individuals pertains to the structuring of the life course along the lines of "chronometric" (calendar) age, which is characteristic of modernization processes (Baars, 2007, 2012a, 2012b). While there has been a de-standardization of biographies in certain aspects (see §2.3.2), this does not mean that the structuring of the life-course according to chronometric age has lessened. On the contrary, especially in the domains of employment and education, there exist powerful institutionalized structuring influences based solely upon people's chronological age. This leads to a continuous process of de-standardizing and re-standardizing of the life course, depending on the prevailing political and economic realities (Baars, 2012a).

Rather than freeing individuals to organize their lives according to their own choices, the structuring according to chronometric age results in variations of the "standard" life course, for instance along the lines of socio-economic status. The envisioned life course of the well-to-do elite may include a prolonged Third Age with plenty of opportunities for consumption and self-fulfillment, whereas groups with lower socio-economic status face later life on the threshold of poverty, often with detrimental health consequences resulting in an early onset of Fourth Age problems.

A final relevant observation related to the structural and systemic influences on aging people's lives is that phenomena associated with aging (such as societal withdrawal after retirement) are also often "naturalized" by scientific theorizing. This legitimates them as self-evident situations, instead of acknowledging the fact that these phenomena are socially constituted (Baars, 1991). The influential but severely criticized *disengagement theory* in gerontology serves as a textbook example here (Cumming & Henry, 1961). The fact that the "natural" tendency to disengage presupposed by this theory may be associated with the social institution of retirement at 65 is totally lost from sight. Such naturalization deflects attention from the influence of social and political forces and power structures that critical gerontology tries to analyze (Baars et al., 2006).

2.4.5 Aging well as an individual responsibility

An important consequence of the choice biography ideology that is typical for late modern self-realization discourse is that the risks associated with those choices have to be carried by the individual agent instead of collective institutions (Beck, 1992). As Settersten and Trauten (2009) argue: "Choices now seem greater, but these choices seem heavier and come with unknown consequences.

Any fall-outs must be negotiated and absorbed by individuals and their families rather than by governments, markets, or other entities" (p. 457). This individualization of responsibility affects the lives of aging people profoundly. For instance, pensions and healthcare are increasingly transforming from a collective responsibility, taken on by the welfare state, to an individual responsibility. This contributes to social inequalities and puts pressure on solidarity (Phillipson, 2009, 2013; Polivka & Longino Jr., 2006).

However, not only financial and healthcare decisions are transferred to the realm of individual responsibility. Existential and moral issues are also increasingly perceived as matters to be solved by individual deliberation and choice. A good example illustrating how increased choice options of late modernity interact with difficult existential and moral questions that have been delegated to the personal realm is provided by Kaufman's discussion of medical decisions surrounding death and dying. Due to biomedical developments and technological innovations, many conditions that would have resulted in death in earlier times have now become chronic conditions. This situation raises difficult ethical questions, for instance about continuation or ending of treatment, but also existential questions related to one's own finitude and one's relations with significant others. The responsibility for these kinds of questions and the dilemmas they invoke is mostly placed with the patients and their social surroundings (Kaufman, 2010a, 2010b).

The emphasis on individual responsibility in late modern aging discourse is also illustrated in dominant models of successful aging. These models focus on health, activity and social engagement and urge aging individuals to conform to the standards of a self-appropriated, active, vital lifestyle (Rowe & Kahn, 1997, 1998; see also §3.3.3). The underlying values of these models, such as autonomy, self-determination, activity, independence, et cetera, are obviously highly influenced by the language of the late modern self-realization discourse. Problematically, however, the focus on a self-appropriated, active and vital lifestyle presupposes that all things threatening the realization of such a lifestyle, such as sickness, vulnerability and death, are kept at a safe distance. It is clarifying to note again the parallels between this implicit urge of the successful aging movement to keep away from disturbing and uncontrollable existential realities associated with the vulnerability of the human condition, and the already discussed tendency of repression and "sequestration" of moral and existential matters perceived as typical of late modernity (§2.3.5). Dealing with existential vulnerability too, has been turned into an individual responsibility. Yet, as observed in §2.2, late modern self-realization discourse has profound difficulties in integrating this dimension of existential vulnerability in a satisfactory manner. The inability to integrate existential vulnerability in a meaningful way can be expected to exert a highly complicating influence on people's chances to experience later life as a phase with value or meaning of its own.

2.4.6 Existential vulnerability and the fragile experience of meaning

In gerontological discourse, the vulnerability of later life is often discussed in terms of *frailty*. Gobbens et al. (2011) define frailty broadly as "a process involving the accumulation of physical, psychological and/or social deficits in functioning which increase the risk of adverse health outcomes (functional disabilities, admission to an institution, death)" (p. 47). Frailty is not so much a state as a process whereby disabilities increase over time. It is an important advantage of this definition that it includes not only physical factors but also psychological and social factors. This is in contrast with more narrow definitions of frailty that tend to focus solely on physical health and functioning (Fried et al., 2001; Gobbens et al., 2011). Nevertheless, even in its broader definition the frailty discourse in general remains strongly oriented towards adverse health outcomes.

Importantly, however, it turns out that people scoring high on the frailty indexes do not necessarily perceive themselves as frail. In fact, people tend to give higher ratings to their own well-being than would be expected on account of their physical and mental impairments, a phenomenon also known as the "disability paradox" (Von Faber, 2002; Albrecht & De Vlieger, 1999). There seems to be a compensation effect at work as well, because once people's physical disabilities increase, they tend to place higher value on social relations in evaluating their quality of life and well-being (Von Faber et al., 2001). Interestingly, although people tend to value their health very highly, social factors, such as the loss of a spouse, seem to be a more decisive reason for them to start perceiving themselves as frail (Verhoeven, Kooiker & Van Campen, 2011).

This study prefers to use the term vulnerability instead of frailty. It focuses in particular on what I call *existential vulnerability*, to highlight elements of the human condition that are not always recognized in the predominantly health-oriented gerontological discourse that also underlies the frailty literature. The term existential vulnerability pertains to what Martha Nussbaum (2001) termed the "tragic" dimension of human existence, a dimension which we can never escape from because it intrinsically belongs to the human condition. To distinguish existential vulnerability from other kinds of vulnerability, it is clarifying to mention a taxonomy of three sources of vulnerability suggested by MacKenzie, Rogers and Dodds (2014). These sources include: 1) *inherent* vulnerability, which refers to those forms of vulnerability that are inherent to the human condition; 2) *situational* vulnerability, which refers to forms of vulnerability that are specific to the personal, social, political, cultural, or environmental situation that people are in; and 3) *pathogenic* vulnerability, which is a subset of situational vulnerability that specifically refers to varieties of situational influences that are troublesome in a moral sense, such as abusive relationships or social oppression and injustice. Of these three, what is described

in this study as existential vulnerability shows most similarity with inherent vulnerability. By contrast, the remediable contingent forms of vulnerability caused by the structural and systemic arrangements influencing the lives of older people on the one hand (see §2.4.4), and by oppressive and marginalizing cultural master narratives on the other hand (see §3.3), are comparable to situational vulnerability and in some cases deteriorate into pathogenic vulnerability. These contingent vulnerabilities influencing the life circumstances of older individuals in late modernity are not related to the inevitable fragility and interdependence of the human condition, but to social, structural and systemic factors that are in principle modifiable (Baars & Phillipson, 2013).

Typically, these contingent vulnerabilities are relegated to the realm of individual responsibility, which is exemplary of late modernity's worrisome "tendency to inflate the idea of individual independence" (Baars, 2012a, p. 149). This tendency results in a denial of the many ways in which human beings live *interdependent* lives and are embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts, which in turn complicates acknowledging the potential for value and meaning that later life harbors. In this sense, contingent vulnerabilities can also have existential impact. As was discussed in §1.5, the existential dimension of human life refers to four dimensions: people's relation with themselves, their relation with other people, their relation with the world at large and their relation with a realm of transcendence (Van Deurzen, 2002). Importantly, it is through their realization of satisfactory relations with these four domains of existence that people are able to experience meaning in their lives. Alternatively, everything that may threaten or impede the meaningfulness people experience through the formation and maintenance of satisfactory relations with these realms falls into the category of existential vulnerability.

Although there is certainly overlap between existential vulnerability and a broad conceptualization of frailty (the loss of a loved one, for instance, counts both as an instance of existential vulnerability and as an instance of social frailty), in its focus on health the scientific frailty discourse tends to overlook other important aspects of existential vulnerability, particularly when it comes to the aspect of meaning and the values that are constitutive of who we are. This is another reason for this study to prefer the terminology of existential vulnerability. Of course, not only elderly but human beings of *every* age are existentially vulnerable in the sense described above. Such events as illness, or the loss of a loved one, form an inescapable element of the human condition and are certainly not the exclusive province of later life. But although young people are not immune to instances of existential vulnerability, the probability of encountering such events nevertheless tends to increase with age, confronting older people more radically with the need for a meaningful integration of this reality in their lives (Baars, 2010).

Settersten and Trauten (2009) have expressed the increase of vulnerability with age in their observation that later life has a "highly contingent quality" (p. 142). By this, they mean that the increased probability to live to a high age by no means guarantees how these added years will be experienced. An unfortunate fall resulting in a hip fracture may be the onset of a downward spiral of vulnerability. On the other hand, the birth of grandchildren may bring unexpected joy and strengthen or enrich contact with one's children, resulting in a flourishing phase of grandparenthood. The balance of experiences may turn out to be positive or negative, depending on what life events one encounters and how strong one's resilience to adversity turns out to be (Ryff et al., 2012). Much seems to depend on the successful *integration* of existential vulnerability and the *attitude* people develop towards it, as this study argues in later chapters.

Obviously, existential vulnerability as described above is a phenomenon of all times and not exclusive to late modernity or late modern aging. But it has been argued that as a result of processes such as individualization, erosion of traditional sources of meaning and morality and the increasing focus on controlling and managing risks, late modernity has a particularly hard time finding a satisfactory attitude towards the existential dimension of (later) life (Cole, 1992). In the absence of self-evident moral and spiritual sources of identity, relating to existential vulnerability can be expected to be a particularly complex task for late modern aging individuals. This study therefore advocates paying broader attention to existential vulnerability in the study of aging, and aims to make a contribution to this goal itself. However, it should be underscored that the contingent vulnerabilities confronted in later life that do not fall into the existential category remain in need of the dedicated attention of gerontology as well. It cannot be emphasized enough that contrary to existential vulnerabilities, the contingent vulnerabilities are principally open to *repair*, for instance, by improving the life circumstances of older people. Critical gerontology rightly keeps stressing the importance of scientific and political efforts to remedy adverse living conditions, such as global social inequalities (Phillipson, 2013; Baars et al., 2006). Cultural gerontology, on the other hand, focuses on the need to replace oppressive and stereotyping cultural narratives about later life with more inspiring counter narratives; this is an aim the current study also aims to contribute to (Gullette, 2004, 2011; Cruikshank 2003; see further chapter 3).

2.5 Conclusion

2.5.1 Ambivalences of self-realization in late modernity

If there is one common element that can be distinguished in the diverse analyses of the late modern world that were broadly sketched in this chapter, it seems to be the image of individuals struggling to lead a good life, in a constantly changing, insecure, chaotic and confusing world. Not only has the individual acquired the morally highly valued status of free and autonomous agency in the course of modernization, individuals are also increasingly regarded as the *only* resource one can eventually turn to when it comes to creating a good life for oneself. In the context of an insecure, complex, globalized world, individuals are destined to find their own – temporary and constantly changing – answers to existential and moral questions and create and maintain a viable self-identity. Consequently, late modern conceptions of the good life that feed into the late modern discourse of self-realization present a strong inclination for individuals to develop their own life plans, projects and lifestyles. The image of people shaping their lives through an autonomous act of design and choice is typical of what is sketched in this study as the late modern version of self-realization discourse.

Yet the status of self-realization as a moral ideal characteristic of late modernity can only be deeply ambivalent. This ambivalence has two causes in particular. The first relates to the tension between the expectation of self-determining moral agency and the host of external forces exerting their influence on the individual; the second relates to the tension between the anthropological assumptions characterizing the late modern self-realization account and the reality of social embedding, interdependence and existential vulnerability that characterize human lives.

1. Late modern self-realization discourse implicitly relies on a strong and independent, self-determining image of the self. This self is expected to be able to reflexively consider (and constantly reconsider) its value commitments, aspirations and desires, and to act upon them in order to express moral agency in complex practical circumstances. However, as previously discussed, late modernity harbors a complex assembly of structural and systemic factors threatening the realization of such a strong self, an assembly of factors which has grown extensively complex in the course of modernization. Moreover, dominant cultural imaginaries and narratives provide an inescapable context that individuals have to relate to in their identity formation, as is discussed in chapter 3. The profound impact of both structural/systemic and socio-cultural forces on the identity formation of individual agents suggests that the promise of late modern self-realization discourse

is not as easily realizable as it seems. In fact, being the independent, self-determining architect of one's own lifestyle, on second thought, seems profoundly problematic. This raises doubts about whether self-realization is at all possible, at least as it is presented in the late modern interpretation.

2. The second source of ambivalence for late modern self-realization discourse relates to the implicit assumptions regarding the nature of the individual moral agent. The late modern view of self-realization relies on an account of human agency which can be argued to be very problematic and unrealistic. In particular, this account tends to disregard the socio-cultural constitution of human agency.

   While the complexity of the late modern world confronts us with deep anxieties and uncertainties and forces us to acknowledge our interdependencies with others, paradoxically, the late modern moral ideal of self-realization suggests that we can and should take the position of an autonomous, independent, sovereign director of our individual lives. The late modern interpretation of self-realization seems unable to acknowledge the situated, socially constituted and interdependent nature of human lives. This inability also lies at the base of its difficulty to relate to the dimension of existential vulnerability (see §2.4.6).

Despite these ambivalences attached to the late modern self-realization discourse however, it is important to realize that as a moral ideal, self-realization still provides us with an attractive image of *what we could be, at our best*. It provides us with an image of moral agents taking charge of their own lives, infusing these with value and meaning according to self-appropriated motivations and orientations. The force of this ideal, no matter how problematic its underlying assumptions, can be felt regardless of the question whether people actually succeed in attaining this ideal, or even whether it is at all realistic that they should do so. From the work of the sociological and philosophical authors that is discussed, self-realization arises as an alternative moral framework replacing the traditional sources of meaning and morality that have lost their self-evident status. This is all the more reason to take it seriously. However, the question relevant for the current study is whether it is a viable ideal to be applied in the context of *aging*.

2.5.2 Reframing late modern self-realization discourse

The case of late modern aging is highly illustrative of the way the discussed ambivalences of late modern self-realization discourse influence people's lives. From the discussion of characteristic elements of late modern aging in §2.4, we have learned that both ambivalences plaguing late modern self-realization discourse described above also impact the reality of late modern aging.

- First of all, for older individuals, exercising competencies associated with self-realization such as self-determination and choice, is highly complicated by the structural and systemic arrangements organizing later life, as well as by the socio-cultural constitution of old age. Older people are often denied the agential capacities that are implied by self-realization discourse, which suggests that the possibility of self-realization seems illusionary in their case.
- Second, the problematic anthropological assumptions typical of late modern self-realization discourse poorly match the reality of vulnerability and frailty that is often radically confronted in aging. Consequently, late modern self-realization discourse seems to offer a rather insufficient model of the good life for older individuals, particularly because it falls short of providing resources for relating to the dimension of existential vulnerability in a meaningful way.

The ambivalences and tensions connected with late modern self-realization discourse that have been discussed above can reasonably tempt us to dismiss the value of self-realization altogether, and particularly its application to later life. Would it not be better to admit that self-realization, though an attractive idea, is in fact very unrealistic; and that a moral discourse based on this concept cannot possibly provide us with the necessary resources for developing more nuanced, inspiring and meaningful imaginaries and narratives about later life? Why try to uphold the moral value of an ideal that is obviously so problematic?

This study takes the standpoint that it would be unwise to give up on self-realization as a moral ideal. First of all, it would be undesirable if the ambivalences attached to the late modern version of self-realization discourse would result in the exclusion of aging people from this moral ideal. Even if the reality of many people's lives seems to negate the possibility for self-realization, I think, as a human society we are morally obliged to cherish its underlying goals of optimal human flourishing and fulfillment as something worthy to strive for, both on an individual and a cultural/societal level. Even those who take the standpoint that our primary scholarly efforts should be directed towards changing social structures in such a way that justice and social equality are enhanced, would be well-advised to probe the moral orientation underlying their engagement with these matters. This also underscores the relevance of the self-realization discourse, with its focus on the development of a viable orientation to identity-constituting values.

Furthermore, despite the formulated ambivalences, which are very real and should not be underestimated, we must not forget that late modern self-realization discourse draws upon a broader philosophical discourse of self-realization which may provide opportunities to help us solve the identified problems. It has become clear that a viable conception of self-realization applicable to the context

of aging does need to address, and to some extent solve, two important issues related to the late modern view in particular. These issues need to be reframed to adapt the late modern self-realization discourse to the context of aging.

1. The problematically atomistic anthropology underlying the late modern view needs to be revised in order to acknowledge the contextual embedding and social constitution of individuals, and their mutual relation of interdependence with other people.
2. The problematic relationship of late modern self-realization discourse with the dimension of existential vulnerability, which is increasingly radically confronted in later life, needs to be remedied.

It is my contention that the rich philosophical discourse of self-realization, of which the late modern view represents only *one* appearance, should be probed for thoughts and insights that provide the opportunity to overcome the limitations of the late modern view, in particular, as they appear in the context of aging. My aim in the following chapters, then, is an *exploration* and *reframing* of self-realization and its constitutive concepts, in order to arrive at an interpretation able to provide backing for the inspirational image of "life as a whole" that Erikson (1997) found lacking in our contemporary world (see §1.2). It is my hope that such a reframed interpretation of self-realization may bring us the needed resources to support an inspiring, meaningful, satisfactory image of what it means to live a good life as an aging individual. This hope illustrates the normative inspiration that underlies the current study, which is fueled by the humanist assumption that better lives are possible if people are recognized as moral agents. Such recognition implies that people should be able to influence their own lives in accordance with what they find valuable and worth striving for, and that they should have access to valued social roles. This humanistic inspiration requires upholding the conviction that moral agency is not an illusionary, redundant category, but a relevant ethical purpose to promote. Hopefully, my interpretation of self-realization in this study will convincingly underscore the importance, nature and conditions of such moral agency.