Chapter 9 – Conclusion

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Every philosophical project, I presume, starts with surprise or wonder. One encounters a situation, observes its features, and asks oneself: how can this be so? Why and how did the current state of affairs come about? How can I analyze this in a fruitful way? What concepts and ideas help me improve my understanding?

   As discussed in chapter 1, the initial experience of wonder fueling my interests in this study, began when I encountered the paradox between the negative cultural associations about later life during my first tentative exploration of the socio-cultural discourse on aging, and my own experience that older people often represent valuable exemplars of life experience, virtue, insight, resilience and wisdom. I was struck by the fact that on the socio-cultural level, late modern society seems to associate aging predominantly with physical or mental decline and the inevitable nearing of death, a period causing nothing but trouble both for individuals and for society at large. Where, in the existing cultural narratives and imaginaries that I encountered, were the possibilities for growth and flourishing in later life that I sensed in abundance in the older people that I knew personally? The absence of acknowledgment for the possibility of growth and flourishing in later life seemed even more pressing given how late modernity, as I knew it to be observed by many thinkers, tends to place such strong emphasis on a moral ideal of the good life relying on self-development and personal growth – the moral ideal that I have described in terms of *self-realization* in this study. Why, I asked myself, did the dominant moral self-realization discourse of late modernity not extend towards the cultural perception of aging and later life? Why were older people excluded from this dominant moral ideal of the good life? And, more importantly, could the late modern self-realization discourse be usefully *reframed* to serve as a moral ideal for later life, thereby possibly contributing to a remedy for this adverse socio-cultural positioning of older people? These were the questions that initially gave rise to this study. What followed was a journey through philosophical and gerontological resources, a journey which sometimes resulted in exciting discoveries and insights,

and at other times led to frustrating bumps in the path and unexpected turns of the road. Having come to the final chapter of this study, it is now time to draw up the balance of this journey.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, a short recapitulation of the line of argument presented in chapters 2 through 8 is given (§9.2). Second, the conclusions that can be drawn in order to answer the questions raised in the problem statement in §1.3 are discussed (§9.3). Importantly, this study has predominantly been oriented towards making a case in favor of (a reframed version of) self-realization. However, the self-realization discourse in general tends to raise some diverse and important objections and critiques. Though these objections have implicitly been addressed at several points throughout the previous chapters, they deserve some more structured and explicit attention before the close of this study. Therefore, the chapter goes on to summarize six of the most dominant critiques (§9.4), namely the *elitism/demandingness* objection (§9.4.1), the *self-centeredness* objection (§9.4.2), the *social justice/social structure* objection (§9.4.3), the *Western/masculine bias* objection (§9.4.4), the *moralism/paternalism* objection (§9.4.5), and the *cognitive ability* objection (§9.4.6). As any scientific and philosophical endeavor, this study too, leaves important questions unanswered, asking for further attention from researchers in the future. Some of the most pressing of these unanswered questions are also discussed (§9.5). The chapter closes with some final, more personal reflections on the theme of aging, self-realization and cultural narratives about later life (§9.6).

9.2 RECAPITULATION OF THE ARGUMENT

This study started with the guiding question: Can the late modern discourse of self-realization be reframed in such a way that it can serve as a resource for meaning-generating cultural narratives about later life in late modern circumstances? (see §1.3). This phrasing indicates the broad concern of this study with a combination of four themes: *self-realization*, *aging*, *cultural narratives* and *late modernity*.

In the process of philosophically investigating this question, several related sub-questions and issues had to be unraveled, discussed and answered.

- In the first place, a proper clarification of the guiding themes of this study was needed. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 were predominantly dedicated to the task of answering both descriptive and interpretative questions about these guiding themes.
- Second, it was necessary to provide sufficient underpinning for the claims assumed in the guiding research question and furthered in this study. The first claim, discussed in chapter 2, was that the late modern interpretation

of self-realization needs *reframing* on some crucial points, in order to be adapted to the context of aging. The second claim, discussed in chapter 3, was that cultural master narratives about aging and later life fall short of providing people with satisfactory identification-models and need to be complemented with viable counter narratives.

- Third, the intended reframing of self-realization and its constitutive concepts had to be substantiated by exploring philosophical discourses about these themes, and clarifying and criticizing their limitations in the context of this study, thereby providing suggestions for better-matching alternative interpretations. This was by far the most complex and extensive task in this study, undertaken in chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8.

- Fourth and finally, my philosophical investigation needed to provide a viable argumentation regarding the claim that the suggested reframing of self-realization and its constitutive concepts can indeed serve as a resource for the meaning-generating cultural narratives about aging and later life highlighted in the problem statement. Chapters 3 through 8 have tried to provide the building blocks to underpin this claim. This concluding chapter will now draw the argument together in its final form (see §9.3).

Importantly, these four sets of tasks had to be undertaken in conjunction with each other, because it was not always possible to separate them. Let me now briefly summarize the course of the argument developed during the investigation.

Chapter 2 sketched the background context of late modernity against which this study is situated. In particular, it attempted to clarify the characteristics of late modern living and aging, as well as the typical features of the late modern interpretation of self-realization. Late modernity was typified as an era advancing an interpretation of self-realization that focuses on the mastery that self-determining actors strive to exert over their lives, in order to arrive at the optimal realization of their self-chosen goals and purposes. Correspondingly, I argued that the good or successful life in late modern circumstances is identified with a life according to one's own choices and value orientations. The process of identity-constitution consequently gains heightened importance when it comes to infusing life with meaning. However, as was mentioned, late modern living is liable to all sorts of complex socio-cultural dynamics and influences, which makes the striving for self-realization a highly ambivalent and problematic undertaking. Subsequently, it was highlighted that in a context of individualization and de-traditionalization, individuals are thrown back on their own resources to search for sources of meaning and identity.

Chapter 3 explored the theme of cultural narratives that also forms one of the main elements of the overarching research question. Aided by Lindemann Nelson's (2001) philosophical theory about cultural narratives and counter nar-

ratives, I discussed the impact of these narratives on the agent's identity-consti-tution, which proved to be both inescapable and potentially damaging. Impor-tantly, we learned that repairing the identity-damage inflicted upon people by oppressive and stereotyping cultural narratives requires the creation of cultural counter narratives that optimize people's potential for *moral agency*. Next, I pro-ceeded to apply the theory on identity-effects of cultural narratives and counter narratives to the context of aging. A dichotomy was suggested between two dominant cultural narratives in late modern Western culture with regard to aging and later life: *decline narratives* and *age-defying narratives*. I also discussed how these cultural narratives might impact people's (aging) identity. Eventu-ally, I argued in favor of a third category of cultural narratives about later life that should be able to remedy the shortcomings of decline- and age-defying narratives. The category of *narratives of becoming* was presented as this study's preferred alternative account of what it means to age well in the late modern world. In particular, narratives of becoming were argued to aim at two import-ant goals: acknowledging the potential for growth and flourishing that later life may harbor, and providing people with the resources for a meaningful integra-tion of inescapable existential vulnerability - resources that were argued to be lacking in existing cultural narratives about later life.

From chapter 4 onwards, the discussion transitioned to more directly ad-dress the main aim of this study: reframing self-realization and its constitutive concepts so that a discourse emerges that escapes the problems of the late mod-ern interpretation of self-realization. Importantly, this endeavor was undertak-en specifically to explore whether the self-realization discourse could provide possible resources to feed into the suggested alternative cultural narratives of becoming. Given the goal to reframe self-realization in a certain direction, the first step needed was to gain more clarity about the philosophical history and background of the concept, in order to enrich our understanding of self-realiza-tion beyond the late modern discourse introduced in chapter 2. The philosoph-ical exploration in chapter 4 presented self-realization as a process of becoming the best that is in you, a process of moral self-development aimed at optimizing one's potential for moral agency. It was discussed that what constitutes this best in human beings has been interpreted in quite diverse ways during the course of Western philosophical history. This richness and diversity of interpretations conveniently provided leads for the reframing of self-realization undertaken in this study. Eventually, I argued that the self-realization discourse can best be understood as a rich and complex fabric of three interwoven threads: autonomy, authenticity and virtue. All of these deserve to be given their due importance in this study's reframed account of self-realization.

Before zooming in on each of the three constitutive threads of self-real-ization in chapters 6 through 8, in chapter 5 I focused on first exploring a satisfying conceptualization of personal identity – the expression of the self un-

derlying self-realization – and formulating an understanding of moral agency matching the purpose of this study. Moral agency arose as a quintessential topic both in the discussion of cultural counter narratives in chapter 3, and in the discussion of the purpose of self-realization in chapter 4. Consequently, it was important to explore this theme in more detail and define a position matching the orientation of this study. My first step in chapter 5 was to argue in favor of a narrative conceptualization of identity. Expressing this preference for narrative views of identity can be seen as part of the reframing of the late modern self-realization discourse. After all, the narrative view provides a welcome alternative for the underlying anthropological assumptions of the late modern view that were analyzed to be problematic in chapter 2. Choosing a narrative interpretation of identity proved to have several advantages, since it enabled acknowledging the social and contextual embedding of our identity, its temporal character, its reflexivity and its embodiment. In this study, I have particularly focused on those narrative views that helped to illustrate the connections between narrative identity and moral identity. It was therefore crucial to substantiate this link between identity and morality, given the conceptualization of self-realization as a process of moral self-development as presented in chapter 4. The next step in chapter 5 was to connect my reflections on narrative identity and moral identity to the theme of moral agency, perceived in this study as the concretization of our moral identity-constituting value orientations into our actions. Using insights of Ricoeur (1992) and other discussed thinkers, I composed a complex definition of moral agency as the ability to lead *a good life, with and for others, according to one's deepest aspirations and best capacities, as full participating members of a society/community.*

Having thus delineated my own view of moral agency and its connections with narrative identity and moral identity, I could proceed to discuss in succession the three constitutive threads of self-realization discourse identified in chapter 4 in the following chapters: autonomy (chapter 6), authenticity (chapter 7) and virtue (chapter 8). In each of these chapters, the discussion of the thread in question followed broadly the same structure. After a general introduction, a selection of relevant philosophical views were discussed and then evaluated in light of the reframing purpose of this study. The chapters also explored how each of these threads has been translated to the context of aging by gerontological thinkers so far. Finally, I suggested an interpretation of each thread in the context of this study that tried to remedy the identified troubles with existing accounts. In particular, I argued in favor of an *individuating account* of autonomy, a view of authenticity as a *social and moral practice*, and a virtue-ethical account that perceives virtue as the *attitudinal concretization of our striving for moral agency* in practice. Importantly, these conceptualizations attempt to refute certain problematical connections that are assumed as self-evident by more

traditional interpretations, such as that between autonomy and independence, between authenticity and anti-sociality, or between virtue and traditionalism.

- Regarding *autonomy*, the discussion in chapter 6 showed how dominant structural hierarchical accounts tend to disregard several facets of autonomy that are important given our conceptualization of moral agency. In particular, the narrative and contextual embedding of autonomous agents, their identification with a certain moral orientation and their relations of interdependence were suggested as vital additions to the autonomy discourse, particularly in the context of aging. The interpretation of *individuating* autonomy proposed eventually aims at combining proper acknowledgment of the relational and contextual embedding of the moral agent with a valuation of their "becoming individual", i.e., acknowledging the importance of moral self-development for autonomy. Ricoeur's (1992) notion of self-constancy provided a concept uniting both the acknowledgment of our moral relations to others, and of the importance of living up to our identity-constituting moral engagements. Both were argued to be crucial for a person in order to qualify as autonomous.
- Regarding *authenticity*, the discussion in chapter 7 identified two general problems confronting the authenticity discourse in general: its essentialist assumptions regarding the existence of an original "true" self that serves as the source of meaning and morality, and its negative attitude regarding social influences on our identity-formation. The interpretation of authenticity proposed in this study suggests we retain the valuation of the individual moral agent as a source of meaning and morality from classical views of authenticity, but reinterpret the authentic self in terms of a social and moral practice. Also, it underscores that authenticity requires both the acknowledgment of one's contextual embedding and social constitution, and the ability to criticize and distance oneself from social influences that are not beneficial to one's good life.
- Regarding *virtue*, the discussion in chapter 8 showed how virtue ethics provides a view of self-realization that acknowledges our embedding in social practices and communities. Moreover, it was underscored that virtue-ethical perspectives advance the development of certain attitudes in life, for instance, by focusing on practical wisdom. The emphasis on the right attitude towards what confronts us in life offers convenient possibilities for the meaningful integration of existential vulnerability, which is one of the focal points for this study. A potential shortcoming of the virtue-ethical discourse, however, proved to be a tendency towards conformism and traditionalism in some interpretations. The interpretation of virtue forwarded in this study aims to focus on a lifelong process of moral self-development, striving with and for others towards a good life. A plurality of goods is ac-

knowledged to be valuable in this account, and its focus lies on the recognition of the moral value of individuality, while this individuality is still perceived as fundamentally socially embedded.

9.3 ADVANCING OLDER PEOPLE'S MORAL AGENCY

This study has been a search for an alternative to the late modern conceptualization of self-realization that forms a better match to the context of aging. In order to arrive at such an alternative conceptualization, I have been trying to reframe our understanding of self-realization and its constitutive concepts. I have intended to do this in such a way that the underlying moral ideal that fuels the self-realization discourse in general, presenting the good life in terms of realizing the best in oneself, remains intact, but is combined with a greater sensitivity for the social and contextual embedding of human lives and for the fundamental existential vulnerability of the human condition.

In order to evaluate the results of this study in terms of a reframing of the self-realization discourse that can serve as a resource for meaning-generating cultural narratives about aging and later life, it is useful to recall the desired conditions formulated for: 1) the suggested account of self-realization in the context of aging, and 2) the suggested cultural counter narratives of becoming. Regarding the conditions for a reframed account of self-realization suitable for the context of aging, I argued in §2.5.2 that the late modern interpretation of self-realization needed to be adapted so that:

- The characteristic atomistic anthropology of the late modern discourse would be replaced by a view that acknowledges the contextual embedding and social constitution of human persons, as well as their fundamental interdependence with other people
- The problematic denial or rejection of the dimension of existential vulnerability typical of the late modern discourse would be replaced by an attitude enabling a meaningful integration of existential vulnerability

The exploration of philosophical discourses on self-realization and identity in this study suggested that there are more possible interpretations of the self-realization discourse than just the late modern interpretation. During the argument in chapters 4 and 5, I hope to have made it clear that the idea of self-realization can in fact be made compatible with an understanding of the moral agent as a socio-culturally embedded being, inevitably involved in interdependent relationships with others, its identity co-constituted by a variety of social (i.e., relational, societal/structural/systemic, cultural and other) factors. Moreover, the argument in this study has repeatedly contended that the

striking for self-realization need *not* be in conflict with the reality of existential vulnerability that we are increasingly radically confronted with in aging. Contrary to the late modern interpretation of self-realization which suggests a strategy of gaining mastery and control over one's life, I have claimed that the philosophical discourses of self-realization, in particular the virtue-thread and some interpretations of the authenticity-thread, provide ample opportunities to present the development of a satisfactory *responsive attitude* towards inescapable existential vulnerability as an intrinsic part of the striving for self-realization. Such an attitude, which I hope this study has shown to be plausible, provides us with valuable resources that are needed for a meaningful integration of existential vulnerability.

Regarding the suggested conditions for narratives of becoming, I argued in §3.4 that these counter narratives about aging and later life needed to:

- Avoid both the equating of aging with decline (typical of decline narratives), and the equating of aging well with staying young (typical of age-defying narratives)
- Acknowledge both the potential for growth and flourishing that later life harbors, and its radicalized confrontation with existential vulnerability
- Provide resources for a meaningful integration of existential vulnerability in one's biography, so that the sense of coherence of one's life narrative(s) is restored and vital involvement with life remains possible

The question that remains to be answered is whether the suggestions for reframing self-realization and its constitutive concepts in the way described earlier are indeed capable of providing us with resources or insights that support the creation of narratives of becoming about aging and later life answering these three conditions summed up above. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the line of argument followed in this study, I contend that the reframed interpretation of self-realization it offers can indeed be helpful here, which means that the guiding research question of this study can be answered in an affirmative manner. I will summarize my reasons for this contention below:

- First, the purpose of self-realization in my reframed articulation (i.e., a process of moral self-development aimed at the optimization of one's potential for moral agency), in combination with the emphasis on self-realization as a lifelong process of development, strongly underscores that growth and flourishing are morally relevant throughout our entire lives. The typical rhetoric of becoming who you are symbolizes this emphasis on continuous further self-development. The focus on moral self-development implies that my reframed articulation of self-realization is both capable of acknowledging the potential for growth and flourishing in later life, and of refuting

the idea that aging should predominantly be seen as a phase of decline. Both features can be expected to be conducive to the creation of narratives of becoming, because they enable older people to access a dominant cultural ideal of the good life (i.e., self-realization) that remains closed to them when we follow dominant cultural master narratives.

- Second, the interpretation offered by this study presents the vulnerability of later life not as something to be remedied or rejected, but as something that can be *integrated* in our lives. The idea of self-realization as a process in which we strive for a good life with and for others is coupled with a narrative and moral account of identity, which emphasizes the importance of integrity, coherence and appropriation of an ethical orientation for a meaningful life. This combination implies that the approach to self-realization taken in this study enables a sensitivity for the importance of restoring coherence and vital involvement with life after being confronted with experiences of existential vulnerability. Restoring coherence and vital involvement is supportive of a meaningful integration of existential vulnerability in one's life, which I have defined as an important condition for narratives of becoming.
- Third, following from the previous point, this study perceives finding the proper *responsive attitude* towards existential vulnerability as quintessential to self-realization. Particularly the interpretations of virtue and authenticity defended in this study emphasize finding a satisfactory responsive attitude towards what confronts us in life. As a result, my reframed articulation of self-realization not only acknowledges existential vulnerability as an intrinsic part of the reality of living, but also perceives the confrontation with it as a potential catalyst for moral self-development, for instance, by increasing our self-knowledge and resilience or deepening our relations to other people. This study argues that with such an acquired responsive attitude, being confronted with existential vulnerability may in the end even *contribute* to one's growth as a human being, and, if not to one's flourishing, then at least to one's resilience. Of course, there is no guarantee that this will happen, but my reframed self-realization account certainly intends to keep this possibility open. In this sense, it also helps refute the idea that aging well is only possible within a framework of youth-related values, because it insists that value can also be derived from meaningfully dealing with those inevitable vulnerabilities and losses that our culture tends to associate with aging.

Together, these reflections illustrate the crucial importance of developing and maintaining the right attitude for the interpretation of aging well based on the self-realization discourse advanced in this study. Regarding the potential of growth and flourishing, emphasis is laid on the importance of an attitude of vital involvement with our own moral self-development and the identifications

and orientations underlying it. It is also emphasized how our involvement with our good life should be translated into our concrete choices and actions, in our engagement with the ethical aims we have identified with, and in our concern for the good of others with whom we are interdependently connected. With regard to the meaningful integration of existential vulnerability, on the other hand, the emphasis has been on the importance of an attitude of resilience towards whatever confronts us in life, an attitude that escapes both passive surrender and active denial/rejection.

During the course of the argument, I have inserted illustrative case examples suggesting the value of specific attitudes and virtues like loving self-acceptance, mildness, hopefulness, independent thinking, modesty, self-respect, et cetera. In contrast, stagnation, indifference, intolerance and lack of engagement have been mentioned as counterproductive for realizing the purpose of aging well. Importantly, however, I have argued against the prescription of a catalogue of virtues that sets the standard for the desired attitude in any situation regardless of the context. Prescribing one specific attitude as a criterion for aging well would contradict the hermeneutic, dialogical ethical principles advanced in this study. Rather, what constitutes the "right" attitude in a given situation is decided in intersubjective hermeneutic practices involving continuous deliberation and attunement, both to one's own needs and to the demands and needs of others involved in the particular situation.

That said, however, the reframing of self-realization and its constitutive concepts advanced in this study does suggest a general direction in which the intended attitude for self-realization can be sought. I suggest describing this direction with the Aristotelian notion of *practical wisdom*, as an overarching virtuous attitude that helps us develop insight into ourselves and sensitivity to our situation, which in turn strengthens the hermeneutic deliberative qualities that we need in order to decide our response, and helps us seek the middle way between unwanted extremes in our reactions. Supported by the practical wisdom we ideally acquire in our striving for self-realization, we can hope to optimally realize our personal potential for growth and flourishing, as well as integrate experiences of existential vulnerability in our lives, without disavowing their reality and denying the pain they cause, but also without falling prey to a permanent loss of vital involvement in life.

What do these reflections imply for the actual formation of narratives of becoming about aging and later life? It means, most importantly, that the language of self-realization should be more explicitly welcomed and more actively applied in discourses where reflection on aging and later life takes place. These discourses, however, are highly varied and manifold. We can, for example, distinguish the following relevant aging discourses:

- *individual interactions* and conversations between people where personal expectations and experiences regarding aging are exchanged. These social exchanges can either take place amongst the elderly themselves, or between individuals of different generations
- *social positioning* of older people, in which certain roles and possibilities are strengthened and affirmed while others are excluded. Examples of such positioning can be found, for instance, in implicit images of older employees by employers, norms regarding clothing or sexuality for older women, stereotypical expectations of dependence and complacency in fragile Fourth Agers, et cetera
- *media representations* of older people and their experiences, for instance, in the way newspapers and television report about them, or the way they are pictured in advertising
- *artistic representations* of older people and their experiences, for instance, in films or documentaries, novels, (auto)biographies, painting or sculpture, et cetera
- *scientific representations* of older people and their experiences, as illustrated by scientific papers and books, conference presentations, et cetera, but also exemplified in the subjects chosen as the dominant research focus by gerontologists and in the allocation of research funds (for example, favoring research on healthy aging, active aging, et cetera).
- *political and societal representations* of older people and their experiences exemplified, for instance, in policies regarding pensions or care-arrangements

All these discourses (and others not mentioned here) have their own way of presenting the reality of later life and thereby framing the lives of older people. The distinguished discourses are often interconnected or mutually influence each other. In their interaction, they decide which dominant images and meanings our culture recognizes as valid and credible cultural narratives about later life. Thus, following the terminology of this study, the dominance of decline- and age-defying narratives relies on a focus on certain themes (and not others!) in the variety of late modern aging discourses. Depending on the narrative, these themes may include illness, loss, dependence, anti-aging, activity, travel and consumption, et cetera. The combination of a certain set of themes mutually strengthens each other and enlarges the influence of the cultural narrative in question. For example, when gerontology focuses strongly on frailty, media predominantly show us pictures and stories about dependent older people in deplorable situations, and politicians and care-directors simultaneously warn about the costs of eldercare rising sky-high, these representations in combination strengthen (in this case) the force that decline narratives exert on the lives, minds and souls of older individuals.

Consequently, the effort to challenge and replace adverse cultural master narratives by moral agency-enhancing counter narratives (see chapter 3) requires adjusting the aging discourse on multiple levels, targeting all of the relevant sketched discourses about later life in their mutual interactions. This effort to transform existing discourses, as may be expected, is by no means an easy process. However, experiences with social groups whose moral agency suffers from adverse positioning through cultural master narratives show that, while the result may never be completely satisfying or finished, the effort to challenge existing cultural master narratives and replace them by more viable counter narratives certainly isn't useless or doomed to fail either. Importantly, it is where master narratives show cracks and inconsistencies that the chances lie to confront them. Such confrontation should lead to the replacement of negative elements of the narrative by more satisfactory ones, a process of transformation that can ultimately lead to a strong counter narrative contesting the status quo (see Lindemann Nelson, 2001 for some interesting case examples).

In my view, we should be realistic, but nevertheless hopeful about the opportunities to transform existing problematic cultural narratives about aging and later life in the direction suggested by my plea for narratives of becoming. But given what has been discussed above, this will require substantive efforts on multiple levels. After all, multiple discourses have to be made aware of the merits of using the language of self-realization (in the reframed interpretation proposed here, of course) to arrive at a more viable image of aging well in late modern circumstances. It depends on which of the aging discourses we target, I presume, what the most promising strategy is to influence them. Generally speaking, the goal is to enrich existing ideas and meanings about aging with the ideas and meanings derived from the philosophical self-realization discourse advanced in this study. *How* precisely this should be done and what strategies will be successful are questions that can unfortunately not be answered here. In this study, I have just aimed to provide a (hopefully sufficiently convincing) philosophical underpinning for the *relevance* of my reframed version of self-realization. Its translation into practice has to wait for further research (see also §9.5).

In anticipation of the results of such further research, it seems to me, however, that inspiring examples and role models, as well as good practices of how older people's moral agency can successfully be enhanced are relevant and needed at all levels of discourse. We thus need pioneering individuals and practices that teach us new and previously unthought-of options to enhance older people's opportunities to live "a good life, with and for others, according to their deepest desires and best capacities, as full participating members of society/ community" – in other words, we need *exemplars of moral agency* that show us the way towards the creation of narratives of becoming that strive to optimize moral agency for the rest of us.

From the recapitulation of the argument of this study in §9.2, advancing and optimizing people's potential for moral agency emerged as a shared central purpose for both the account of self-realization as well as the account of narratives of becoming suggested in this study. The concept of moral agency is thus a kingpin of my argument. Based on the analysis in this study, I can now formulate four crucial conditions to enable the optimization of moral agency. The first two of these conditions, *identification* and *orientation* place emphasis on efforts undertaken by the *individual person* to become a moral agent, whereas the other two, *recognition* and *participation* require efforts on the *socio-cultural and/or societal level* to facilitate individuals in their striving to become (and remain) moral agents.

- First of all, I have repeatedly emphasized the need for moral agents to identify with a certain image (or rather a dynamic set of images) of who they want to be or become. This *identification* with a "possible self" or set of selves is essential for our identity as selfhood and our self-constancy, to use the terminology of Ricoeur (1992) that has inspired my view of moral agency (see §5.4; §5.5). Following from the view of identity I have defended in this study, the identification of relevance here does not result in a static fixation of oneself on one predefined image of identity, but is a dynamic process that gradually and organically takes shape in our lifelong evolving narratives about ourselves, narratives that are intersubjectively co-constituted in our relationships with others.
- Second, this identification both enables and relies on a moral *orientation*, a positioning of oneself relative to a horizon of values, as C. Taylor (1989) puts it. This orientation enables us to form our aspirations and articulate our purposes. The orientation we have appropriated is also what guides us when we define for ourselves what we want to remain true to in our lives, which is where our orientation interconnects with the identification discussed above. The truthfulness to our identity-constituting orientation, as encountered particularly in the discussion on authenticity, is an indispensable ingredient of self-realization and therefore crucially important for moral agency.
- Third, arriving at a viable identification and orientation presupposes that we are socially positioned as able and worthy moral agents. That means that our moral agency crucially relies on processes of social *recognition*, as underscored earlier in the discussion of Honneth's (1995) views (see §3.2.3). The context in which we live our lives should harbor persons, practices, systems and structures that are willing and able to acknowledge our valid claims to love, respect and solidarity (the values at stake in Honneth's three levels of recognition), which are indispensable for the ethical aim of a good life with and for others that underlies moral agency. A context in which

one or more of the forms of social recognition is (are) absent or flawed will expectedly be an obstacle to the optimization of the development of moral agency.

- Fourth, because self-realization also pertains to the actual translation of the value orientations one has identified with into practice, moral agency also requires that people are engaged in society and granted the opportunity to *participate* as full members of the communities to which they belong. The discussion of Honneth's (2008) views about reification (§3.2.3) taught us how important it is that people are treated not as mere bystanders in their own lives. Instead, they should be treated as participants in a shared practice of striving for a good life together with others. As participants, they are granted the ability to influence their own lives, which is crucial in order for their potential for moral agency to come to full bloom.

In conjunction, identification, orientation, recognition and participation form the necessary conditions for moral agency, and thereby for the understanding of self-realization defended in this study. In order to contribute to the creation of viable counter narratives, we should thus strive to influence the opportunities for moral agency in all four of these domains. Importantly, identification and orientation are individual tasks, the success of which rely for an important part on the opportunities for recognition and participation that precede their exercise. Therefore, initiatives and projects undertaken to optimize older people's moral agency would perhaps be most efficient if they start out by improving the chances for recognition and participation first.

9.4 OBJECTIONS TO THE SELF-REALIZATION DISCOURSE

There are several objections that can be directed against the self-realization discourse in general. These objections need to be briefly discussed here, in order to evaluate whether this study's reframed conceptualization of self-realization is able to answer them in a satisfactory manner. Six main objections to the self-realization discourse are discussed below: that it is *elitist* and overly *demanding*, only attainable for the "happy few" (§9.4.1); that it is *self-centered* and overly individualistic (§9.4.2); that it neglects the fact that a good life is highly dependent on how *social structures* organize our lives, and whether or not the society we live in harbors a practice of *social justice* (§9.4.3); that it is biased by *Western and male-oriented* values (§9.4.4); that it is *moralistic and paternalistic*, prescribing individuals a specific moral lifestyle instead of respecting their own choices and preferences (§9.4.5); and that it advocates an ideal of the good life that presupposes *mental health and cognitive ability*, thus excluding people

who experience disability in this regard, for instance, people with dementia or Alzheimer's disease (§9.4.6).

9.4.1 Elitism/demandingness objection

The elitism/demandingness objection accuses the self-realization discourse of defending a "high bar" moral ideal, which is believed to be only relevant to a minority elite. Thus, only people who are healthy and wealthy, reflexive and intellectually highly developed, can afford to engage themselves in activities that are conducive to self-realization. Along similar lines, this objection argues that self-realization is too demanding for "ordinary" individuals. After all, it requires many capacities (reflexivity, autonomy competencies like self-direction, self-knowledge, et cetera) that – it is assumed – are not normally found in the majority of people.

In response to this objection, I would like to emphasize first of all that the suggestion that self-realization is not suitable for "normal" people has always sounded slightly condescending to me – indeed, the elitist objection seems to occupy an elitist position itself in this regard. Though I grant that most people would probably not formulate their engagement with existential questions and their search for meaning and a good life in terms of an abstract philosophical concept like self-realization, this does not mean that the underlying concerns expressed by this discourse do not concern them. A basic assumption underlying this study is loosely inspired by existentialist philosophy, which states that people have no other option but to engage themselves in a lifelong search for meaning and a good life, even if it is acknowledged that the universe they live in is not intrinsically meaningful itself. Consequently, what is fundamentally at stake in the moral discourse of self-realization – a good life with and for others, according to one's deepest aspirations and best capacities, as full participating members of a society/community – is considered relevant for all human beings.

I should grant those who raise the elitism/demandingness objection, however, that self-realization discourse makes significant demands on individuals which some people in some situations may be unable to answer. However, if we consider what is at stake – a good life in the broadest sense of the term – it should not really surprise us that the demands are high. After all, a good life is something that requires effort, at least if it is conceptualized as transcending a superficial sense of "well-being" in terms of positive affect, as used in some hedonistic conceptions of the term (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In this study, by contrast, a good life is considered to be a complex process of self-development, as has also been underscored in eudaimonic conceptions of well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2008). The interpretation of the self-realization discourse advanced in this study, in particular the virtue-ethical thread, therefore implies a process of continuous development and practice. It is fully acknowledged that the striving

for self-realization takes place in a complex and imperfect context. What counts is that the result of one's strivings to respond to the demands of the situation is optimal *given the restrictions of the situation*. This criterion should serve to illustrate that according to my proposed reframing, though self-realization indeed makes demands on people to further their development and continuously strengthen their moral agency, it is nevertheless within the reach of many more people than the elitist objection would have us believe.

9.4.2 Self-centeredness objection

The self-centeredness objection fears that focusing on self-realization will lead to moral egoism or a narcissistic self-centeredness, whereby individuals are only concerned with creating the circumstances that further their own flourishing. Consequently, it is argued, there is a lack of attention to moral questions that require our engagement with the interests of others. This objection therefore considers the self-realization discourse to be insufficiently capable of acknowledging the fundamental relational embedding of the human condition, by focusing exclusively on the individual capacities for growth and flourishing.

The self-centeredness objection is addressed at the supposed underlying anthropological assumptions of the self-realization discourse. However, as seen earlier, the reframed discourse on self-realization that is advanced in this study is equally critical of the image of the self-sufficient, atomistic human agent. It follows that in my suggested reframing, the agent striving for self-realization is never solely concerned with the self, because this self is situated in a social and cultural, historical context. Moreover, as I have argued in chapter 5, this study defends a view of identity which is intrinsically moral in two senses. First, I have claimed, following C. Taylor (1985a, 1989), that our identity presupposes the appropriation of a value orientation relative to the moral horizon that forms the inescapable background of our lives. Second, following Ricoeur (1992), I have claimed that our identity as selfhood always intrinsically presupposes an ethical engagement with the good of others. Both arguments make it clear that the self-centeredness objection is refuted by the way this study has reframed the late modern interpretation of self-realization, to which the objection more rightfully applies.

9.4.3 Social structure/social justice objection

Related to the self-centeredness objection, but addressing it from a different angle is the social structure/social justice objection. It argues that our moral concern should not be primarily directed at the individual self, as is assumed by the self-realization discourse. How could we legitimize a focus on individual flourishing, when the world around us is on fire and requires structural mea-

sures to remedy gross injustices and inequalities? Doesn't self-realization seem an insignificant, self-absorbed and elusive undertaking compared to solving "real world problems"? Shouldn't morality be concerned with the question how social justice can be furthered, inequality diminished, and solidarity created, thus improving the life conditions of the less privileged in society?

This objection has a legitimate point, insofar as the self-realization discourse indeed places moral primacy on the individual moral agent. This does not mean that matters of social justice or the potentially damaging influence of social structures are considered unimportant, however. As has been repeatedly discussed, this study's reframed interpretation of self-realization strongly emphasizes the socio-cultural constitution of the individual person, and its embedding in a social, historical, cultural and societal context. Hence, this account is perfectly capable of acknowledging the importance, indeed, the necessity, of creating favorable circumstances under which people are able to strive for self-realization, as the emphasis on recognition and participation also illustrates.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the principal focus of the perspective defended in this study is on the development of individual moral agency, not on changing social structures. In defense against the charge that the self-realization discourse has faulty priorities, however, I argue that the focus on moral self-development is legitimized based on the following line of thought. Challenging and transforming social structures that damage or impede people's chances to lead a good and fulfilling life are rightly underscored as important moral goals by the social structure/social justice objection and deserve to be taken seriously. However, realizing any social change or transformation requires people who take the lead. Structures are created by people, and can only be changed by people. The desired transformation in the direction of more humanizing social structures and arrangements requires first of all that people are willing to engage with ideals that are representative of the desired "better world". In order to do this, they need to be capable of appropriating an identity-guiding value orientation and act upon it. It is exactly this process of identifying with a value orientation and expressing this moral identity in actions that was argued to be the foundation of moral agency.

Thus, in order to change and transform damaging social structures, we need strong moral agents. Only strong moral agents can unite forces to challenge adverse social structures, unjust practices and oppressive cultural narratives. The perspective focusing on social structures tends to reduce moral agents to powerless pawns subjected to the overwhelming force of systemic powers. I believe this does a fundamental injustice to the potential of human persons, paradoxically a potential that is vitally needed to reach the very goals the social structure-perspective aims at. The reframed interpretation of self-realization proposed in this study emphasizes precisely the development of the

potential for moral agency in individuals that is a "sine qua non" of social change.

9.4.4 Western/masculine bias objection

This objection states that the self-realization discourse is based on values and capacities that betray a bias towards Western, masculine values. The bottom line of this objection is that the self-realization discourse pretends to represent a moral perspective with a universal value, while in fact its assumptions are based upon the life reality of Western, male, white and upper class persons. Consequently, it is argued, the situation of this minority group gains a normative status, while there are many other people whose lives have very different features. The latter's claim to a good life is denied or marginalized because it supposedly does not match the criteria of self-realization.

The background against which the argument about self-realization in this study is situated is the context of late modernity. This undeniably presumes a Western, individualized context, since the features that are characteristic of late modernity do not apply to more traditional or community-oriented societal contexts. In this sense, it is fair to say that the moral discourse on self-realization advanced here is predominantly applicable to the Western context, and therefore, in a sense, biased. Expectedly, however, the experience of aging itself will also be very different in other cultural contexts, mainly because different cultural narratives about aging abound there. It seems to make little sense to try to formulate one overarching moral ideal that could accommodate all these very different experiences of aging. The reframing of self-realization advanced in this study therefore does not claim universal validity, but aims to provide a foundational concept that is capable of stimulating the creation of more nuanced and richer cultural narratives about later life in a Western, late modern context.

With regard to the accusation of a masculine bias, it is important to emphasize that this objection seems to be directed mainly against the late modern interpretation of self-realization, which has also been criticized by this study. By contrast, my proposed alternative conceptualizations of identity, autonomy, authenticity and virtue explicitly strive to accommodate the feminist critique regarding the negative influence of neglecting the relational and vulnerable dimensions of human existence. Since the interpretation of moral agency that is advocated in this study does not resemble the more traditional accounts of agency that have been accused of a masculine bias, I believe this study's reframed interpretation of self-realization largely escapes this objection.

9.4.5 Moralism/paternalism objection

The moralism/paternalism objection touches upon a very deep and fundamental critique that can be made against all normative philosophical projects. It is intrinsic to a normative philosophical project that a certain way of living or a certain understanding of the good is presented as superior to others. The moralism/paternalism objection questions the legitimacy of such superiority claims on principled grounds: it argues that there is no good reason to impose the particular preferences of one philosopher or one philosophical orientation on others, for this will restrict their freedom to choose for themselves. The moralism/paternalism objection accuses the self-realization discourse of imposing moral self-development on people as a criterion to measure the moral quality of their lives. This normative prescriptiveness is perceived as undesirable paternalism, which paradoxically also contradicts the fundamental underlying principles of the self-realization discourse itself. After all, this discourse highly values making one's own authentic life choices and stimulates one's own reflexive appropriation of an identity-constituting value orientation.

In a way, the moralism/paternalism objection is understandable and maybe even partially legitimate. After all, the self-realization discourse *does* explicitly promote a certain lifestyle aimed at moral self-development and optimization of moral agency. Such a life is perceived as ranking higher on the continuum between admirable and flawed lives than a life with no moral focus or direction. However, as I already suggested in defense of this study's preference for narratives of becoming over decline- and age-defying narratives (see §3.4), taking a normative stand can be prescriptive in weaker or stronger degrees, which influences its susceptibility to the moralism/paternalism objection. This study defends a weak substantive normative view (see §6.6), which promotes that people strive to form an authentic moral orientation and act upon it, without prescribing in detail what this value orientation should precisely aspire towards. Within certain constraints that are suggested by the moral horizon of our culture (such as the so-called Golden Rule that restricts the aspirations and purposes that are morally acceptable to strive for; see §5.5) this study makes a principled choice to advance maximal freedom for individual choice between different identity-constituting values, and for the appropriation of an authentic lifestyle in correspondence with what the individual agent values most deeply.

Defending a weak substantive normative position assumes a focus on transcendental conditions of self-realization, instead of on the prescription of concrete, strong substantive value orientations. For instance, the self-realization discourse presupposes that leading a good life requires certain basic competencies, such as identification with a moral image of who we strive to become, or appropriating a certain value orientation. When we assume that leading a good life is, in principle, of interest to all human beings, for it would be self-effacing

for them to strive for anything that is not good, the "prescription" that people acquire the necessary competencies that enable such a good life acquires legitimacy. Following this, however, people ought to have the freedom to "individualize" their self-realization trajectory in their own autonomous, authentic and virtuous manner. Consequently, my suggested (re)interpretation of the self-realization discourse is indeed, in a sense, moralistic, but this need not lead to paternalism that forces a specified conceptualization of the good upon people, as would be the case in a strong substantive approach.

9.4.6 Mental/cognitive ability objection

The mental/cognitive ability objection expresses doubts whether people are always capable or in possession of the necessary capacities to engage in self-realization. This objection is of particular relevance when it comes to applying the self-realization discourse to the context of aging. If basic cognitive abilities start to fail, for instance in the case of Alzheimer's disease, is it still credible to speak about self-realization – or even about the presence of a self? It cannot be denied, of course, that Alzheimer's disease and other such forms of cognitive impairment deeply affect abilities we tend to regard as essential to human personhood. If we would follow the more traditional accounts of human identity, we would have to take the standpoint that people whose cognitive abilities are deteriorating lack the constitutive capacities for identity, and thus the indispensable preconditions for moral agency. Consequently, people with cognitive impairment would be denied access to the moral ideal of the good life that is represented by the self-realization discourse, since the latter strives for optimization of moral agency. Ultimately, we would then fall back upon the decline narratives that we wanted to challenge in the first place by suggesting self-realization as a resource for counter narratives of becoming. We would be forced to conclude that in this case, self-realization discourse cannot provide the desired perspective on later life, able to integrate both the potential for growth *and* the fundamental existential vulnerability of the human condition, of which Alzheimer's disease presents an unsettling example.

As argued in §5.3.2, however, the view of identity as a narrative, social practice endorsed in this study enables upholding the idea that people with Alzheimer's disease, despite their cognitive deterioration, still qualify as persons with narrative identities, because they are so held by their social surroundings (Lindemann, 2014). In this account, when people lose the capacity to keep their own narrative going, it does not mean that their identity-constituting life story ends. Others too can help people tell their life story; they can conserve valuable memories that slip away from the person originally possessing them. People can be recognized for the valuable roles they have played in the past, or be supported in occupying or maintaining other social roles in the present. Their

social networks can engage in dialogical processes aiming to secure, as much as possible, the acknowledgment of who they used to be and who they are now, and can strive to help them organize their lives correspondingly.

Naturally, this will remain an imperfect and incomplete process. This imperfection and eroding cohesion of identity is surely one of the losses that cognitively impaired people and their social surroundings will have to deal with. But perceiving identity in a wider sense than the strictly individual cognitive perspective enables us to see that, though some fundamental capacities underlying the personhood sadly disintegrate in the process of Alzheimer's, other identity-constituting elements remain intact, such as the embodied, affective or social dimensions of identity. If we view identity as a social practice, these elements can provide enough basis to grant people suffering from Alzheimer's disease a continuing narrative identity.

Yet, claiming that people with Alzheimer's disease can still qualify as human persons or selves does not automatically mean that they are capable of self-*realization* as well, of course. It is deeply problematic and may even be perceived as presumptuous to describe the lives of older people surrendered to progressive mental deterioration in terms of moral self-development or the optimization of moral agency. After all, doesn't applying the language of self-realization in this case negate the life-reality of people who suffer from Alzheimer's disease, as well as the experience of their loved ones who have to watch them "fade away", as it were, progressively loosing grip on life and on everything that used to constitute their identity? I do not deny these problems. Still I wish to contend that it would be wrong and unjust to use them as legitimization to automatically exclude people with Alzheimer's disease (or other cognitive disabilities) from the realms of self-realization completely. The following two reflections elaborate on my reasons for this contention:

- First of all, the narrative conception of identity as a social practice suggests that our self-realization does not only rely on our first-person ability to uphold an identity or our third-person ability to reflect on who we are. Others can assist us in upholding our identities and help us strive for what is important for us from their second-person narrative engagement with who we are and have been throughout our lives. Importantly, the view of Atkins (2008) (see §5.3.3) has taught us that an interaction between first-, second- and third-person perspectives is characteristic of *everyone's* identity. For people whose first- or third-person perspective is weaker, the balance of the narrative identity-work underlying the striving for self-realization could be covered to some extent by a larger contribution from the second-person perspective.

  People with Alzheimer's disease have a lifelong history of relationships and commitments that have made them who they are. They often have a his-

tory of moral self-development which we can draw on to decide the best direction in which to further their chances to lead a good life with and for others. It takes great creativity and engagement from family, friends and caregivers to figure out which purposes or aspirations are valuable for patients of Alzheimer's. But if we take the time and effort to involve ourselves in their life narratives, we will probably be able to learn a lot about who the person is, and what choices, roles and activities would be most consistent with who they are. Further, we could help them practice these roles and activities, adapting our strategy through trial and error if it turns out that the chosen road is not advancing people's experienced quality of life. This implies that there are still possibilities to continue a lifelong process of self-realization and exercise moral agency even in conditions where people suffer from mental or cognitive disabilities. In fact, I think this is precisely what many family-members, friends and caregivers try to do in practice, in order to include their loved one in the shared practice of striving for a good life as long as possible.

- Second, it is important to reflect on the four conditions of moral agency that I have discussed before (identification, orientation, recognition and participation) in light of the objection that mental/cognitive deterioration automatically diminishes the chances for self-realization. It appears to me, namely, that there is much to be improved when it comes to enhancing the social recognition and chances for full participation for people with Alzheimer's disease or other age-related vulnerabilities in contemporary late modern societies. Anecdotal evidence from my own experience and the stories I have heard from caregivers suggests that more often than not, people with Alzheimer's disease are prematurely denied moral agency, for instance, by being treated like children or not being spoken to or consulted directly about their wishes and aspirations. Also, the cases in which we see people with Alzheimer's disease participating in valued social roles in "normal" social life are worryingly scarce. Investing in securing valued social roles for these people (or even creating new valued roles for them) would greatly enhance their opportunity to exercise moral agency, even if they are increasingly dependent on the support of others for their identification and orientation in the social practice of upholding a moral identity. I suspect that, with sufficient time and effort, with an ethical commitment to honor and preserve the uniqueness and diversity of people's life narratives, and with some creative out-of-the-box thinking aimed at enabling a more inclusive society in which everyone can fully participate according to their own aspirations and capacities, there would be many *more* possibilities for people with (cognitive or other) impairments to realize moral agency than is usually assumed. This should at least nuance the claim of the mental/cognitive

ability objection that as soon as mental deterioration sets in, self-realization sadly becomes a closed book.

9.5 Unanswered questions

As any scientific and philosophical study, this study too leaves many important questions unanswered. I will summarize some unanswered questions below that, in my view, would be valuable research domains for future investigators:

- Although the current study provides plausible philosophical underpinnings for the claim that the suggested reframed self-realization discourse might serve as a valuable resource for narratives of becoming about aging and later life, the question of *how* such counter narratives can be effectively created still remains open. This calls for interdisciplinary, explorative empirical work tracking down the characteristics of good practices and exemplars of moral agency that contribute to challenging existing dominant cultural narratives.
- While the primacy of the moral agent is defended with full conviction on a theoretical level, the actual voice of aging/older moral agents is missing in this study. Given the complexity of the philosophical argument I was unable to include their perspective in the study, with the exception of some anecdotal illustrations from my own experience with older people. Nevertheless, I strongly feel that the project of this study remains unfinished as long as it has not been brought into much closer connection with the living narratives of older people striving for a good life, with and for others, according to their deepest aspirations and best capacities, as full participating members of a society/community. This calls for narrative research connecting the individual life narratives of aging individuals to my theoretical/philosophical argument. Interesting questions to pursue would be, for instance: How do older people experience existing dominant cultural narratives about aging in practice? Which virtues and values do older people cherish and strive for? How does their autonomy take shape in practice? How have they searched for authenticity in their lives? How do they deal with existential vulnerability? Which obstacles and dilemmas confront them in their search for a good life? These and other questions deserve more attention, from age scholars and narrative ethicists alike.
- I have argued above that remedying the troubles identified with existing cultural (master) narratives about later life through the creation of narratives of becoming requires that the multiplicity of existing aging discourses is sensitized to the vocabulary of the self-realization discourse. It would be a valuable direction for future research in a more practical or applied setting

to develop and test concrete interventions based on such vocabulary in the context of elderly care or specific domains of policy aimed at older people, for instance. One could think of interventions using artistic means to make care professionals and managers aware of the potentials for growth and flourishing among their elderly population, or projects raising awareness in organizations of the underused potentials and experiences of their older employees.

- On a more theoretical level, more research is called for on the relations between individual, cultural and societal/structural factors that impact people's striving for moral agency or self-realization. The focus in the current study was mainly on the interaction between individual and cultural identity-constituting factors. The impact of societal and structural factors has been indicated in chapter 2, but has further remained in the background during the main argument of the study. It would be important to devote more time and thought to how societal and structural arrangements influence the process of moral agency-development as conceptualized in this study, both on the meso-level of organizations and institutions, and on the macro-level of politics and economy.

- The focus of this study on social recognition and participation in a society/ community as crucial conditions for moral agency suggests a certain societal ideal, that has remained largely untheorized in this study and thus deserves further exploration in future research. I would suggest that theoretical and practical perspectives focusing on the need to realize an *inclusive society* can be a valuable road to explore in this regard, both in theoretical and practical or applied research projects (compare for instance, my reference to social role valorization theory in §3.2.3). The ideal of an inclusive society pleads for equal participation opportunities for all people regardless of their social, cultural or ethnic background, their gender, their age, their health status, et cetera. In my perception, the ideal of an inclusive society could provide a valuable match with my reframed interpretation of self-realization and its constitutive concepts in this study. In particular, the advanced view of moral agency, the view of identity as a social and moral practice and the suggested interpretations of autonomy, authenticity and virtue seem to accord very well with the ideal of an inclusive society .

9.6 Final thoughts

I have come to the end of this study connecting the themes of self-realization (including moral identity/moral agency), aging and cultural narratives about later life. In a normative philosophical endeavor such as this, it seems less uncommon then in other realms of scientific investigation to include a personal

note; so let me end with a few personal reflections that pertain to my own, I now dare to admit, *ambivalent* relation to the concept of self-realization. Among philosophers, I have often heard the joke that we tend to choose as our professional focus precisely those themes that we struggle with in our personal lives. I must admit that I am no exception. The task to lead *a good life* (what do I consider good?), *with and for others* (which others do I reckon with? what if significant others die or disappear from my life? how can I mean something for others?), *according to my deepest aspirations and best capacities* (what are these in my case? and how can they be meaningful to myself and to others?) *as full participating member of a society/community* (to which community do I want to belong? and what if I am by nature hesitant to participate?) has often puzzled me deeply.

Yet the fact that I keep asking myself these questions, that I keep struggling with them in my personal life, is also proof of my authentic engagement with the moral ideal of what I have called self-realization in this study. Apparently, I have some important personal issues to digest relating to the theme of moral self-development, which I have been discussing from a comfortably detached, theoretical perspective in this study. Of course, it is precisely my struggle with these questions and with my own self-realization that has fueled my scholarly engagement with these matters in the first place.

I will not return to the arguments in favor of the self-realization discourse discussed in the more formal part of this study, for they have hopefully been made sufficiently clear above. I will end instead with two reflections regarding the meaning of self-realization that arise from my personal point of view:

- First, what is the use of striving for self-realization in light of the transiency of everything in human life? If you don't believe – as I do not – in an ultimate purpose for your life, in some gratification for earthly struggle to be acquired after one's death…. If life has made you aware – as happened to me - of the fact that who and what you love most is never here to stay "forever and always", then why take the trouble to keep striving for self-realization? To return to the gardening metaphor introduced in chapter 4 when clarifying what is at stake in self-realization: why put in all the effort to strive for a flourishing garden, if eventually everything that was blooming withers away and dies? Feinberg (1992) has made this point in a more sophisticated manner by pointing out that the whole undertaking of self-realization may seem intrinsically pointless and absurd, comparable to the ancient myth of Sisyphus, pushing his rock to the top of a hill ad infinitum only to see it fall down again on the other side.
Despite these thoughts, however, I have eventually come to the conclusion that for me there is value in the striving for self-realization after all. My own experience and confrontation with existential vulnerability has convinced

me that eventually, we human beings *cannot help* seeking meaning and fulfillment in our lives. We will always long for the joys of a flourishing garden, no matter how far away this goal may seem at moments of despair. To me, the value of the self-realization discourse and its focus on a continuous process of moral self-development is therefore that it sensitizes me to the importance and intrinsic worth of activities in the here and now, which are undertaken with dedication, attentiveness, care, enthusiasm and determination. Striving for self-realization against all odds enables me to keep feeling a vital involvement with life even at times when this seems most difficult.

- Second, one of the reasons for my personal ambivalence towards the theme of self-realization is that oftentimes, who I am, my "self" that I am supposed to develop according to the self-realization discourse, seems rather like a burden to me. I can be deeply dissatisfied with myself – with my insecurity, my laziness, my anxiety, my workaholic tendency, et cetera – and I am quite sure I am not the only one. But what my struggle with the theme of self-realization in this study has taught me, an insight that has deeply contributed to my eventual appreciation of this discourse, is the indispensable need for a *loving acceptance* of who I am, with all my imperfections. Importantly, self-love and self-acceptance also imply struggling with the feeling that I have not chosen to be this particular person. Feinberg (1992), again, puts this into words in a way that resonates with my own feelings by stating that, "self-identity can be conceived as a kind of arranged marriage (I did not select the self that was to be me) that in a stable person ripens into true love, but in an unstable one sours into rancor and self-destruction" (p. 326). This self-love, the incomparable value of which I have come to appreciate through my involvement with the self-realization discourse, is not of the heroic kind advanced by Nietzsche, however, but of a rather more modest type. This self-love or loving self-acceptance is a virtue of realism regarding my own strengths and weaknesses, an attitude that couples an intention to make the best of myself in life with a certain mildness and forgiving attitude towards my faults and vices, and to the many moments at which I fail in my strivings. Without an attitude of loving self-acceptance, I feel like my striving for self-realization becomes an insurmountable burden. But *with* such an attitude, the task of "becoming who I am" seems less daunting and even – dare I say so? – attractive to pursue.