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Rediscovering the Human Agent: A Theological Exploration of Human Activity in Old Age

Sian Brookes, Department of Divinity, University of Aberdeen

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Abstract: This paper explores what it means to be a human agent when the capacity for autonomous activity is reduced due to old age. I argue that the modern Eurocentric social imaginary expects meaningful agency to disappear in late old age, as it locates human activity within the capacity for autonomy, or independently driven "self-government". This denial of consequential agency has negative social and personal consequences for those living in this time of life. In response, this paper challenges existing definitions of human agency. Using secondary-sourced ethnographic fieldwork and theological reflection, it proposes an alternative definition of human action, one which is rooted not in the individual's capacity for deliberation and intentionality but in Jesus Christ. This will ultimately include the old within the category of human 'doings' who have a meaningful role to play in society.

Keywords: agency, autonomy, old-age

1 Introduction

What does it mean to be a human agent? The definition is elusive and fluctuating. To be a human who 'acts' in a culture at one stage of life will be different in another culture at a different stage. This paper studies the nature of human agency, particularly in relation to those who, as a result of old age, cannot demonstrate certain qualities such as cognitive deliberation and extensive, independent, self-governed activity. First, it considers how modern Eurocentric societies define human agency. Second, it explores the impact this has on the social status and personal experience of being old in these settings. Third, it seeks to offer an alternative vision for how to describe human agency in a manner that includes those who are living at the end of their capacity for autonomous activity.

This paper will suggest that the modern Eurocentric worldview observes human agency as being rooted in the individual's self-governed ability to make decisions, free from external impact, and with complete individual control over one's activity. Activity comes from within the self-controlled person, and if one is influenced by external forces, they are deemed passive; meaningful action is diminished. As sociologist Barry Barnes outlines:

> For an individual to possess agency is for her to possess internal powers and capacities, which, through their exercise, make her an active entity constantly intervening in the course of events ongoing around her (Barnes, 2000, p. 25).

This paper will explore and interrogate this understanding of human agency, considering how this understanding of agency arose and offers examples of how it is applied in common vernacular and academic literature.

It will then consider the implications this definition has for those who do not have the capacity to act through self-direction, in particular those who are dependent on others as a result of old age. Using secondary-sourced ethnographic research to study older people's experience of their own 'activity' and 'passivity', I will argue that, whilst peripheral narratives suggest that those in late old age should be described as 'passive', this is not always the experience of those living the reality. This will begin to challenge the definition of agency outlined in the first section. It will also demonstrate how the

dissonance between the lived experience and external perception can have a negative impact on those growing old.

Finally, having outlined the problems that the modern Eurocentric approach creates, this paper will offer a theological redefinition of where human agency is rooted. This theological focus will primarily use Karl Barth's theology to explore human and divine agency from a Christological perspective. Rather than understanding human activity as rooted in the self-driven individual, I will define human activity as rooted in participation with Christ's activity. Rather than self-government being the key component of agency, relinquishing the self in favour of allowing guidance and direction from God offers a more appropriate paradigm of what it means to 'act'. Thus, those who cannot self-govern or self-direct are still deemed meaningful human agents.

2 Modern Definitions of Agency

2.1 Philosophical Reflection

This section will argue that, within the modern Eurocentric social imaginary, human agency is defined by the ability to deliberate and make choices within the human self. This understanding of agency is predicated upon the individual's ability to reflect on a number of different possible actions and analyse and avoid any externally sourced influence (such as motives driven by one's outwardly affected emotions or another person's effect). It then requires the ability to act purely based on one's rational intentionality and independent deliberation. Paul Katsafanas is one philosopher who has critically shown the popularity of this approach to defining agency in his article *Activity and Passivity in Reflective Agency* (Katsafanas, 2011). Katsafanas tracks a number of modern philosophers who adopt a concept he calls "agential agency" (Katsafanas, 2011, p. 223). He writes:

> These philosophers invoke the idea of an agent or self, who in some cases actively brings about her own action, rather than serving merely as a passive conduit for various desires and affects that cause acts. (Katsafanas, 2011, p. 220).

Katsafanas goes on to give the example of Bob, who chooses not to have an extra drink at a party but ends up drinking it anyway, and Claire who thinks she should study instead of her desire to go to a party, ultimately choosing to stay in and study. Within agential approaches of activity, Claire is 'active' as she demonstrates control over the elements of herself that are impacted by things other than her rational mind, whilst Bob succumbs to 'passivity'; his emotions overcome his ability to 'choose' his action (Katsafanas, 2011, pp. 222-223). This paradigm of human agency is driven by the ability for self-government and self-control over anything that is not constitutive of rational cognitive function. Human agency is fundamentally defined as being the direction of a self-driven rational agent.

Katsafanas locates the root of this definition of agency within the philosophies of Leibniz, Locke, and Kant, all of whom emphasise the importance of the individual's mind having control and freedom over emotions and desires which affect decision making (Katsafanas, 2011, p. 226). To add to Katsafanas' reflection backwards into the world of Enlightenment philosophy, it is interesting to consider the work of Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza's definition of activity is: "we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause" (Spinoza, 1992, p. 70). "Adequate cause" means when the cause is acting alone (Spinoza, 1992, p. 70). In contrast, Spinoza's definition of passivity is that, "we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause." (Spinoza, 1992, p. 70).

According to Spinoza, to act is to be able to generate uninfluenced, unaffected, internally driven agency, and to be passive is to be impacted by anything external to a kind of pure version of an uninfluenced self. Yet it is not only things external which might make humans passive; it is also anything within the individual that is not driven by a rational, coherent, and logical mind making active choices. For Spinoza the route to true adequate thoughts, and therefore true human activity, is to be able to think rationally. The more the mind is impacted by things it encounters outside of itself, the more it imagines (or amasses images), and the more it is affected by the passions (or emotions). The way to overcome these experiences and to gain control over them is to *understand* the nature of the body and to understand what is impacting it (Lord, 2010, p. 86).

The route to activity is to use cognitive function to comprehend and interpret anything outside of the mind's independent logic. Whilst we cannot control the body being affected by external realities, we can understand how the body is changed by the things that affect it, and in understanding those things, in coming to understand the feelings that they arouse, we are able to bring those feelings under control. This control enables us to be more active than passive in any given situation. The ability to gain personal control over the passions through the mind's rational ability is key to overcoming external influences, and therefore overcoming passivity.

This brief overview of Spinoza's understanding of activity and passivity offers an example of where modern perspectives on human agency originate. To act is to act from a rational cerebral centre, isolated within the individual and unaffected by any external power or source. To be influenced by anything other than one's own rational mind is to be passive. To be a human agent is to act autonomously, to be able to govern through a kind of law (νόμος) driven only by the self (αὐτός). It is to possess an independent and rational mind which can make decisions and then act upon those decisions. Passivity, in contrast, is to be impacted or affected by someone or something else. Under this definition of 'activity', I am not really acting unless I am choosing that action without any external pressure or force placed upon me. I am 'passive' if I have been made to do something, forcefully impacted by someone or something else. Passivity is *not* having the ability to choose; passivity is having that self-driven agency taken away.

2.2 Wider Material – Ethnographic and Christian Literature

Evidence from secondary-sourced ethnographic research shows that this understanding of independent, self-governed activity has very much seeped into the modern public consciousness, especially when it comes to the experience of growing older. The presumption is that to age actively is to maintain the ability to 'act' independently. In a 2011 study which interviewed older people on 'active ageing', one older gentleman described the term as follows:

> Active ageing. Well it's what I do. I can walk 5 miles without any problem. I drive. I have multiple interests. I *do my own* washing, ironing, I could do the others but my daughter feels she ought to do something, so she changes my

> bed and vacs up but I could do, I did do that and more at one time. I *don't want to have to rely on anyone* but my two children are wonderfully supportive… But er, active ageing yes. I'm always busy, I *do my own* cooking. I plan my new kitchen, you know. [male, 87] [emphasis own] (Stenner, McFarquhar and Bowling, 2011, p. 470-471).

To grow old 'actively' is apparently to grow old independent of external support or influence. Another respondent in the same study replied to the question saying:

> Active ageing. Just, I think it's being active, it's being able, to me it's being able to do what I want, when I want. And to be able to do the things that I want to do (Stenner, McFarquhar and Bowling, 2011, p.471).

Deliberation and intentionality – the ability to make decisions and control one's activity – is a key part of this person's understanding of what it means to be active in old age. Finally, when asked what detracts from active ageing, another respondent replied: "Well when your body doesn't want to let you do the things you want to do, I would say." (Stenner, McFarquhar and Bowling, 2011, p.472). The idea that to be active, the choices made within one's internally located intentional mind must be facilitated by one's body reflects the idea made above that to be a meaningful human agent. One has to demonstrate the ability to be able to make intentional, deliberative decisions within one's rational mind.

A consequence of this definition of human agency is that those who find themselves unable to act independently, as a result of lost physical or mental capacity, are inevitably described as passive, unable to 'do' anything. One group of people who fall into this category are those living in the late stages of old age –those who depend on external support and influence in order to perform even the most basic daily tasks. [1] The idea that individuals naturally become 'passive' as they age is suggested in ample

[1] It falls outside of the scope of this paper to discuss other groups of people who are traditionally deemed "passive' such as children and those with mental or physical disabilities for example.

examples of Christian reflection on old age.[2] Amongst certain texts in this genre, a key narrative is that as individuals grow into old age, they move from a state of 'doing' to a state of 'being'– from a state of being active to a state of being passive. Elizabeth Mackinlay writes, "Frailty is a time when the 'doing' mode does recede and 'being' becomes the predominant feature of living" (MacKinlay, 2024, p.16).

Eberhard Jüngel similarly remarks:

> [...] the elderly are the most natural representatives of the absolute primacy of persons over their works. They are essentially recipients and...can no longer do anything for themselves." (Jüngel, 2001, p. 270)

For Jüngel and MacKinlay, and as the ethnographic research above demonstrates, at the time in old age when one can no longer do anything independently for oneself it is presumed that passivity must ensue.

Yet the analysis thus far does not present the whole picture. In contrast to the idea that older people always become passive as the possibility for independent action is reduced, there are many accounts of a retained experience of activity. The following section will describe how, for some older people activity is not limited to independence and complete rational control. This will begin to challenge the existing definition outlined in this section and will explain why it is so problematic.

[2] Here I refer to a body of literature which spans research on: spirituality and old age written by Christian academics; ethnographic work studying the impact that Christian faith has on growing old; Practical Theology which reflects on old age; and literature which considers the ethics of caring for those who are old or considers ageing from a bio-ethical perspective, with a particularly Christian slant. It is impossible to reference every piece in this article. The primary players in the field are Elizabeth MacKinlay's work on spirituality, John Swinton's work on dementia, Frits de Lange's ethics of Ageing and Michael Mawson's exploration of ageing and disability and successful ageing. Whilst not all of these authors reflect the move from "doing" to "being" outlined here, amongst others, Elizabeth MacKinlay in particular adopts this reflection.

3 Understanding first-hand experience: Secondary Sourced Ethnographic Research

By analysing ethnographic data that has previously been collected primarily by gerontologists and social scientists, this section suggests that the provisional definition of activity outlined above is not reflective of many older people's experiences. Instead, when one no longer possesses the ability to self-govern, this does not necessarily lead to an easy acceptance of passivity. Instead, it simply prompts an altered understanding of one's own activity. The definition of what it means to be a human agent begins to be stretched and reshaped into a different nature.

One term that begins to demonstrate this stretched understanding of 'activity' is the concept called "small agency" (Kiuru and Valokivi, 2022, p. 1). "Small agency" describes certain 'acts' that older people do which may not fit within a strict definition of activity as defined through independence and autonomy; it is a type of agency that involves dependence on external realities (Kiuru and Valokivi, 2022, p.4). In one study on active aging in the fourth age, the authors describe how the study participants actually find dependence on others can increase their capacity for 'activity', rather than decrease it: "Receiving help did not always mean giving up their own activity completely; for example, cooking could be done in cooperation with someone else" (Kiuru and Valokivi, 2022, p. 6). [3]

Being partially governed by an agent that is separate to the self can, in fact, enable a form of meaningful agency. For many older people, dependence on others and 'passivity' are not the same thing. To be dependent on someone else to help one make decisions or to influence one's choices and capacities does not always mean to be the one 'done to'; it simply means being in a relationship with another actor who is acting at

[3] The "Fourth Age" refers to the stage in the ageing journey that follows the Third Age. The latter signifies the later years (60s and 70s) and the former extends into the later late years (80s, 90s, 100s). While the Third Age is understood as a time of independence, activity, health, and engagement in society, the Fourth Age characterised by frailty, disability, and decline, and therefore by increased dependence. See Gilleard and Higgs, 2010-03 pp.121-128 for a full critical explanation of this concept.

the same time as oneself. This demonstrates the limitations of the above definition of human agency as acting from an independent, purely self-driven person, unaffected by any external reality. The provisional definition of activity outlined in section one of this paper naturally leads to an understanding of an older person who is dependent on others as exclusively passive. The concept of "small agency" suggests that this is a reductive understanding of what it means to be active in old age.

The idea that dependence and independence – and therefore meaningful agency and contrasting passivity – are necessarily mutually exclusive is not always borne out in the reality of older people's lives. This is evidenced in one ethnographic study by Denise Tanner who interviewed an older lady, Harriet, twice within a ten-year period, tracking changes in her approach to her own ageing. A notable shift that Tanner highlights is Harriet's attitude towards her ability to perform certain tasks. Tanner writes of the latter interviews:

> However, the talk of struggling to remain independent is noticeably absent compared with the earlier interviews. Rather, Harriet has accepted her reliance on others and talks with equanimity about being 'infirm' and 'dependent'. This is not just dependency on people - her carer and family - but also dependency on her pendant alarm, zimmer frame and wheelchair. These 'dependencies' enable what she sees as 'independence' - living contentedly in her own home. (Tanner, 2016, p. 12)

The first-hand experience of being 'independent' is not something either present or absent in this Harriet's life. Instead, her understanding of her own independence changes with time, and therefore what is deemed to be 'active' or 'passive' also shifts. For Harriet, what would once have been understood as passivity – such as the inability to walk alone or to perform certain other tasks of daily living as an atomised, purely self-driven individual – actually enables a form of revised activity. While being influenced by something or someone might reduce her capacity for complete self-government, at this stage of life the ability to be entirely self-driven often becomes impossible, and others are required to 'do' things. Yet this does not necessarily mean that she is unable to 'do' anything at all.

This example of Harriet demonstrates a core presumption that this paper seeks to challenge: simply because complete independence is no longer possible does not mean that an individual cannot be described as a meaningful agent. Instead, agency can be rooted in something beyond the individual's capacity to deliberate and exercise complete control over one's actions. To exist in a state of heteronomy rather than autonomy does not necessarily entail pure passivity.

4 The implications: A kind of death

Based on the data above, there is a disconnect between the reality of some older people's self-perceived agency and the definition of human agency adopted by Eurocentric societies. What older people themselves experience as a meaningful activity is not necessarily recognised by the public consciousness as constitutive of important and consequential action. This has significant consequences. We fear old age, we fear lost capacity, and we fear loss of independence, ultimately because we fear losing our perceived 'agency'. As a result, older people often experience a kind of "social death" before their physical death (Hordern, 2020, n.p.). This social death can easily be attributed not to the ability or actions of the individual but to the fear, embarrassment, and disgust that modern Eurocentric society feels towards those in advanced old age, shaped by ideals of independence, autonomy, and apparent meaningful agency. Hordern writes:

> Public reason is inclined to withhold the "status of person" from those irretrievably incapable of exercising the power of moral choice—those seemingly not competent to be members of a *deliberative* democracy. (Hordern, 2020, n.p.).

If deliberation, personal choice, and self-driven power – all forms of society's understanding of what it truly means to 'act' as a human being, all forms of action originating from within a rational and isolated self – are not possible, then we disregard the individual as the opposite: powerlessly passive and helpless (see also Gilleard and Higgs 2011; 2013; 2020).

For some, this social death may remain only a social experience; however, for others, with the emergence of medical assistance in dying (MAID), it may be realised as

a route to an expedited physical death.[4] Perhaps the most important consequence of this inability to see human agency as broader than the internal capacity of an individual is an increased desire for life to end amongst those in their final years. This topic has been researched extensively by Els van Wijngaarden. From interviewing older people who were not experiencing a long-term illness but still expressed a wish for their life to end prematurely, van Wijngaarden highlights that for many in this position the root of the desire to die is not necessarily to die, but a desire to be acknowledged as a meaningful human agent. One participant described it as follows:

> You have no effect on anything, you know. The ship sets sail and everyone has a job, but you just sail along. (...) I am cargo to them. That's not easy. Not easy. No, no, no. That's not me! No, no, no, no, no!... I have no idea in which area someone my age is able to seriously participate. (van Wijngaarden, 2015, p. 261).

Van Wijngaarden then notes:

> In most stories, an intense longing to make a valuable contribution and to participate somehow emerged, but the respondents felt that their contribution was not taken seriously, not needed, they felt rejected, and this further intensified the pain of not mattering (van Wijngaarden, 2015, p. 261).

And yet, at the same time, the individuals struggle to accept a narrative in which they just fade into a state of passivity and invisibility:

[4] As of the Commons vote on 20th June 2025, it is likely that MAID will become legal in the UK within the next four years. Currently, simply being old does not make one eligible to request assisted dying in the UK as a terminal diagnosis remains part of the eligibility criteria. However, in nations such as Switzerland, Netherlands, Belgium, and Canada, the eligibility criteria are significantly broader, with unbearable physical or mental suffering with no prospect of improvement qualifying an individual. In the Netherlands, people with dementia are eligible, if an advance directive has been made. In Canada, within five years of introduction of the MAID laws, eligibility was extended to non-terminally ill individuals. Whilst this is not an inevitability in the UK, many MPs, faith groups, and other concerned parties have argued that this is a serious possibility. See Dyer and Garcia, 2015, 351 and https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmpublic/TerminallyIllAdults/memo/TIAB25.htm?utm

> Simultaneously, participants felt unable to resign themselves to this state of listlessness, because to them it is irreconcilable with their idea of who they are, as they lived an active life. (van Wijngaarden, 2015, p. 261).

Van Wijngaarden's research implies that the problem with our understanding of agency lies not with the older person's ability to 'do' things, but with a society that leaves no room for those in advanced old age to be seen as of any use if they cannot act in the prescribed way. In a world that struggles to value any activity outside of a specific frame of reference – defined by independence, autonomy, and the capacity to impact the world as an individual – some older people decide it would be better to die than to have no role.

The presumption of passivity in old age creates an expectation that many older people will no longer be actors in society, but simply recipients of the activity of others. As Phyllida Parsloe writes:

> We have no difficulty in children being receivers and perhaps we could accept for ourselves, as well as others, that the end as well as the beginning of life is a time when one may receive more than one can give. The balance can be provided in the middle years. (Parsloe, 1999, p. 142).

This reduces the 'older old', who can no longer act independently, to inconsequential, almost non-members of society. One route to overcoming this problem might be to challenge individuals' desire to have a role – to acknowledge that 'being' is more important than 'doing'. This is already a well-trodden path.[5] This paper seeks a different approach. Instead, it challenges the definition of meaningful agency which is outlined in the opening section. By offering a redefinition of agency, it aims to include those currently excluded and broaden the understanding of what it is to be a human who has a meaningful role to play in the world.

[5] This is the approach taken by those such as Elizabeth MacKinlay and Eberhard Jüngel

5 Created for a different type of agency; a theological reflection on human activity

In order to value those living in deep dependency in late old age, a different definition of agency is required. A different perspective is needed to demonstrate how those who are dependent on external support can still be agents with a role to play. Firstly, in this section I argue that God intends for humans to be agents: to be a human 'being' is also to be a human 'doing'; the two are necessarily connected. Therefore, the claim that older people are primarily passive – progressing from 'doing' to 'being' – is deeply problematic. To categorise an entire group of people, such as the old, into a bracket of 'passivity' as opposed to 'activity' is to rob them of something fundamental to being human. Secondly, this section suggests that true human agency is not rooted in an independent, self-asserting individual. In contrast, it is only ever participatory with, and therefore dependent on, Christ. True human agency is thus discovered not in self-control but in relinquishing self-control in order to allow God to act through and within the self. In this sense, older people who are forced to practise release of self-control might provide a more accurate picture of human agency than originally perceived.

Rather than viewing human agency as something originating in an autonomous individual, Christian theological thinking instead suggests that it originates in the person of Jesus Christ. This theme is particularly established in the theology of Karl Barth. For Barth, all elements of humanity exist precisely because Jesus, the divine human existed. Without Christ, there would be no humanity:

> As the man Jesus is the Head and the firstborn of all creation, the truth of the human creature is to be sought in Him. It is not that He is a man like us, but that we are human like Him. (Barth, 1957, 3/2, p.132).

Just as it is Christ who establishes humanity, is it also Christ who establishes human agency. Christ's own human agency is the foundation that allows for all human agency to exist. As Paul Nimmo suggests, by taking on the role of human agent God

affirms all human agency (Nimmo, 2007, p. 109).[6] In the same way that Christ does not erase human ontology but creates it, Christ's human agency does not erase human agency but creates it. As Barth writes, "In Him [Jesus Christ] we see what it means to be truly human: to live in obedient freedom under God's command…" (Barth, 1957, 4/2, p. 21).

To be a human is to perform the activity which corresponds to God's commands. For Tom Greggs, in Barth's work this plays out primarily within the concept of the particularity of Christ:

> In the particularity of Christ must exist the particularity of all human beings: God's election of the particular human Jesus Christ and in Him all humanity must mean all human beings in their particularities. (Greggs, 2009, p. 104)

Jesus Christ was incarnated as a particular human being, and in his particularity as a human being God affirms the particularity of all human beings. In the same way, in the particular actions of Christ, all the particularity of human actions is affirmed. This does not mean that God approves of all actions undertaken by humans, but it implies that within Christ's action there is space for human agency to be affirmed and sustained. Far from creating human beings with the intention of having their ontology paramount over their activity, Barth's Christological method suggests that human ontology and human activity are deeply intertwined in Christ. God did not just create humans to 'be' in Christ; God also created humans to 'do' in Christ (Ephesians 2:10).

This centring of Christology is fundamental in Barth's understanding of justification, which leads him to a discussion the extent to which human passivity interacts with activity. For Barth, Christ is the author and finisher of justifying faith; however, this does not mean that there is no role for human faith. As Barth writes:

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[6] Whilst critics of Barth historically claimed that his emphasis on Christological centrality eclipses the possibility of human ethical activity, more recent interpreters of Barth have shifted the emphasis. Rather than viewing Barth's theology as one in which divine agency overrides human ethical responsibility, they read him as affirming a meaningful (though derivative and responsive) ethical agency for humans within the framework of divine command and grace. See Webster, 1988; McKenny, 2010; Nimmo, 2007; and Migliore, 2010.

> But in so far as in Christology we have reached the climax of the doctrine of justification, what we can say is that, even in its emptiness and passivity, justifying faith has this character of supreme fulness and activity, and that without it would not be justifying faith: the character which is proper to it because Jesus Christ who is the object of it is, in the words of Heb. 12:2, its author and finisher, and therefore the One who forms it. (Barth, 1957, 4/1, p. 521)

Barth unites justification and sanctification into one act which is found in the life of Jesus. But this does not eclipse human activity: because Jesus is the one human who establishes all of humanity, his act also becomes the act that makes humans agents in the salvation narrative. Therefore, justification (understood as forensically objective, denoting human passivity) and sanctification (traditionally the subjective appropriation of justification, allowing for human activity) are bound together; the saving act of God is also the commanding act of God. As Barth writes earlier in 2/2,

> It is as He makes Himself responsible for man that God makes man, too, responsible. Ruling grace is commanding grace. The Gospel itself has the form and fashion of the Law. The one Word of God is both Gospel and Law. (Barth, 1957, 2/2, p. 773)

In the very same act in which God saved humans – by committing to the humanity of Christ – God makes humans responsible, by sharing in the humanity of Jesus Christ. This is why for Barth, to be a Christian is very much to be given a task: not simply to passively receive justification and sanctification, but to embrace vocation as central to the Christian life, as outlined in volume four of *Church Dogmatics*. Thus, Barth writes in total contradiction to the idea that human work is simply the inconsequential work of sinners doomed to ineffectiveness, "Before God man is not nothing but something, someone. God is far from finding pleasure in the nothingness of man as such" (Barth, 1957, 3/2, p. 375). God intends for humanity to have a role and creates space for this within the primary means by which he interacts with humans – in the incarnation.

When God creates humanity, He also intends for humans to have a role – to be active agents in the world. If this is true, the argument that older people should accept passivity fundamentally robs older people of something which is core to being human.

To be a human is to be given a task; to be a human 'being' is also to be a human 'doing'. However, it is important to note that the type of human agency which Barth describes is not an agency which exists based on the individual's capacity for rational control over her actions. Instead, it is a type of agency which is discovered only by participating in the agency of Christ. One Pauline passage which reflects this participatory nature of agency is Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God.".

In this passage, Paul very clearly asserts a meaningful form of his own agency, he still actively 'lives' a life in the body. Yet in order to do this, and to participate in the life of Christ, Paul has to allow a version of himself to die. To enact a kind of agency which participates in Christ's active life, the human must not embrace individual self-control and self-assertion, but instead deny them. New Testament scholar Grant Macaskill, who has written extensively on this concept of participation with Christ writes on this theme: "There is no "I" left to speak of in the Christian life, at least not in self-subsistent terms". (Macaskill, 2019, p. 41).

Importantly within Macaskill's narrative, there is an 'I' that remains, an 'I' that performs meaningful human action, yet this 'I' is one which only exists 'in Christ': "It is not that there is no such person as "Paul" anymore…But Paul is now Paul-in-Christ; Paul-in-himself is a thing of the past" (Macaskill, 2019, p. 54).

To realise the kind of participatory agency that Barth describes – to embody a truly theologically conceived understanding of human agency – the human being must embrace not her own self-control and reject any external direction, but conversely must embrace dependence on an 'other', rejecting the human desire for autonomy and for self-law governing all of one's life. True human agency is found not in independence and rational control, but in surrendering these things in order to discover a different kind of active life.

The Christian theological definition of human agency therefore directly contradicts the idea that human autonomy is the basis of human activity. Instead, it is in giving up autonomy (self-law) and embracing God's law for our lives where human activity finds its veracity and ultimate purpose. God intends for humans to be agents, but does not intend for that agency to be independent of His command for obedience and direction.

6 Conclusion

This paper's redefinition of the roots of human agency generates significant consequences for human agency in late old age. If to act is to act 'in Christ', then to act as a human is always to act in accordance with a law which is not driven by a self-governed individual. In this sense, there is a kind of breadth and depth which is found in Christ's establishment and affirmation of human activity that is never too limited or too narrow to encompass even the most dependent type of human action. In fact, instead of heralding autonomy (self-government) as the foundation of human agency, to act by participating in Christ's activity is to reject self-government in favour of allowing an 'other' to govern over you. In this sense, the "small agency" of the 'older old' should be fully included in the realm of human 'activity'. For the lady on her deathbed, breathing in and out, supported by the love and care of a nurse, or the older man whose life is sustained by the carers who facilitate his eating and personal care, their part in the agential exchange remains meaningful. By their presence, by being governed and driven by another individual, there is a parallel with all Christians who allow themselves to be driven and governed by Christ. In Christ there is space for human agency, and this space not only includes but elevates even the humblest of human activity.

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