

Rethinking moral duties towards the elderly: the distinction between social and biological time (A. Errasti, N. Bilbeny, and A. Gonzalez)

The debate about demographic change and the need to face ageing as a political issue displays an initial theoretical inquiry: what is so special about senior citizens –taken as a social category– that makes them the subjects of morality? Most societies in humankind history have expressed a moral concern towards their elderly, considering their care as a moral duty. Is this just a matter of biological change strictly dependent on time? Or is it the result of some sort of intuitively-shared moral values? Ander Errasti (PhD student of Ethics and Political Philosophy at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra), under the supervision of Dr. Agustin Gonzalez and Dr. Norbert Bilbeny (Universitat de Barcelona), is currently working on this question. The article will be produced within the framework of the SforAGE project for healthy and active ageing. The three researchers working on the paper are members of GISME: a group of junior and senior researchers from different academic disciplines who are working to correlate scientific progress and social needs.

Assuming the current ongoing socio-political changes (i.e. risk society, liquid modernity, post-Westphalian nation-state order, etc.) and the consequent crisis, the concept of elderly itself is being subjected to reconsideration. The paper will start by introducing the main conceptions of time in order to show their impact on the variety of contemporary socio-cultural categories: workers, women, migrants, teenagers, etc. The aim will be to identify the pillars used by academia to support the category of ‘the elder.’ In order to do so, it will place emphasis on three determinant aspects: technological advances, the cultural conception of work, and the distinction between social and biological time. The paper will then introduce a moral conception of time, understood as inter-generational justice, as a fundamental principle in a fair society. The article, however, will not only consider inter-generational justice as a moral duty towards the upcoming potential citizens, but also – and especially – towards those citizens who, because of their biological time, are displaced to the sidelines of society. The last part of the paper will identify the socio-political implications of ageing and a renewed moral conception of biological time. It will argue that ageing is a social construct that confuses the biological and the social notions of time. The problem is not how societies consider the elderly – social notion of time – but how the biological age of individuals hinders their attainment of a high-quality life. Thus, societies ought to supply the means by which to achieve a high-quality life for its elderly citizens, taking into account, too, the negative implications associated with biological age. The paper concludes that the moral duty of welfare states, then, is not to care

for senior citizens as a social consideration, but rather owing to biological factors that have a negative effect on the quality of their lives.