

Age and Self-Knowledge

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Abstract

This paper proposes an analysis of some possible implications of aging focusing the effects that aging may have on one's self-knowledge. The goal of the paper is in fact to connect research on aging with different accounts of self-knowledge and put forward the following hypothesis: (i) in the late stages of our lives we adopt a different way of looking at ourselves, and (ii) there are three main factors likely causing this change: cognitive problems (episodic memory impairment), motivational factors (coherence-seeking), and loss of a forward-looking way of structuring our lives. In addition, (iii) all that makes confabulation a potentially serious problem during the aging process. Though not all aging adults go through these changes, I contend that the possibility of this shift in self-knowledge needs to be analyzed further.

Keywords: Aging, Self-knowledge, Confabulation, Agency, Narrative.

1. Introduction

Aging people often have to face health issues and challenging, negative emotions, such as the fear of death.¹ In this paper, I will not be concerned with death or health, though. I will also set aside any concern about practical issues linked to aging, such as where to find appropriate care or retirement plans. In contrast, here I plan to focus on the fact that old age potentially brings a different type of challenge: a changing *and* diminishing self-knowledge. This change is not constitutive of aging and is not a necessary feature of aging. In contrast, this paper puts forward the hypothesis that, given what aging often entails, loss of self-knowledge could be an outcome of aging. To be sure, mine is not a full empirical investigation on aging: what I offer is a claim that connects features of aging with various theories of self-knowledge. As a result, my view is compatible with the possibility that aging is *not* accompanied by a changing and diminishing self-knowledge.² But it is also possible—given the causes I will allude to below—that aging could

¹ Outside the field of bioethics, little attention has been devoted to understanding the philosophical implications of aging (see Améry 1994; de Beauvoir 1996; Baars 2012).

² Also, nothing I say below suggests that there is something intrinsically pathological about aging or that old people are in any way less valuable or less important than younger folks.

cause those changes. Hence, I conclude we won't be able to understand aging unless we investigate those potential challenges.

The structure of the paper: I first look at Mitova's recent, valuable attempt to make sense of an important change we usually experience in the last stages of our life. I criticize it and then start building up my argument. By looking at the literature on self-knowledge, I explain that we currently have two main ways to explain self-knowledge: the descriptive approach and the mindshaping-constitutive approach. I see these two approaches as compatible rather than mutually exclusive. I then show that, as we age, we are potentially at risk of gradually losing the ability to know ourselves through a process of mindshaping. That means we rely on a more descriptive way of interpreting our minds. This change also likely affects our personal identity. This, in turn, has important consequences for the relation between self-knowledge and confabulation.

2. Age and Agency?

The philosophy of aging is hardly mainstream. However, in an interesting and thought-provoking paper, Veli Mitova (2012) tries to explain what is so special about aging. She argues that aging people are forced to confront a loss of agency. Her argument is that older adults experience the sense that time is running out for them, and that diminishes "*their capacity to reinvent themselves*" (Mitova 2012: 1). This capacity, she argues, is constitutive of agency, so aging "attenuates agency".

Let's briefly consider her view. The phenomenology of being 'old' and the experience of aging bring with them something that is rarely experienced by younger people: the feeling that time is running out. There is strong empirical evidence that supports this claim, and Mitova rightly makes use of that. This body of evidence is part of the well-known "socioemotional selectivity theory", a view that enjoys a lot of support in current gerontology. This view predicts that there is a motivational shift when time is perceived as more limited. Perceived-time is of course deeply subjective and is measured using various methods that all seem to point out that, as we grow older, we feel that our life-prospective is getting shorter (Carstensen 2006; Calabresi and Cohen 1968; Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961).

This time-prospective-shift has an effect on our future decisions and goals. In particular, Mitova links reduced-time prospective to a diminishing agency through the idea of "self-reauthorship". Mitova points out that self-reauthorship is the ability to shape your character and dispositions in accordance of your best judgments. If I believe I ought to be more generous, I can—as long as I have time to do so—re-shape my character trying to become a better person. However, Mitova maintains that running out of time reduces my chances to get better, to re-shape myself, to improve my character and so on. Importantly, on her view, "reinventing ourselves" is part of our "self-reauthorship". From that, she concludes that older adults' ability to reinvent and reshape themselves is limited. The loss of agency is the result of this limitation in self-reshaping.

I see one main problem with this argument: it is unclear that there is any obvious connection between *feeling* your time is almost up and your *inability* to reinvent oneself. Here is an example: take Lina, she is 65 year old and, as many aging adults do too, she feels that she is running out of time and that her options are diminishing. Fortunately, she is healthy and in shape and, it turns out that she will end up living till she's 85 years old. That means she has 20 years to re-invent

herself and exercise her agency. Granted: over those 20 years she will *feel* that her sense of agency is decreasing and her ability to reinvent herself is limited. But *de facto* this is *not* the case: she can still reinvent herself, even if she does not know or feel that she has that option. In other words, given that, *per hypothesis*, she has many years in front of her, she is still *capable* of self-change, she has all the time in the world to change: she is a full functioning agent! Since Mitova's point is that the *capacity* for self-reauthorship is constitutive of agency, then—contrary to what Mitova concludes—I could be a full agent even if I perceive my time-horizon as limited. The problem is that Mitova's conclusion overlooks the difference between what my future is and my *feelings* about my future. Feeling I am out of options is not the same as *really* being out of options. And one's capacity to re-invent oneself diminishes in the latter case, but not necessarily in the former, as the case of Lina shows. That means that it is not true that aging attenuates agency *because* it brings with itself a perceived limited time-horizon. It is true that aging creates the *perception* of a limited time-horizon and it may be true that often aging casts a shadow on people's *agency*. But the temporal correlation between these two events should not fool us into hastily thinking that there is an obvious causal connection. What we need to do is to look for ways in which shorter time-prospective may influence us independently of whether this subjective feeling is *correctly* tracking the fact that we have only a few years left. I plan to do that below.

3. Self-Knowledge

In *De Senectute*, Cicero argues that the elders are often savvier and more able than younger folks, as they possess knowledge not just about the world but also, presumably, about themselves. In contrast, the goal of this paper is to show that aging potentially brings a decrease in self-knowledge. This may seem like a very surprising statement: as Cicero suggests, don't we know ourselves better as we grow older? To be sure, I am not full on opposing Cicero's view here that aging may bring wisdom and understanding. Like Cicero, I am focusing on some *potential* and distinctive aspects of aging: I look at what aging *could* be, zeroing in on the underlying causes that could make aging a challenging time for self-knowledge.

Let me first clarify what I mean by 'self-knowledge'. Self-knowledge is the ability to correctly figure out our own thoughts, desires, ambitions, beliefs, emotions and so on. Self-knowledge is thus at least one of the ways in which we get to "know ourselves" and what goes on in our minds. To be sure, self-discovery—namely understanding one's 'true self'—is a much more complex process than what I mean here by 'self-knowledge'. Contrary to the complex endeavor of understanding who we truly are, self-knowledge seems—as Carruthers (2011: xi) puts it—"easy to come by". This is because our thoughts and the content our minds seem to be "transparently available to us". Indeed, it seems we, as subjects, have a form special access to the different components of our complex mental lives in a way that is qualitatively different from the access we have to the minds of others. It is often hard for us to know what other people think, want or feel, but when it comes to our own mental states, we enjoy a sense of security and reliability: we *seem* to know what is going on inside us. Therefore, it sounds odd to claim, as I will in this paper, that our ability to tap into our own thoughts can diminish with age. Before defending this surprising claim, however, we need to figure out the different ways self-knowledge may work. How do we understand our mental states and dispositions? There are three main views concerning self-knowledge

and I will briefly explain them here. These three views fit within two distinct categories: descriptive and constitutive self-knowledge.

3.1 Descriptive Self-Knowledge

Direct Access View. On this view, self-knowledge consists of *directing* accessing the content of your mind. This view dates back to at least Descartes' *Meditations* where he argued that we have a privileged access to our minds because we can directly know what we think, feel or desire. This view seems to be phenomenological plausible: if I want to know what I am thinking, I can 'look inside' and 'see' my thoughts in a way that is not totally dissimilar from the way I can perceive objects around me. And I do not have to infer what I feel based on evidence: I simply direct my attention inward and gaze inside my mind and what I see is *immediately* transparent to me. And this immediacy brings reliability and a sense of certainty in my self-assessments: I can rarely be wrong about the conscious thoughts, emotions and desires I have.

In contrast, I don't have direct access to other people's mental states so I have to rely on external cues to tap into their minds. The access I have there is not direct but interpretative; it is also not immediate but it involves multiple inferential steps. Importantly, the evidence I gather is part of my knowledge and understanding of others' minds: it is the justification for why I believe that they think/what/ feel this or that. Because the object of my assessment is removed from me, there is always the possibility I could be mistaken about it. And so, on this view, knowledge of others' minds is uncertain in a way self-knowledge is not.³

Indirect Access View. Contrary to the direct-access view, a different approach has been proposed according to which self-knowledge is the result of an *interpretative effort*. We have direct access only to few aspects of our mind and for the rest we mainly infer our thoughts, complex emotions, hopes and so on through an interpretative process. That means that we access our minds mostly indirectly, using the same kind of mechanism we use to tap into others' thoughts and feelings. More specifically, we use law-like generalizations that tell us how mental state usually function and we use those to infer not only how others see the world but also the content of our own thoughts, desires and so on. We have, that is, a theory of how minds work and we apply it to both others and ourselves (Gopnik & Wellman 1992; Carruthers 2011). Therefore, on this view we do not necessarily enjoy any privileged access toward many of our mental states. The reason why we seem to understand ourselves better than we understand others, is that we have more information about our own behavior and our surrounding environment than we have for other people. But we do not enjoy any epistemological privilege vis-à-vis our minds.

One important piece of evidence for this view is that agents' introspective abilities are not as reliable as we thought: we often misattribute mental states to ourselves, in the sense that we both fail to see the real psychological causes behind our actions and thoughts and we attribute to ourselves mental states we do not have (Carruthers 2011; Lawlor 2003; Scaife 2014). This misattribution process is called *confabulation*: as we look inward, we often come to form a misconstrued picture of our minds. And if this is so, then the claim that we mostly have direct

³ Simulation theorists such as Goldman (2006) argue that we understand others' minds by trying to put ourselves in their shoes.

and epistemically privileged self-knowledge is in significant peril (Carruthers 2011).

3.2 Constitutive Self-Knowledge

The Shaping View. The views of self-knowledge mentioned above both share the idea that accessing our minds is a matter of *describing* them. That means that first personal claims (e.g. I want to become a lawyer) are description aimed at giving a correct picture of our current mental states. A different approach has been recently proposed that aims at showing that self-assessments are not there to actually describe; in contrast, their primary function is to shape our future actions and claims to conform to the rational patterns associated with mental states concepts. More concretely, if I really *want* to become a lawyer there are things I will be prepared to do and say that are consistent with that desire. On this view, then, first-personal interpretations have mostly a *regulative social* function, namely to make ourselves predictable to others by shaping our behavior to make it consistent with our self-attributions of mental states. Therefore, self-interpretations aim at shaping our minds to conform to social-rational norms about what it means to be, e.g., a believer: someone responsive to the evidence she has and committed to acting accordingly. As Zawidzki points out,

human social cognition is more about mindshaping than mindreading. We succeed in our social endeavors [...] because we are good at shaping each other to think and act in predictable ways in shared contexts. [...] self-interpretation is *not*, primarily, in the business of discovering truths about independently constituted mental states. Rather, it helps *constitute* the mental states of self-attributors by shaping them to fulfill self-attributions (Zawidzki 2017: 479).

Self-attributions are thus akin to “self-fulfilling prophecies”, in the sense that they aim at “regulating” our behavior to match our interpretation of ourselves (McGeer 1996, 2007).

The evidence for this view comes from the importance of pedagogical tools that shape us into conforming on the social expectations connected to these concepts. These expectations and constraints allow us to coordinate successfully and in a unique way by forcing the new members of the community to live up to normative standards. That is, we are taught to rationally react to the environment and act accordingly. We are also taught that concepts such as ‘belief’, ‘wish’, ‘fear’ and so on, are attached to rational commitments. To illustrate, an agent can’t say that she *wishes* that we could reduce plastic consumption if she also strongly opposes plastic bag taxes or any reduction in the use of plastic straws. That means that *what she wishes* rationally constrains the kinds of moves she can make. Indeed, saying *I wish* is to make a normative move within a *social space* that requires that I shape my future dispositions and actions to match my words (Brandom 1994). Similarly:

To interpret oneself as believing that *p*, on this view, is *not* to entertain an evidence-based description of facts about oneself, like behavioral dispositions or internally tokened mental states. Rather, its role is to turn oneself into the kind of person that conforms to the socially instituted constraints on believing that *p*, the kind of person who rejects claims inconsistent with *p*, endorses claims implied by *p*, and regulates her behavior in the light of *p*. Such self-regulation through self-interpretation

is possible because self-interpretations are commitment devices that change both internal and external incentives: by undertaking commitment to *p*, one opens oneself up to sanction, both internal/emotional and social/punitive, for failing to play the role of a believer-that-*p* (Zawidzki 2017: 487).

Zawidzki (2021) points out that mental state concepts (e.g. belief) are “socio-cognitive tools” that make use into social-cognitive agents able to coordinate with others. Instead of being descriptive tools, mental concepts are ways to impose certain types of reactions on us and create expectations in others that we will conform to those norms. The fact that we are players in this normative game also allows us to become more predictable and more transparent to others, facilitating coordination and cooperation (Zawidzki 2021): people will expect that we are by and large rational, that we have the mental states that it is rational for us to have given the circumstances. They expect us to make decisions that square with those mental states. As players in that game, we shape one another every time one of us does not live up to those expectations. At the same time, we also shape ourselves to better coordinate with the other members of our community of rational agents.

An important upshot of all this—which will be relevant below—is that when confronted with typical cases of confabulation those who defend the Shaping view will say that what we *generally* call confabulations are not necessarily mis-attributions of mental states. This is because on their view attributions of mental states are not primarily descriptions: their function is to shape our future behavior, align with past behavior and be responsive to the current circumstances. As Strijbos and De Bruin (2015: 305) argue: “confabulation might also be cast as in part being a ‘forward-looking’ phenomenon: we can then be said to confabulate when, for example, we attribute a judgment that *p* to ourselves, but are unable to self-regulate ourselves such that our future behavior aligns with this judgment, i.e., that we acquire the dispositional state of believing that *p*.” That is, whether or not something counts as a case of real confabulation (and thus failure to correctly depict one’s mental states) depends also on one’s future behavior and whether it aligns with the allegedly expressed mental state.

4. Age and Self-Knowledge

What is the relation among these three ways of understanding and framing self-knowledge? I don’t have the time and space to assess them here, but I will embrace an *ecumenical approach*. As mentioned above, both the Direct and Indirect access view put forward a descriptive account of self-knowledge: self-knowledge is mostly self-discovery. The Shaping view, in contrast, has a constructivist/constitutivist conception of self-knowledge: self-knowledge is the process of shaping our minds. Here I will assume that both these approaches are correct as far as they go, in the sense that it is possible that part of our self-knowledge is really self-discovery and part is self-shaping. At times, when we make self-attributions (e.g., I believe that...) we are trying to describe the current status of our minds. At other times, self-attributions are meant to *construct* our minds. In fact, I will suggest that they are somewhat complementary, in the sense that successfully interpreting our minds requires that this interpretation has a constitutive function too. It is important to notice that this ecumenical approach, as I called it, is very much in line

with the spirit of the view of self-knowledge mentioned above. For instance, Caruthers (2011) admits that he is in fact proposing a hybrid view: on his view, self-knowledge is both interpretative and direct (when we introspect emotions and sensations). Similarly, Zawidzki explicitly says that oftentimes self-knowledge is interpretative and descriptive, even though he thinks mind-shaping is primary. Accordingly, whereas an adult and functional human being possesses and adopts both these forms of self-knowledge, I will argue that aging could progressively erode self-knowledge *in general*. This argument, however, will require me to take a detour, explaining what is going on in the process we call ‘aging’ while also referring to empirical research on this issue.

4.1 Progressively Leaving the Normative—Mindshaping—Game

The main hypothesis put forward in this section is: it is possible that, as we age, we progressively leave the normative-shaping-game at the center of the Shaping view of self-knowledge. This hypothesis stems from the observation that three possible components of aging may play into that: shortening time *prospective*, diminishing cognitive abilities (in particular, episodic memory) and reduced social-cooperative roles.

A Decreasing Time-Prospective. As mentioned above there is now substantial evidence that older adults feel that their time is limited (Carstensen 2006). I believe that a decreasing time-prospective limits engagement in the normative game that builds self-knowledge. That is, if self-knowledge is a normative, partly forward-looking enterprise, then whether or not the description “I believe...” is correct depends on what I will be doing in the future to play the role of the, e.g., believer. My ability to be a believer is thus limited if my moves are in fact limited in time as time-limitations may influence my ability to *be* a believer now. If I am at least in part defined by the future, the fact that my shots are limited may undermine my ability to have mental states *now*. Importantly, if I *feel* my options are too restricted, then I will probably stay clear of a form of looking at myself that is fundamentally forward-looking and that requires being fully committed to shape my actions to line up with my self-attributions. That is, if I feel time is closing on me, I may retreat from the very normative-game that is constitutive of *self-knowledge as shaping*. And since the future becomes less defining for me, I may be less open to put energy and effort in trying to be predictable and coordinate with others. If I think I have few remaining moves, that is, I will probably rely less and less on that self-constructing regulative process. Though I do not have direct evidence for this, the “socioemotional selectivity theory” provide *some* support for my hypothesis:

[...] individuals select goals in accordance with their perceptions of the future as being limited or open-ended [...]. When time is perceived as expansive, goals aimed at optimizing the future are prioritized. Such goals often pertain to the acquisition of knowledge or to seeking contacts that could be useful in the more distant future. This also includes goals related to the task of finding out about one’s role in the society (e.g., receiving social acceptance), and to vocational or career interests (e.g., become financially independent). In contrast, when time is perceived as limited, emotionally meaningful goals become relatively more important because they are typically associated with achieving short-term benefits (Lang & Carstensen 2002:125-26).

This suggests that older adults may shift their interests and motivation giving up on many of their “future-oriented goals” and focusing more on the present, emotionally important aspects of their lives. This provides at least circumstantial evidence that limited time prospective makes us focus on short-term achievable goals. Thus, it is likely that the way we look at ourselves is also influenced by how much time we think we have left, as argued above. Accordingly, one of the motivational shifts of aging is that the shaping-normative game becomes less and less important as aging progresses: the present (and the past), not the future is what defines me.

Alterations in Cognitive Abilities. There is evidence that older adults have problems with episodic memory. On a popular view, that explains why they have troubles remembering details of the past and imagining the future because both use episodic memory (Schacter and Addis 2007). Episodic memory allows us to recollect the *details* of past experiences and events (Tulving 2002, Amer et al. 2022): “several studies have shown that healthy older adults provide fewer episodic details than young adults both when they remember the past and imagine the future” (Schacter & Madore 2016: 246-7).

This may affect older adults’ ability to imagine future possible self-s that are significantly different from their current self. As Mitova rightly pointed out, it is hard to re-shape yourself if you can’t make long-term plans. I think this is especially true when making long-term plans means requires imagining what it will take to enact those plans. To illustrate: if I express the intention (or wish) to adopt a healthier life style (e.g. stop working as hard, enjoying time with my friends), I should be able to imagine a future self—different from the current self—that will be doing the things that a healthy life style requires. But if I can’t really figure out the details of this plan, if I can’t imagine what it will really take to modify some aspects of my life, it is hard to make plans about it. If so then cognitive limitations may alter my ability to commit myself to future behavior. Believing, wishing or desiring new things may become increasingly difficult as it requires being willing to shape one’s future self in ways that are—especially for the older adult—hard to picture. There is in fact extensive evidence that older adults perceive their future self as in line with their *current* self, in the sense that they are often more likely to perceive the present as the same as the future than are younger folks are. Similarly, Carstensen (2006) points out that many older folks live in an “extended present”. And this is a positive thing: self-continuity is an asset of aging because self-continuity is associated with beneficial behavior choices and patterns (Roberts et al. 2006). However, this may also hinder their ability to fully engage in a dynamic process that requires the ability to envision changes and future possibilities.

Reduced Social-Cooperative Roles. Löckenhoff and Rutt suggest that a diminished ability to engage in forward thinking affects social roles:

personality change is driven by people’s investment in new social roles [...] and that the frequency with which people take on new roles declines with age. Consistent with this notion [...] openness to experience, a personality trait associated with seeking out novel ideas, contexts, and activities shows steady decrements with age [...], further reducing the likelihood of encountering new roles and environments (Löckenhoff & Rutt 2017: 403).

A defining feature of the normative game I mentioned above is the willingness to be open to change, to take up new roles, to shape and be shaped. The Shaping

view of self-knowledge gets its traction from the fact that cooperation is best achieved if we all try to conform to social-normative standards of rational behavior (Zawidzki 2013; 2019). As they develop, children are trained to take up new roles and conform to them: they coordinate with others by becoming more predictable. Older adults seem to be at the other end of the spectrum: they take up less and less new social roles and it is likely that their function as cooperative agents will slowly fade away. Let me be clear, though: many older adults are very active and willing to contribute to society in many ways and take up numerous social roles (Vidovičová 2018). My claim here is simply that *in so far as* an older adult is less and less willing to cooperate, the more likely it is that she will be pushed out of the social-normative game that is key to self-knowledge *qua* mindshaping. I am not making a sociological point about older adults here: mine is a speculative psychological claim about what might happen if certain conditions are met.

5. The Narrative Self and the Rise of Confabulation

In the previous section I suggested that, as we age, we might end up progressively leaving the normative-mindshaping-game. At that point, it is likely that our self-knowledge is less about *shaping/being shaped* and more about *interpreting* our thoughts based on the behavior cues we have (in line with the Indirect access view). The hypothesis is that, as we grow older, self-interpretation might be more about *describing* our minds rather than *designing* them. In this section, I will argue that this may affect our personal identity. I will also argue that this shift may hinder our *overall* self-knowledge and first-person authority.

The topic of personal identity/ self is very complex and it is not my intention to develop an account of personal identity or the self here. For those following Locke (1698), self-continuity or “continuity of consciousness” is the key mark of personal identity. Interesting results, however, indicate that younger adults see their future self as markedly different from their present self. It is likely that young adults see their identity *in fieri*, a work in progress partly shaped by interactions with others. Because more open to change, younger people probably conceive their identity as not fully dependent on continuity of character and same dispositions. My suggestion then is that younger people’s identity is partly determined by the cooperative role they have in the normative game I was alluding to before. That is, they embrace a forward-looking, dynamic approach to their own self.

In contrast, older adults—as they might be gradually retreating from this normative space—may shift their attention to a *narrative conception of the self*. A narrative self develops during childhood and progresses during adulthood. Some philosophers have argued that developing a sense of self requires building a seemingly coherent narrative of the main aspects of our lives. Thus, being a self means “understanding one’s life as a narrative and enacting the narrative one sees as one’s life” (Schechman 2011: 395, but cf. Strawson 2004: 430). Indeed, narratives are key to personal identity and developing coherent narrative is a skill that develops overtime (Reese et al. 2011).

More importantly for us, the *self as narrative* seems predominant in the later stages of life: there is evidence that, as we grow older, we focus less on the details of our past and more on our overall story: “[while] age decrements in the vividness and concreteness of past and future selves, narrative continuity shows age-related increases in the coherence and stability of one’s life story” (Corinna et al.

2017: 400). In part this is explained by the fact—mentioned above—that older adults favor semantic memory over episodic memory: whereas episodic memory involves time-travel and attention to details (Tulving 2002), “semantic autobiographical memories involve simply knowing about an event or fact, without a sense of mentally travelling back and re-living a specific event” (Rathbone et al. 2015 :423). However, recent studies suggest that this shift is also due to the fact that older adults may be less *interested* in remembering specific events and more focused on the overall *meanings* of their lives. This is why—as they move away from a *dynamic* sense of self and identity—they are more inclined to present a coherent story of their lives that heavily relies on the past. Instead of a forward-looking identity and self, they present a more stable picture of who they are and this picture revolves around their autobiographical narratives.

Unfortunately, there are important costs associated to this. In shifting their focus from a forward-looking, dynamic self to a more static identity, *older adults are also interpreting the content of their minds based on this narrative-seeking approach*. Their beliefs, wishes, hopes and so on, need to fit within a coherent package and what they *take* themselves to think, belief and hope is influenced by this search for coherence. This seems to follow from the claims defended above that older adults move gradually out of the shaping –game and rely less on a developing understanding of themselves but mostly implement the type of self-knowledge that I called ‘Indirect access’.

Now, this may leave older adults at the mercy of a strong confabulatory process that—as a result—hinders their overall self-knowledge. Here is why. As we saw above, confabulation is the process of offering a faulty picture of your mind: you say you believe or remember things you do not actually believe or remember. According to the Indirect view of self-knowledge, confabulation happens because we mostly fail to directly access the content of our thoughts. In contrast, we mostly interpret our minds based on what we know and makes sense.

Confabulation gets worse with aging, and this is probably due to decreasing cognitive abilities and faulty episodic memory (Dalla Barba et al. 2010; Attali et al. 2013). However, I suspect that it is not just about loss of memory. It is possible that older folks are also more prone to confabulation because they rely on narratives to define their identity. Indeed, confabulation is often the result of our needs to “fill gaps” in our story (Coltheart 2017: 67-8; Sullivan-Bissett 2015): as we focus more and more on autobiographical narratives, we will look for ways to offer a coherent story and so confabulation is likely to become a more pressing problem. If so, then older adults’ confabulation could be also motivational: because their self is dependent on narratives, coherency may become more vital to them.

So here is the worry. As we said, as we grow older we might be less and less part of this shaping-game and less and less committed to shaping our actions based on our self-assessments. Our tendency to confabulate is normally held in check by the fact that our self-attributions are not only descriptive but also *constitutive* of our mental states. This kind of accountability potentially decreases as we grow older, whereas our need for coherent narratives accelerates. Strijbos and De Bruin (2015: 304) rightly point out that, “McGeer’s account of first-person mindshaping as self-regulation suggests that, to a certain degree, we can protect ourselves against subliminal cues that cause us to confabulate.” My worry is that once we phase out of that self-regulative process, the risk of falling prey of confabulation increases, especially because this is also complemented by a search for coherence. And confabula-

tion—absent any ‘mindshaping’—erodes self-knowledge and the epistemic authority of our self-descriptions. Therefore, as we grow older, we may become less reliable when talking about our own minds. On this view, the fact that confabulation gets worse with aging is no coincidence: it is the combination of cognitive problems (episodic memory loss), motivational factors (searching for coherence over reliability), less mindshaping and more reliance on an indirect, interpretative form of self-understanding (which—without mindshaping—has little support against confabulation).

6. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was *not* to show that aging brings with it a loss of self-knowledge. In contrast, I made a much more speculative claim: given certain conditions that occur with aging, we could expect to see a loss of self-knowledge in older folks. That is, cognitive problems, motivational factors and loss of a forward-looking way of structuring our lives, could make the tendency to confabulate a serious threat to their self-understanding. Though not all aging adults go through these changes, I argued that the possibility of this shift in self-knowledge should be analyzed further.

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