

Preface

What does it mean to lead a *good* life? This question has puzzled moral philosophers for centuries. As is characteristic for all fundamental philosophical questions, it will never be fully answered. But finding the ultimate answer is not what matters; the continued quest for the meaning of a good life is of value because of the richness of perspectives it can open. In turn, these perspectives may inspire a variety of practices that are conducive to what Ricoeur (1992) has defined as the ethical aim of human life: ‘a good life, with and for others, in just institutions’.

This phrase forms the heart of the mission statement of the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, The Netherlands, a small university that in its research program focuses on the humanization of society, in order to enable individuals to lead a meaningful, dignified life of optimal human flourishing. This book is the culmination of five years of PhD-research in this unique academic community, where I had the privilege of participating in the research group *Aging well*. This multi-disciplinary group was founded in 2008, and consists of philosophers, social scientists, historians and anthropologists. In its research program, this group aims to apply broad humanistic questions and thoughts about the good life to the context of aging. Contrasting dominant biomedical and sociological perspectives on aging, the members of this research group share an interest in the social-existential dimensions of aging (Baars, 2012a).

By narrowing down the question about the good life to the context of aging, we enter the field of humanistic and cultural gerontology. In recent decades, this field has been engaged in a vivid search to answer the question what it means to age well from different disciplinary perspectives, which has resulted in a mature and highly relevant (sub)field of the study of aging. Ever since the publication of the first handbook *What does it mean to grow old? Reflections from the humanities* by Cole and Gadow in 1986, humanistic and cultural gerontology offers much needed counterweight to the dominance of biomedical perspectives in the study of aging. The growing research interest in existential, moral and spiritual questions concerning aging, studied from a critical, context-sen-

sitive perspective, offers hopeful and interesting perspectives on the meaning of aging well in our days. It also calls attention to the importance of having cultural resources available to help older people experience their existence as meaningful and socially relevant.

Each society, each culture has its own range of resources – stories, images, ideas, artifacts – that individuals can draw on in their own search for a good life. However, each socio-cultural context also harbors a variety of forces that may impede the optimal realization of a good, meaningful existence. As Edmondson (2015) has argued, cultural meaning resources for old age are by no means self-evidently available in contemporary modern Western societies. This raises the urgent question how to shape inspiring narratives and images of a good old age. In this book, this question is addressed from a philosophical perspective, inspired by the rich discourse about self-realization, or realizing the best in you. Since, with some exceptions, the contribution of philosophy to the study of aging has remained relatively modest so far, this study hopes to be a valuable addition to the field of humanistic and cultural gerontology.

This book could not have been realized without the help of others. Although it is impossible to mention everyone who has, knowingly or unknowingly, contributed to the creation of this study, some people deserve special acknowledgement. First of all, I am thankful to my colleagues of the research group Aging well at the University for Humanistic Studies. In particular, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Joep Dohmen, for his unconditional and loyal support at both the intellectual and existential level, and to Jan Baars, for sharing his broad knowledge of philosophy and gerontology and encouraging me to boldly start writing about my ideas. Second, I am very grateful to the *European Network of Aging Studies*, who has granted my work the first prize for Best PhD-thesis in 2017, in the aftermath of which the editors of the Aging Studies Series at Transcript Verlag kindly agreed to publish my work as part of their series. The University of Graz, the University of Humanistic Studies and the Dutch foundation for protestant elderly care VPSB generously contributed funding to support this publication. Finally, my own personal process of self-realization would be impossible without my beloved friends and family, whom I would like to thank for their continuous loving support in good and bad times of my life.