

Bodies, lost and found

Simone de Beauvoir from *The Second Sex* to *Old Age*

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In the decade following the publication of *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir had been both devastated by political events – her experience of the Algerian war, McCarthyism and racism in America – and profoundly affected by her intense involvement with Claude Lanzmann. Curiously though, in 1963, de Beauvoir described the fact that she had grown old as the most significant thing to have happened to her since 1944, for which she could discern no compensation.¹ The conviction with which de Beauvoir repeatedly describes her own old age as a mutilation is shocking to the reader. It calls for the theoretical analysis de Beauvoir offered in *Old Age* of the reasons why a subject, and particularly a female subject, might attribute to her own ageing this degree of importance, and might sometimes describe it so negatively.

To date, much of the philosophical interest in de Beauvoir has been feminist, and most of this feminist interest has concentrated on her treatment of feminine embodiment. But another aspect of embodiment, ageing, probably occupied more space overall in de Beauvoir's work. It was the object of her second largest theoretical work after *The Second Sex*, *Old Age*. It dominated four of her autobiographical narratives: *All Said and Done*, *Adieux: Farewell to Sartre*, and *A Very Easy Death*, Part Two of *Force of Circumstance*, and fictional work such as the three novellas of *A Woman Destroyed*.

Analysis of de Beauvoir's work on old age supports the view that her autobiographical writing should be interpreted for its philosophical content, and seen as interconnected with her theoretical work. Like the interconnection between evocations of lived femininity in (the theoretical) *The Second Sex* and (the autobiographical) *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and *The Prime of Life*, the theoretical work *Old Age* can also be interpreted in interconnection with the autobiographical representations de Beauvoir offers of her own, her mother's and Sartre's encounters with

ageing in *Force of Circumstance*, *All Said and Done*, *Adieux: Farewell to Sartre*, and *A Very Easy Death*. Approaches to this question of the theory/autobiography interconnection which have focused on de Beauvoir's autobiographical and theoretical depictions of gender² have given rise to an interpretation of de Beauvoir's autobiographical work as depicting a life she understands as demonstrating a woman's capacity to live a free and independent existence: 'I think we can conclude this is what de Beauvoir had in mind with her art of living: though her life, she wanted to prove a woman could live as a subject.'³ But the view that de Beauvoir's life is depicted as exemplary is not entirely born out by her autobiographical work on old age. In fact, this material importantly depicts the failure in her work of the language of the exemplary.

Old age: othering and bad faith

Although *Old Age* was published twenty-one years after *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir used much of the framework from the earlier work to devise an analysis of the depreciation of old age. Where she had argued in *The Second Sex* that woman is the Other, in *Old Age* she would argue that the aged are, and in a similar sense, the marginalized Other. In her analysis, otherness had a twofold meaning. First, that which is not the norm, that which society considers to be other in relation to young adult male subjectivity. Social, professional and public arrangements often accommodate with greater difficulty those who are not the norm, and de Beauvoir describes in both works the difficulty women and the elderly sometimes have in living and working effectively in the public and private spheres. The notion of otherness also includes an element of not being recognized as 'like' or 'same'. One of de Beauvoir's formulations for otherness depends on whether a young adult male can 'recognize himself', and indeed wishes to recognize himself in the marginalized other. According to her argument, a young adult

male as little wishes to recognize his like in 'that aged person' as in 'that woman'.⁴ In *The Second Sex*, a man should be able to recognize himself (his like) in a woman because she is 'a free and autonomous being like all human creatures'.⁵ In *Old Age*, a younger person should be able to recognize him- or herself in an older person because old age will happen to all of us. A person who refuses to recognize him- or herself in 'that old man' or in 'that old woman' is denying their own destiny.

Second, de Beauvoir uses a concept of being-for-others to explain that the 'revelation of our age ... comes to us from outside – from others'. The identity as elderly which I eventually take on is largely a result of my impression that I am perceived by others as old. De Beauvoir describes the protest this often provokes, partly because old age is a socially devalued identity: 'We do not accept it willingly.'⁶ Our ageing existence is an inseparable synthesis of physiological change and generally negative meanings given to these changes in a Western context. De Beauvoir therefore defines the being-for-others of old age as a 'complex truth':

for the outsider it is a dialectic relationship between my being as he defines it objectively and the awareness of myself that I acquire by means of him. Within me it is the Other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider – who is old: and that Other is myself.⁷

At one point in her analysis, de Beauvoir will describe her alienation from the image of herself in the mirror, an ageing face she detests. That she devalues the face she finds in the mirror, and is loathe to recognize herself in it, is linked to the status of old age as Other. Her constant status as a 'being-for-others' is the impetus necessary for it to occur to de Beauvoir to look in the mirror to find herself in the first place. In so far as she is a being-for-others, it does not occur to de Beauvoir to doubt that the face she sees (the image for others, the image others see) is herself. But in so far as old age is 'the Other', de Beauvoir distances herself in disgust from the image which she sees:

I can't get around to believing it. When I read in print Simone de Beauvoir, it is a young woman they are telling me about, and who happens to be me. Often in my sleep I dream that in a dream I'm fifty-four, I wake and find I'm only thirty. 'What a terrible nightmare I had' says the woman who thinks she's awake...

Perhaps the people I pass in the street see merely a woman in her fifties who simply looks her age, no more, no less. But when I look, I see my face as it

was, attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure.⁸

To produce the theoretical work *Old Age*, de Beauvoir redeploys much of the philosophical framework of *The Second Sex*. She has recourse, once again, to a certain social constructionism, according to which '[t]he individual is conditioned by society's theoretical and practical attitudes towards [oneself]'. She rejects the view that biological facts have an objective reality which can be located in abstraction from all other factors with which they are always already synthesized:

man never lives in a state of nature: in his old age, his status is imposed upon him by the society to which he belongs ... it is pointless to study the physiological and psychological aspects separately ... psychic ... life can only be understood in the light of ... existential situation ... [which] affects his physical organism and the converse applies.⁹

It is for this reason, as she explains, that a subject might sometimes greet her ageing with disgust. This response reflects the integration of physical facts with societal attitudes, and the subject's acceptance of or resistance to these. De Beauvoir's own response clearly reflects both societal valuation of youth and beauty, and the heightened valuation of youth and beauty in a woman.¹⁰

De Beauvoir also redeploys the ethics which denounces bad faith. She denounces first the bad faith of denying the extent to which one is a facticity (for example, denying the extent to which one is or will be old): 'We must stop cheating: ... let us recognise ourselves in this old man or in that old woman.'¹¹ She also denounces the bad faith which can arise from reducing oneself to that facticity: a thing, an old person. One thematic which emerges from her novella 'The Age of Discretion' involves the narrator's impatience with what she perceives as her partner André's wilful definition of himself in these terms:

He often tells me that nowadays all the fresh ideas come from his colleagues and that he is too old to make new discoveries: I don't believe him ...

At my age one has habits of mind that hamper inventiveness. And I grow more ignorant year by year...

André's defeatism has no valid basis ... this extreme gloominess saddens me ... it is unjustified...

He was playing at being an old man and he would end by persuading me that he was one. For a horrified moment I thought ... 'I'm going to spend the rest of my life with an old man!'¹²

The attitude denounced in the novella, wilfully reducing oneself to stereotypes of the elderly, accords with

de Beauvoir's frequent critical accounts of women, and of women protagonists in much of her fiction, who reduce themselves to robotic, slick or passive stereotypes of femininity.

Given that de Beauvoir's position is that there is no objective truth to old age, we expect her to tell us that we should not understand ourselves as determined either by its physiological facts (which we only experience in interconnection with our interpretation of them), or by societal attitudes (which, while negative and an imposition on our freedom, may still be resisted). Furthermore, de Beauvoir has gone to some pains to argue that we should be willing to recognize ourselves in 'this old man or that old woman'. Her autobiographical accounts of her own old age, then, are startling in their monumental failure to depict an exemplary experience in this regard.

Calamity, fatality, capture, entrapment

Not surprisingly, de Beauvoir expresses contempt for the position, 'so long as you feel young, you are young', as a 'complete misunderstanding of the situation'.¹³ This bears out Debra Bergoffen's suggestion that one can read *Old Age* as correcting what de Beauvoir herself sees as the flaw of *The Second Sex*, the excessive focus on the capacity of all existents to consciously affirm their freedom.¹⁴ But when de Beauvoir describes her own ageing in her autobiographical works, she goes too far in her depiction of old age as a real physical limit. Despite the passivity the attitude reflects, she describes her old age as a calamity, in relation to which it seems she is helpless, which besets her, or captures her. As she recounts in *Force of Circumstance*: 'I have fought always not to let them label me, but I have not been able to prevent the years from enmeshing me.' 'I thought, one day when I was forty', she writes, 'Deep in that looking glass, old age is watching and waiting for me; and it's inevitable, one day [it] will get me. [It's] got me now.'¹⁵ She goes on to describe the capture in moving terms:

My heart too has been infected by it. I have lost my old power to separate the shadows from the light, to pay the price of the tornadoes and still make sure I had the radiance of clear skies between. My powers of revolt are dimmed now by the imminence of my end and the fatality of the deteriorations that troop before it; but my joys have paled as well....

Yes, the moment has come to say: Never again! It is not I who am saying goodbye to all those things I once enjoyed, it is they who are leaving me; the mountain paths disdain my feet.... Never again shall I slide through the solitary morning snows. Never again a man. Now, not my body alone

but my imagination has accepted that. In spite of everything, it's strange not to be a body any more. There are moments when the oddness of it, because it's so definitive, chills my blood. But what hurts more than all these deprivations is never feeling any new desires: they wither before they can be born in this rarefied climate I inhabit now.¹⁶

These passages support the suggestion that de Beauvoir increasingly rejects freedom of consciousness as primary in relation to one's situation. She comes up against, or at least feels she comes up against, a limit point for which freedom of consciousness offers little consolation.

However, in the theoretical work *Old Age*, de Beauvoir offers numerous descriptions of figures who refuse to accept this Other of old age as themselves, who are 'objectively' old, but do not feel old. De Beauvoir may feel that the loss of her own sexuality in old age is a simple fatality, but her theoretical work includes many accounts of figures who maintain an active sexuality throughout their old age (in addition to the many who do not). In fact, de Beauvoir's description of her own old age as a fatality confirms the concept she elsewhere proposes that we create rather than passively experience our life. For some, ageing, sickness, loss of mobility and bodily functions may be experienced as a fatality, entrapment, or may render us passive, depressed or indifferent. But others will interact with similar physical conditions entirely differently, with every possible permutation of rage, refusal, aggression, affirmation, and this is exactly what de Beauvoir recounts in *Old Age*. That old age 'happens' to de Beauvoir, and, unlike labels, 'can't be fought', tells us everything about Simone de Beauvoir and the specificity of her relations to embodiment, identity, femininity, sexuality, beauty, activity and youth, and her internalization of societal attitudes to old age.¹⁷ The old age depicted by Simone de Beauvoir as her own is just one of the manifold experiences of old age recounted in the work *Old Age*, which go to demonstrate that the apparent objective limit of old age is in fact a complicated nexus of the psychological, the physiological, the economic, material conditions and one's existence as a being for others. While de Beauvoir does not make this point herself in her autobiographical material on old age, the material itself is eloquent in this regard on her behalf.

We might expect a de Beauvoir who was rigorous on the topic of existentialist freedom to tell us that it seemed as if the mountains were refusing her feet, but in fact she was 'choosing' to refuse the mountains. She tells us it is the time of the 'never again' ('never

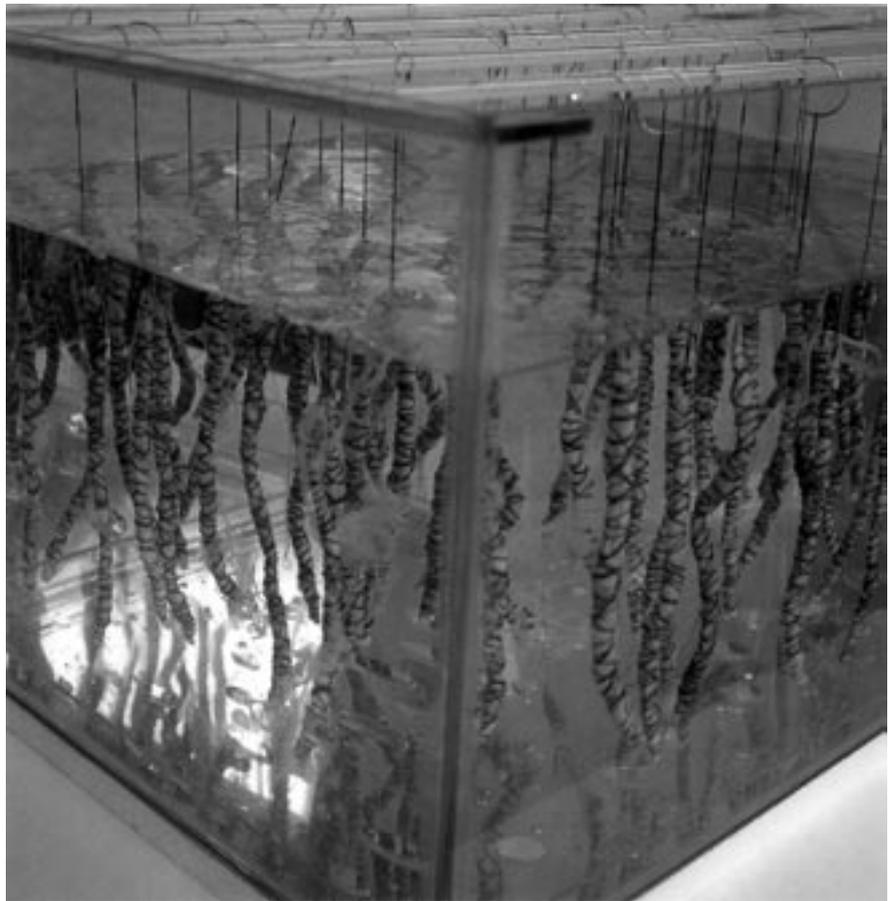
again a man', she writes), as if this is a simple limit that 'happens' to her, as opposed to the kind of interpretation she places upon her own body and sexual possibilities. Her depiction of her wrinkled face as disgusting is devoid of any critique of conventions about physical beauty and youth, to which the narrator of 'The Age of Discretion' disturbingly provides echo with her view that a male's aged naked body is less ghastly than a woman's:

As for bathing, no.... I am very unwilling to display myself in a bathing-suit, even in front of André. An old man's body, I said to myself ... is after all less ghastly than an old woman's.¹⁸

I often stop, flabberghasted, at the sight of this incredible thing that serves me as a face. I understand La Castiglione, who had every mirror smashed.... While I was able to look at my face without displeasure I gave it no thought, it could look after itself. The wheel eventually stops. I loathe my appearance now: the eyebrows slipping down towards the eyes, the bags underneath, the excessive fullness of the cheeks, and that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring.¹⁹

Both the younger and the older de Beauvoir emphasize the role of societal attitudes and being-for-others in determining how we live femininity and old age. Certainly, de Beauvoir's response to the loss of her youth and beauty can be interpreted in these terms. But although de Beauvoir consistently and famously considers our freedom to be impinged on by societal attitudes to youth and femininity, she is also consistent in emphasizing that all existents do retain some capacity to resist these attitudes. Her provocation to women to resist societal attitudes about femininity is crucial to *The Second Sex*.

For this reason, I think that the younger de Beauvoir would have said that the reaction of her older self, and of the narrator of 'The Age of Discretion', demonstrate to what extent apparent fatalities do reflect 'choice',²⁰ however we might disavow this. And the hard-line, young de Beauvoir-as-existential-ethicist would surely have said that the older de Beauvoir 'chooses poorly'.



Nikki Allford, Hatchery 2

If it makes any sense to talk about the exemplary, then the older woman's experience is patently non-exemplary, in terms of its conviction that she is passively undergoing a fate which has simply befallen her, and in regards to which she is helpless.

However, what changes in *Old Age* is the lessening of de Beauvoir's impatience with those who take the 'easy slope'. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir had used this language of complicity to criticize women's readiness to believe stereotypes about femininity and had described an existent's reduction of him- or herself to a 'thing' as a 'moral fault' if s/he 'consents' to it (although it may be inflicted on one).²¹ A passage from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* also serves as a reminder of just how scathing de Beauvoir could be as regards women:

there are still many who take shelter in the shadow of men; they adopt without discussion the opinions and value recognized by their husband or their lover, and that allows them to develop childish qualities which are forbidden to adults because they are based on a feeling of irresponsibility.... [This implies] a deep complicity with the world of men ... the difference which distinguishes [women] from an actual child [is that] ... the woman (I mean the western woman of today) chooses it.... Once there appears a possibility of liberation, it is resignation of freedom not to exploit the possibility, a resig-

nation which implies dishonesty and which is a positive fault.²²

These ‘volleys’ against the subjects she means to liberate²³ disappear in the work on old age. De Beauvoir does not sacrifice the language of bad faith, and it is a concept which informs *Old Age*, and is a frequent reference point in ‘The Age of Discretion’.²⁴ But the way in which she deploys this language puts the problems of *The Second Sex* into clearer perspective. In *Old Age*, those accused by de Beauvoir of bad faith are those who treat the aged as the Other, and those who do so at the expense of the aged, refusing to identify themselves, and more generally the human, in ageing. Thus, when she says, ‘we must stop cheating’, she is denouncing our indifference to the economic and social circumstances of the aged, an indifference which she thinks arises out of our refusal to recognize our fellows in the old.²⁵ In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir is torn between directing volleys at those who are indifferent to or responsible for women’s economic and social circumstances, and women themselves and how they deal with these circumstances. By contrast, the object of her ‘volleys’ in *Old Age* is more consistent. She is rarely critical of how a subject deals with their own lived situation and being-for-others as old, however much this might (for example, in her own case) seem open to critique. Instead, she is consistently critical in her theoretical work of the economic situation and social attitudes towards the aged.

This absence of moralism about how one deals with one’s own situation is interesting because de Beauvoir does repeatedly represent both ageing and dying as involving various states of (sometimes necessary) self-dishonesty. Again, her autobiographical work is informative in this regard. Describing her mother’s death in *A Very Easy Death*,²⁶ de Beauvoir considers it evident that her mother is aware at some level that she is fatally ill, but finds it easier to believe that she is recovering. This could be described as the bad faith which refuses to accept the facticity of dying. But, in the midst of de Beauvoir’s horror at her mother’s situation, we certainly don’t see any moralism directed at her mother’s psychic ruses. The tenacity with which her mother clings to life overwhelms de Beauvoir, as she insists on eating excruciating spoonfuls of yoghurt when her body is unable to absorb food due to intestinal cancer, and insists on doing all that might be ‘good for her’, in a context where her life can’t be saved and death is imminent.

In *Adieux*,²⁷ de Beauvoir similarly describes Sartre as a figure who does not want to die, and who combats

death through denial of his facticity. However, instead of a pointless attachment to what might be good for his health, Sartre’s refusal to accept his facticity is seen in his furiously embracing those things which most destroy his health – severe alcohol and drug abuse and stressful work conditions. De Beauvoir seems torn between respect for a Sartre who combats his circumstances and refuses to give in, and the surprised recognition of a Sartre who is dishonest to himself about the inevitable, and is denying his facticity – the extent to which he is destroying himself when he does want to live.

If de Beauvoir’s own response to old age is not depicted as exemplary, neither is Sartre’s response, nor that of her mother. While she admires her mother’s will to live, she recoils before her eager attachment to the paternalism and deceit of her carers. While she admires Sartre’s courage, she recoils before his self-deceit. Almost every discussion of old age which is autobiographical in de Beauvoir’s work embodies the state of denial of facticity, of transcendence or more generally of self-deceit. If we accept the suggestion that de Beauvoir’s philosophical ideas are successfully developed, and should be located in various interconnected literary forms, a point emerges more clearly from these autobiographical discussions. These aged lives could be described as exemplifying the point at which de Beauvoir must reject the very appeal to the exemplary as irrelevant.

From her earliest work, de Beauvoir assumes the moral importance of affirming one’s freedom. To refuse to do so is understood by her as a fault. It is, then, more than noteworthy that in later work which encompasses both her autobiographical and theoretical descriptions of ageing subjectivity she does not assess human responsibility in these terms. It might be argued that the difference is that those who are old have a limited lifetime remaining. One faces an objective limit in ageing and death that one does not face in femininity. Can the difference in her tone and approach be explained in these terms? It is true that her descriptions of old age (fictional and autobiographical) do repeatedly represent old age as a loss of freedom relating to a loss of horizons stretching far into the future. The echoes between the conclusion to *Force of Circumstance* and ‘The Age of Discretion’ are strong in this regard. But for the early de Beauvoir, if one has any possibility of affirming one’s freedom, it is resignation and a moral fault not to do so. For her at that time, then, even though one’s horizon’s might be severely limited in time, one would have a responsibility to affirm one’s possibilities of choice

and interpretation within that time, rather than seeing oneself as determined or limited.

Reformulating moral responsibility and bad faith

De Beauvoir values far-stretching horizons into the future and associates these with liberty. According to the existential ethics with which de Beauvoir associated her work, liberty is connected to an open future. But according to those same ethics, not even the loss of far-stretching horizons towards the end of a human's life should be a constraint on liberty. These shortening horizons still provide the context for constant expressions of freedom, and freedom should (according to de Beauvoir's earlier morality) be located in those expressions. In this respect, the repeated assumption, both of de Beauvoir and of her protagonists in 'The Age of Discretion', that their freedom is literally limited, would be open to criticism (by the de Beauvoir of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, or of *The Second Sex* for whom it is a subject's 'fault' to fail to affirm his or her freedom where possible). What is interesting is the change in emphasis. It is technically open to de Beauvoir to discuss the bad faith of her protagonists, her mother, Sartre, or herself. Recall how Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, emphasizes the freedom still available to the tortured victim, the conscripted soldier, his definition of how I 'choose' (am free to give the meaning) even to my birth, his account of the waiter as in bad faith or playing at being the waiter, reducing himself to his facticity in the most trivial example of daily play-acting at being oneself. Bad faith may be located in either the denial of transcendence or of facticity, and, so long as one is conscious, freedom can be located in the most constrained circumstances with a minimum of life remaining. And de Beauvoir, in her earlier work, certainly is demanding enough to require that freedom should be located by the subject where possible. But discussing old age, de Beauvoir has lost, not the necessary theoretical apparatus, but the moral impetus to make the charge of bad faith; it seems unimportant to her, a matter lacking interest.

In conjunction with this change in focus, the idea that one might be morally assessed or otherwise accountable for the way in which one negotiates these matters seems to vanish except in so far as one might negotiate this dilemma at the expense of others. This is true both of the autobiographical and the theoretical depictions of old age. In her later work, de Beauvoir's ethic 'we must stop cheating' is an ethic no longer directed by a subject at him- or herself: it is not an

art for living, 'live so as not to cheat yourself', but an ethic stabilized as one of how we treat others – 'don't displace onto the other what you won't recognize in yourself, at their expense'. Discussing the failure of a young person to recognize him- or herself in 'that old man' or 'this old woman', de Beauvoir analyses the social and even the economic harm which, she argues, results from that failure. For example, she locates as this kind of displacement a state politics or economics which literally impoverishes the aged, as in the more callous features of the French social, retirement and welfare state policy that she describes.

De Beauvoir's ethics no longer apply to one's negotiations with one's own ageing, though this negotiation may well involve forms of dishonesty, self-deceit and literal bad faith. Her ethics apply only at the point at which dishonesty about whether I will indeed be 'this old woman' lead me to fail to pressure the government to ensure adequate economic circumstances for the aged, because I don't want to admit that 'I am that older woman'. It will be noticed that de Beauvoir sees this lack of concern as a lack of solidarity, and a failure to wish to identify 'her' as 'like me'. Her argument manifests her tendency to valorize the recognition of the other as like, and it can be criticized as such. But her concern is really to criticize a form of psychic appropriation of the other. She offers an ethics which denounces my displacing onto 'that older woman' those aspects of myself that I refuse to recognize (the inevitability of my own ageing), literally at the expense of ensuring her reasonable economic circumstances.

What is clarified is that morality crucially involves our approach to the Other. We may well practise techniques of avoidance of the realities of our own freedom, or of our own facticity, but those techniques are not necessarily questionable in themselves. Modes of self-dishonesty may at times be inevitable, crucial to survival or to joy in life. They are questionable when their price is the impoverishment of the other. Impoverishment of the other is a complicated notion. While the example of the French welfare system is a simple one, other examples might be found in my impatience with or anger at another for manifesting an old age I refuse to recognize in myself, and another in my play-acting at being old, out of anxiety that I am old, where this might frighten or alienate my partner. If Sartre's indifference and self-abuse excessively impinged on others, it might still be criticized under this revised ethics. But de Beauvoir wastes no time in criticizing her mother for a harmless and necessary self-dishonesty about her own decay which impinges little on others.

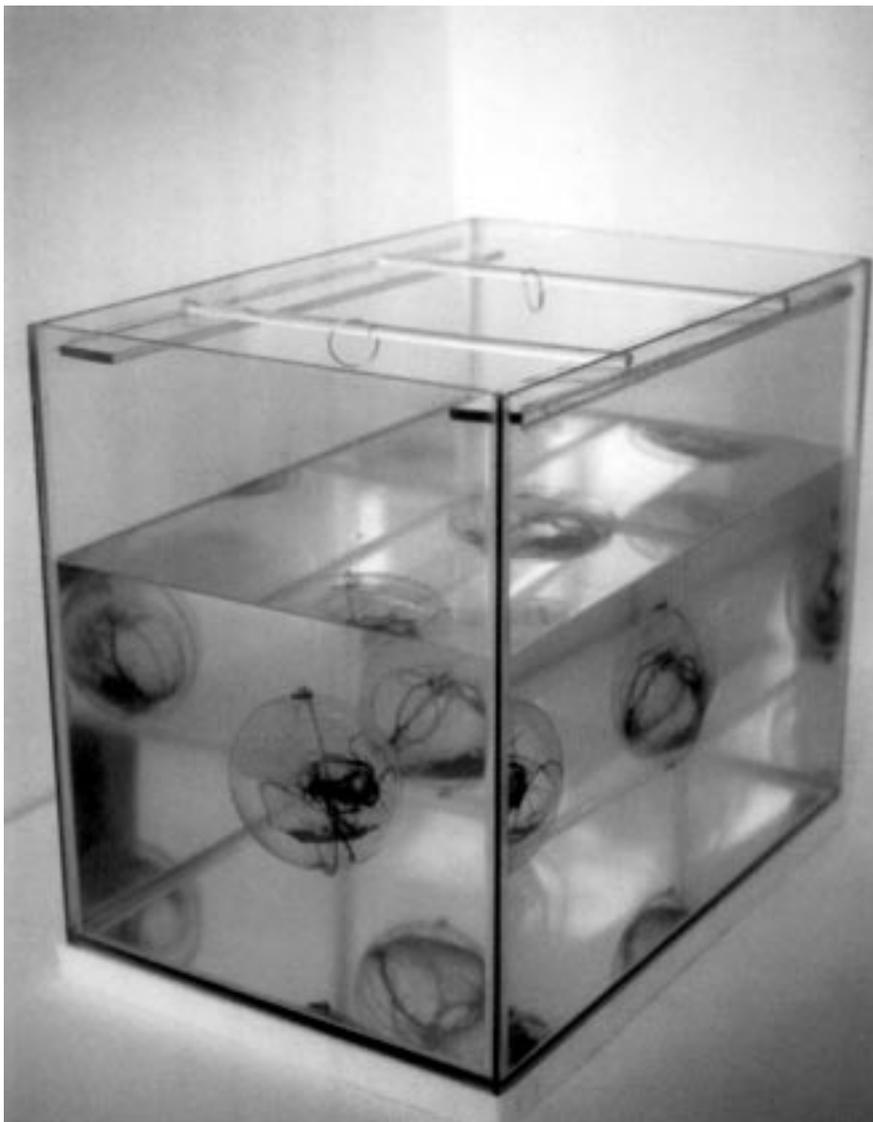
There are, then, important differences between the philosophical model used in *The Second Sex* and in *Old Age*. In the former, de Beauvoir has little sympathy for the ways in which women might deny their freedom or be complicit with gender norms. By contrast, de Beauvoir's work on old age becomes more sympathetic to the various ways in which one might well be in bad faith in dealing with an aged embodiment rendered Other. 'The Age of Discretion' concludes with a substantial change in the narrator's attitude towards André. At the outset, she assumes it to be through bad faith that he declares he can have no more ideas, or takes his pulse every ten minutes; an excessive play-acting at being old. The conclusion is that she has been unjust towards him, despite the fact that André admits that he had been over-acting 'being old', to some extent.

The work on old age provokes a rethinking of de Beauvoir's position on bad faith, since she becomes so much more committed to a defence of the lies one may need in order to live. To some extent, bad

faith remains a viable concept in de Beauvoir's work (both André and the narrator agree that the former had been in bad faith), but one which she does not much deploy because it is less relevant in her newer focus on responsibility towards the other. In addition, some of the philosophical work accomplished by de Beauvoir's fictional and autobiographical accounts of old age suggests that the viability of the concept of bad faith also begins to break down at times.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir took the position that women were both free and not free. Women are not free, in so far as they are the second sex historically, economically, in terms of their education, because they enter a world which has already decided they are the second sex, and because this affects women subjectively, physically, sexually, and so on. Women are however free, because like men they are free and equal existents whose choices arise in situation, even the situation of one's being the second sex. In other words, we must distinguish specific freedoms – of movement, expression, financial inde-

pendence, sexual choices (which, de Beauvoir argued, had been limited for many women) from the more general freedom of existential choice that women retain. The latter would be understood as a woman's freedom to interpret and respond subjectively from among a series of open possibilities, on the strength of the fact that she finds herself in the situation of being the second sex. De Beauvoir clearly did maintain in the earlier work that this freedom largely remained with women, and might be defined as the freedom of conscious response, or response of attitude to one's circumstances. The problem for the early work was that of whether one could coherently separate, on the one hand, the domain of one's circumstances – including one's embodiment, one's economic situation, the way in which one was socially regarded and so on – from,



Nikki Allford, Capsule

on the other hand, the domain of one's conscious and attitudinal response to these circumstances.

In this regard de Beauvoir conceded, in a way which departed from the philosophical perspective of Sartre, that social, economic and historical circumstances *did* also impinge on the domain of one's conscious response. One's consciousness is formed, she points out, to some extent, by these circumstances. For example, she argues that apparently reprehensible cases of women's 'docility' can not be separated from a circumscribed education which formed such docility.²⁸ Social and economic circumstances often produced women as psychologically shy, timid, and prone to shame and physical self-consciousness rather than freedom of movement and expression.

Theorizing the construction of femininity, de Beauvoir was obliged to recognize the inseparability of the domains of consciousness and material circumstances, embodiment and psychic attitude. Understanding gender identity as to some extent a social indoctrination which begins from an early age to form one's character, knowledge, expectations, personality and consciousness, de Beauvoir could not comfortably maintain that material circumstances merely provided the context for, rather than impinging on, one's free conscious choices. Circumstances and choices merged in *The Second Sex*, in a way which makes tacitly clear the extent to which they are maintained as separate spheres in *Being and Nothingness*, and unsatisfactorily so.

But it seems to be only in her considerations of old age that de Beauvoir draws the effective conclusion from the merging of these domains. It is here that she offers sensitive accounts of individuals engaging with inescapable circumstances they might wish to flee but must negotiate or accommodate, and in which categories of bad faith, honesty, denial, resignation, passivity, compliance, tolerance, acceptance, combat, transcendence, submission, deceit, self-deceit, all interplay and interchange interminably, inevitably. It is not that de Beauvoir makes no reference to notions of bad faith. It is, for example, a serious concern for the protagonists of the late work 'The Age of Discretion', each locating it in the other's negotiation with old age. Is de Beauvoir in 'bad faith' when she describes as a simple fatality the death of her sexual desire? The younger de Beauvoir might have said yes. Such changes don't just happen to us, but differently occur, are experienced and interpreted by us because of how we live, have lived and respond to our situation. But this doesn't mean that the affirmation of oneself in sexual desire necessarily constitutes the absence of bad

faith. De Beauvoir suggested that her long affair with Lanzmann was a means of freeing herself from her age.²⁹ To affirm herself in the affair was (in her view) both a refusal to recognize the reality of her age and an affirmation of her transcendence over that facticity, and a refusal to reduce herself to her age.

There may be literal undecidability between whether de Beauvoir's mother's tireless fight for her health or Sartre's tireless self-abuse are the bad faith of dishonesty about the facticity they deny, or the affirmation of freedom. André is in bad faith, play-acting at being 'the old man'; yet the narrator concludes that he is also literally losing his faculties, and that the bad faith has also been her own, in denying the reality of old age's limitations. The concept of bad faith often remains coherent – play-acting at being a thing, an old person, remains identifiably bad faith in this work. But there is a point at which the distinction between bad faith and the appropriate affirmation of freedom does break down. While it remains an occasional reference, it is also a collapsing concept in the later work.

The autobiographical material could be interpreted as a philosophical recognition of the occasional indeterminacy of bad faith. Positive protest, refusal to be determined by circumstances, can sometimes be literally indistinguishable from the refusal to admit them, and this tells us a lot about the instability of the concept. I have suggested that this is a point depicted autobiographically: in repeated depictions of modes of ageing which are *concurrently* deceitful and affirmative. De Beauvoir's mother is dishonest with herself about her facticity – she cannot truly believe she has long to live. She denies her facticity in earnestly doing all that is good for her. Sartre denies the reality of his own facticity. He wishes to live, and denies his knowledge of the limits of his health by doing all that is bad for him. By contrast, André is said to be in bad faith not for denying the reality of his facticity, but for reducing himself to it – he sees himself as a thing, an 'old person', and in so doing is dishonest about the freedom he does have. The character comes to confess this: "Yet to a certain extent you were right to say I was putting it on," said André. "I overdid it ... I determined to take myself in hand. I don't want to be an old bore. Old is quite enough: bore, no."³⁰

However, I want to consider one final aspect of the novella, which recounts the narrator's developing conviction that old age is a literal psychological and physical limitation. The narrator first discovers that her intellectual work has become pointless and repetitive, and then that she has lost her physical strength:

I who used to climb so cheerfully in former days ... was gasping and panting.... I was no longer in control of my heart or my breathing.... I had said to André, 'I don't see what one loses in growing old'. Well, I could see now, all right.... My body was letting me down. I was no longer capable of writing.... What nonsense, this intoxicating sense notion of progress, of upward movement, that I had cherished, for now the moment of collapse was at hand! It had already begun. And now it would be very fast and very slow: we were going to turn into really old people.³¹

Now the narrator's realization that she has been unjust towards André relates not to an ethics according to which his bad faith would be irrelevant, but instead to her view she had not formerly appreciated the physical realities of old age. Now the narrator herself seems to be enclosing herself also in an interpretation of herself as a thing with a limited future. The lesson she learns is that she should avoid thinking about the realities of her future, and her question is whether it will be possible to live in a state of deliberate disavowal of those realities:

It was false teeth, sciatica, infirmity, intellectual barrenness, loneliness in a strange world we would no longer understand and that would carry on without us. Shall I succeed in not lifting my gaze to those horizons?³²

The moral seems to be that living old age viably will require a perpetual state of bad faith, a denial of one's own facticity, deliberately *not* lifting one's gaze to one's own horizons. This is no longer a perspective on the self condemned by the narrator, but one to which she resigns herself.

An adequate ethics?

One of the many strong aspects of Debra Bergoffen's interpretation of de Beauvoir is her highlighting of the fact that from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* onwards, de Beauvoir would place the moral onus on us to affirm the freedom of others. But the problem with the early work is that de Beauvoir still interconnects this ethics with her condemnation of those who do not affirm their own freedom. This occurs repeatedly throughout *The Second Sex*, despite the fact that de Beauvoir depicts the impingement on the very conscious freedom which must be autonomous to merit her tones of condemnation. The problems this causes are highlighted all the more when we consider the second context – an analysis of old age – in which de Beauvoir has relinquished this approach, no longer condemning those who do not affirm their own freedom. The equivalent approach in *The Second*

Sex with regard to women would probably have been to criticize the economic and social circumstances of women, and to criticize men for not 'recognizing themselves' in women, while not criticizing women for failing to affirm their freedom unless this occurred at the expense of others. In many ways, this would have produced the consistency in approach missing from *The Second Sex*. Commentators have frequently discussed its absence of consistency on these points, and here the supposition is that consistency would have produced the better work.

But perhaps de Beauvoir's discussions of old age also clarify what could be lost with this very consistency. De Beauvoir does not submit to critical reflection her attitude towards her own ageing. She does not seem to consider herself responsible for it, and appears more than sympathetic to her narrator's abhorrence at the thought of swimming in a bathing costume in front of her own partner. She does not subject to scrutiny the supposition that she has, in old age, 'lost her body', or that there will never again be a man or a mountain path or a walk in the snow. Just as she has done in *The Second Sex*, these are depicted as physiological truths, real limits, and this does seem to express her will to limit her possibilities. It is de Beauvoir herself who has argued that there are no physiological truths. Instead, there is only the intersection of the social, the physiological, conventional understandings of aged or feminine embodiment, and her own choices in these regards. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir depicts women's freedom as impinged upon by her being-for-others – her subjection to social constructions of femininity. In *Old Age*, she depicts the freedom of the aged as impinged upon by subjection to social constructions of old age. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir still regards it as a moral fault if women fail to locate the freedoms available to them in this situation. This leads to the contradictory tenors of that work. In *Old Age*, these contradictory tenors are no more, and their absence in de Beauvoir's criticism is certainly a relief. But with their loss, it may be that something else important is also lost: the potential for an important critique of herself.

If we can apply de Beauvoir's modified ethics to her autobiographical and fictional depictions of ageing, we notice that de Beauvoir herself could be considered accountable only at the point at which her own dishonesty impinges on the freedom of others. Otherwise, it seems to be de Beauvoir's own business to cope with her ageing in the belief that she is a passive victim to the loss of her body, all possibility of new desires, and the refusal by mountain paths of her feet. It could be

argued (fairly easily) that her attitudes – personal and published – do reinforce and disseminate restrictive and demeaning attitudes to the aged. In that sense, the ethics of de Beauvoir’s autobiographical depictions would still fail by her own standards. What still seems missing, however, is the theoretical impetus that might provoke de Beauvoir to be more self-reflective about her own experiences of embodiment. Many of her depictions do need critical scrutiny, and perhaps in ways which outstrip the (admittedly already very complex) question of whether she lives her old age at the expense of the other. Again, it is de Beauvoir’s own material which is particularly eloquent in this regard. She demarcates her own old age as a time when ‘new desires wither before they can be born’, a time when she loses the things she enjoys – mountain paths, solitary morning snows, exhausted collapses in hay. This is the time, for de Beauvoir, of the loss of the body, and this is interconnected with a notion of the physiological limit. By contrast, consider *A Very Easy Death*, in which her mother, who is bedridden with cancer with few days to live, is autobiographically depicted as *returned* to her body:

What touched our hearts that day was the way she noticed the slightest agreeable sensation: it was as though, at the age of seventy-eight, she were waking afresh to the miracle of living. While the nurse was settling her pillows the metal of a tube touched her thigh – ‘It’s cool! How pleasant’. She breathed in the smell of eau-de-Cologne and talcum powder – ‘How good it smells’.³³

I have argued that at times de Beauvoir’s autobiographical material speaks philosophically to the collapse or non-viability of the concept of bad faith. This is seen in her depiction of her mother’s last weeks, in which bad faith, crucial (I believe) to the politics of *The Second Sex*, becomes both an irrelevant and at times unstable notion. Yet the material also serves as a reminder of the occasional value of critical reflection on freedoms available in constrained circumstances. De Beauvoir does reinvolve too quickly the notion of the physiological limit, in terms which are also undermined by her own material. Her mother finds sensuous pleasure in a state of extreme bodily degradation, and de Beauvoir does judge too quickly that her own old age must equate with the loss of desire.³⁴ What kind of ethics, one wonders, would be adequate to the question of her mother’s responsibilities and her own?

Notes

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard, André Deutsch and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965, p. 653.

2. An important exception is Elaine Marks, *Simone de Beauvoir: Encounters with Death*, Rutgers University Press, Brunswick NJ, 1973.
3. Karen Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996, p. 107.
4. The implicit ethic here is that he should be able to, and would, if not for the depreciation of women and the aged. One can challenge this depiction of recognition as the ‘same’ or as ‘like’ as an ideal model. What concerns de Beauvoir, however, is the reasons why the older person, or the woman, fail to be perceived as ‘same’ or ‘like’.
5. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, Picador, London, 1988, p. 29.
6. Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, p. 320.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
8. De Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, p. 656.
9. De Beauvoir, *Old Age*, p. 15.
10. In her chapter ‘From Maturity to Old Age’ in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that women grow old more suddenly than men: ‘woman is suddenly deprived of her femininity; she is still relatively young when she loses the erotic attractiveness and the fertility which, in the view of society and in her own, provide the justification of her existence’ (p. 587). In fact, in this chapter de Beauvoir also argues that a woman might greet menopause and her fifties with some relief, particularly if childbearing, pregnancy and sex have been nothing but a burden: ‘Rid of her duties, she finds freedom at last’ (p. 595). The problem, however, is that she will still have to live with the societal depreciation of a woman over fifty (p. 596).
11. De Beauvoir, *Old Age*, p. 12.
12. De Beauvoir, ‘The Age of Discretion’ in *The Woman Destroyed*, trans. Patrick O’Brian, Harper Collins, London, 1984, pp. 11–12, 26.
13. De Beauvoir, *Old Age*, p. 316.
14. Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1997, p. 187.
15. De Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, pp. 655, 656 (translation modified).
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 656–7.
17. In the chapter ‘From Maturity to Old Age’ in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir claims ‘the crisis of the change of life is felt much less keenly by women who have not staked everything on their femininity’ (p. 587). In later work it becomes apparent that de Beauvoir feels her own ageing very keenly indeed, and this does seem to indicate how much she staked on her femininity, a point half admitted in the conclusion to *Force of Circumstance*.
18. De Beauvoir, ‘The Age of Discretion’, p. 59.
19. De Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, p. 656.
20. Here, the key issue is the existential concept of ‘choice’, since this implies not (necessarily) conscious choice, nor choices necessarily made at the time. A series of choices, interpretations and engagements with the world which have been made throughout one’s life lead to subjective phenomena which (only) seem like a fatality.
21. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 730.
22. De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Citadel, New York, 1976, pp. 37–8.

23. I am thinking here of Jean Elshtain's pithy summary of de Beauvoir's early analyses of women: 'Beauvoir launches volleys against her subjects in the name of liberating them' (*Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981, p. 307). This point is also discussed in Penelope Deutscher, *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, pp. 169–93.
24. This is less apparent in the English translation, since 'mauvaise foi' has been translated with words such as 'dishonesty'.
25. De Beauvoir, *Old Age*, p. 12.
26. De Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O'Brian, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969.
27. Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieux: Farewell to Sartre*, trans. Patrick O'Brian, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986.
28. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 730.
29. De Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, p. 285.
30. De Beauvoir, 'The Age of Discretion', p. 69.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
33. De Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, p. 44.
34. Events, desires and pleasures recounted by de Beauvoir about the period after *Force of Circumstance* obviously give the lie to this perception of old age. De Beauvoir's depiction of her mother's death, and its relation to her concept of desire and Eros, are discussed more fully in Penelope Deutscher, 'Living Aged Skin: Simone de Beauvoir on Desire, Embodiment and *Old Age*', in S. Ahmed et al., eds, *Skin*, Routledge, London and New York, forthcoming.

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