

# Rethinking biographies, Respecting beginnings

Towards a Philosophy of Biographical Development  
that Balances Respect for Creative Self-Expression,  
Correction and Care.

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Who

What

How

**am I**

to do?

to interact

with others ?

# Lasting Questions & Time

Who am I?

What am I to do?

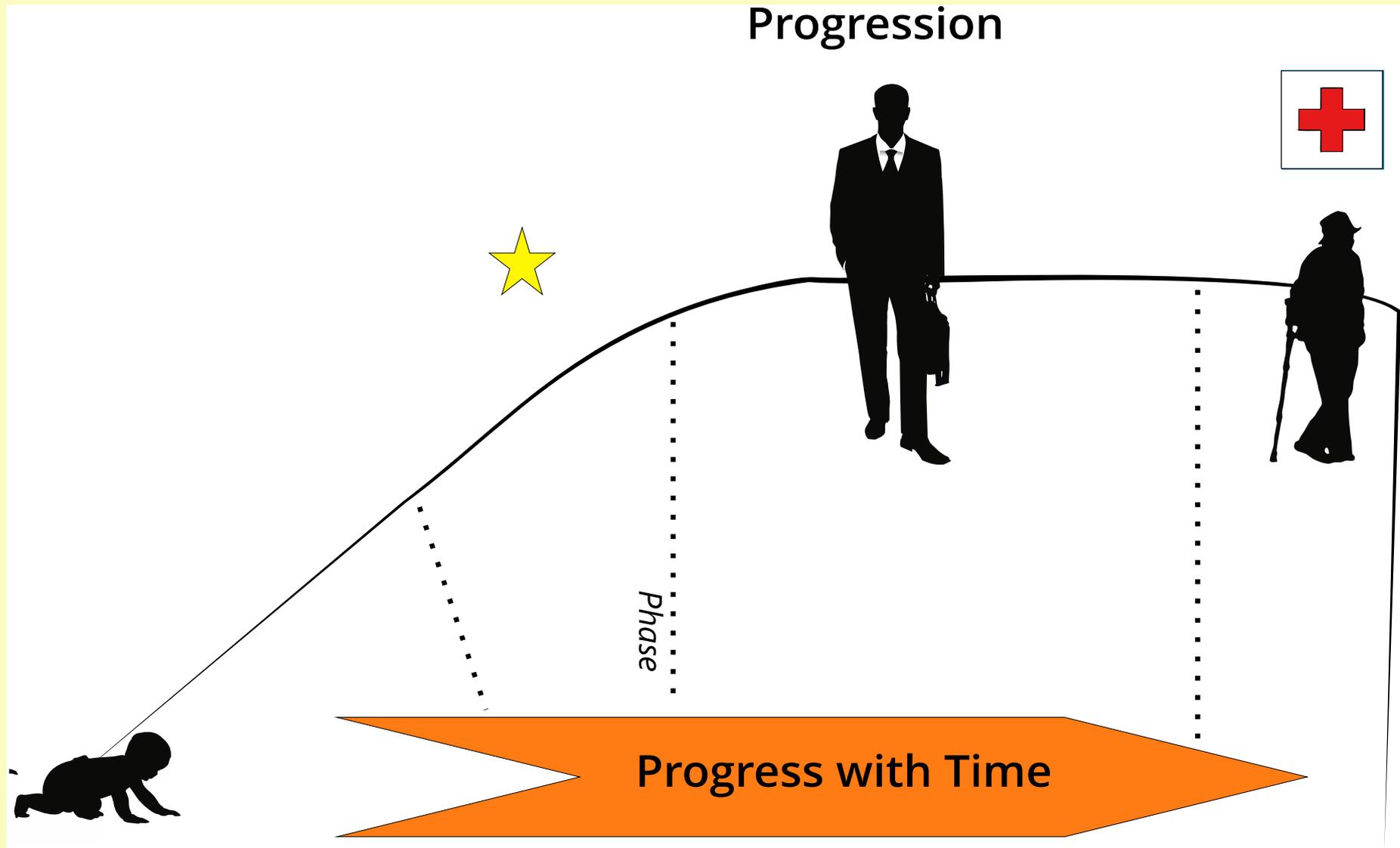
How am I to interact with others?

**Evolving, shifting answers over time**

**Temporal aspect, relating to personal  
biographies of agents**

**A justified view of agents at  
any point of their  
biographical development,  
throughout their lives.**

# A traditional, teleological picture



- Clearly delineated stages

- Clear progression of stages

# Questioning the Traditional Picture

- Delineated stages
    - Focus on the middle years
    - Childhood depreciated ↔ old age suspect
  - Succession, progress - more realistic, dynamic notions?!
  - Value of persons, of lived life in and of itself
  - Individuality
  - **Note:** Scheme has been applied to life courses of extremely different lengths
- (Traditional picture according to:  
A. Stables, 2008)

# Features and Problems

- **Hierarchy I:** The more experienced senior is above → in command of the needy junior, up until a depreciated old age sets in
- **Hierarchy II:** Unambiguous progress, personal growth over time; no admixtures of gains and losses, no dialectic.
- Little room for creative new beginnings (or breaks) → little room for **'special goods of childhood'** (cf. A. Gheaus, e.g. 2015)

## Features and Problems (2)

- Little room for creative **new beginnings**
- The evaluative measures for outcomes, of success are believed to be relatively stable, the socio-cultural framework is (to remain) unchanged.

# Assets → Challenge

Comparably undemanding scheme, providing orientation

- Who am I as an agent
- Who is the other? → Interaction
- Where should positive development lead us?
- Who is on the right track?

However, this certainty (→ stability)  
is treacherous

# (Novel) Challenge(s)

Not all states of being / projects of an agent are valuable (or viable).

- Agents, esp. when young or frail, are in need of support, including intervention and correction
- If we want to respect an agent's point of view equally, not discounting it on the basis the life stage (s)he is in...
- **How** are we to balance respect vs. (supportive) intervention? Which evaluative scale is to guide intervention?

# Overview

- Critique continued
- Why this is philosophically innovative: Why this reforms our self-understanding, of: actors, personal development, human(e) interaction
- A quandary of selfhood attendant to respect for developing persons from early on
- Some proposals from (European) Philosophy of Childhood and Feminist reconceptions of the self and autonomy
- Results and Questions

# Desiderata: Elements of a new approach

- New sensitivity for the agent as s/he is now, in this stage of her live
- Notion of autonomy and respect that admits involvement and corrections;
  - Relational autonomy
  - Critical, dialogical self-understanding
  - Acceptance of personal evolution (volatility) and vulnerability ↔ creativity, self assertion

# A Quandary: „Paradox of the Self“

(cf. R.Nogge, 2008)

- **Autonomy & Self-authorship:** A real element of the self is required to be authorised – i.e. sanctioned – by the self as an authentic part of itself
- How can this be, at very early, ‘primary’ stages, since the self must at time integrate elements that are clearly alien to itself, of foreign origin: it must be composed from external, foreign elements beyond itself

# Paradox Origins of the Self

- Where is 'the personal' – the instance to be addressed – at very early stages of a biography? — Does it exist?
- The answer 'no[ne]' has given rise to cruel denigrations and negations
- I suggest to build on primordial capacities and behaviours and trust in this human potential (*pace* R. Noggle)

# Reconsidering Autonomy

- The problem is not the recurrence to foreign influences → connectedness to others (and the non-human world)
- But the overriding of one's own perspective, the denial of self-authorship – of co-authorship of one's own biography
- Balance intervention and non- interference without clear external demarcators (age, health)
- How does sth. become part of ourselves? What is my very own domain, living my life inter-related with other persons?

# Feminist Themes

Impulses from Feminism for an alternative view

- A 'non-individualistic' self: Relational aspects and development of the self
  - Embeddedness in shared action, exchange/ dialogue, socio-cultural structure to nurture individual growth
- The idea(s) of Care
  - Specifically: Early care, care provided to the frail
  - More principally: Care as an alternative to a hermetically closed / guarded personal sphere, demarcated by rights

# Feminist Themes (2)

- Ideas of benevolent, autonomy-friendly, non-hierarchical correction
  - Specific others at critical moments need to tell you when something is going wrong; this support is needed.
  - Non-enimical forms of correction: Genuinely taking the part of the other, acting on her\* behalf, in an exchange sustained by 'Trust'.

(cf. C. Willet/ E.Anderson et al., 2015)

# Beyond Feminism: Counterbalance and Critique

- Care – how far can it guide us before turning into ‘maternalism’ (heteronomy)?
- How to conceptualise the balance between acceptance of the other and correction? - Novel ideas vs. safe-guardning
- How can such a perspective inform our actions?

# Pivotal Points from European Philosophy of Childhood

- Children as incipient persons
- A primordial form of caring is genuinely human and inherent in children from the start...

(cf. M. Betzler, 2011; H. Baumann/ B. Bleisch, 2014)

- Observation: You can attach yourself to elements of the outside world and express yourself in your interaction with this world, even without a fully formed, considering reflexive self → Role of emotions, attempts at activities
- Structures the time you live through in a meaningful way → affords you a sense of self: Building of personal projects
- Parents are **enabling 'gate-keepers'**, facilitating and evaluating projects – but dialogically, starting from this primordial capacity.

# Assets and Advantages of an Alternative Approach

## Let's see...

- A gradual approach to authentic personal development, valuing momentary, intermediary stages
- A dialogical model, allowing for innovation and criticism → change

## Come in...

- All persons involved may/ need to learn: change in seniors and juniors
- A society appreciating/ coping with change, accepting of a wider range of people

# Research & Reflection required

- 'Come in' & 'Let's see'
- How to act this out?
- How to balance correction and acceptance?

# Concluding Questions

# Results (1)

- Abandoning a linear, teleological and hierarchical view of an agent's biographical development broadens the perspective
  - Inclusive of a wider range of people
  - Involves more facts/facets of life (biological, social)
- Accommodating social, environmental and personal change in philosophical views of life becomes easier → Responding to the social reality of change

# Results (2)

- More perplexities / complexities raised
  - How to narrate a life story, a success story  
↔ evaluative measures are problematic
  - An autonomy-related notion of respect that allows for foreign involvement, interference: critique and correction
  - Philosophical issues that remain to be addressed



# Why pursue these Lines of Thought?

The traditional view underestimates and unjustly declassifies (i.e. denigrates) 'atypical' agents.

- A participatory society needs to accommodate a greater diversity of people with their life courses and views → evaluative measures beyond hierarchy
- The reality of social changes and the need for change urges us to cherish creativity of beginnings/ of beginners, whereas
- The false certainties of teleological accounts are lost, anyhow, in our own time.

**Thank you**  
for your thoughtful  
**attention !**