

**Death
And Anti-Death,
Volume 4:
Twenty Years
After De Beauvoir,
Thirty Years
After Heidegger**

**Edited By
Charles Tandy, Ph.D.**

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Ageing And Existentialism: Simone De Beauvoir And The Limits Of Freedom

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Die early or grow old: there is no other alternative.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*

Introduction

This paper addresses Simone de Beauvoir's transformation of existential ethics through her investigation into the process of ageing and its unique relationship freedom. In *The Coming of Age* [*La Vieillesse*, more appropriately translated as, *Old Age*] (1970) Beauvoir divides the text into two distinct discussions in an attempt to break open the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding ageing. The first part takes up old age as it appears as an object of investigation in anthropology, ethnology, and history. The second part speaks of aged "being-in-the-world," or the lived experience of being old. In both sections, Beauvoir writes about ageing as a scandal—either as it is stereotyped and systematically demeaned by society, or as it is unwillingly submitted to by the aged individuals themselves. I argue that, in this later treatise, Beauvoir's understanding of freedom and the ethical weight of actions is radically altered from her earlier moral works. For the young Beauvoir, the ambiguity of existence—that impossible arrangement of situated freedom—reveals to us the opening of future possibilities, choice, and the transcendence of brute facticity. Death, although certainly the absolute future limit of our action, is always unrealized and unrealizable. In her discussion of old age, however, the future functions no longer as an opening but as a wall into which the elderly feel themselves crashing.

Whereas the future allows for projective activity in most adults, aged individuals find their projects falling into the ever-expanding past as their future simply holds the inevitability of death. This leads Beauvoir into a major recasting of her earlier existentialism as the experiences of engaging the world through projects, the lived experience of time, and our being-for-death are all rethought in light of what it means to grow old. I conclude with the suggestion that, although Beauvoir's philosophy of ageing seems to go against everything her existential ethics stand for, perhaps she has given us a more complete ethics of ambiguity by taking seriously forces that work to curb the individual's freedom.

Part I: Individual Freedom and the Open Project

Beginning in the early 1940's with the onset of World War II, Beauvoir's "moral period," inaugurates a period in her life where she focuses heavily on the ethical implications of existential philosophy. Specifically, in these works Beauvoir attends to the ways in which absolute freedom and responsibility carry a moral obligation to live an authentic, i.e., metaphysically honest life. Her interest lies both in analyzing the ways in which human beings flee their freedom by adopting false absolute ideals and belief systems (bad faith) as well as in developing strategies to avoid this bad faith through transcendent activity.

In her first full-length philosophical essay, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944), Beauvoir prioritizes *doing* over *being* as the individual is in essence, *nothing*. Put differently, in a radical departure from Enlightenment subjectivity, Beauvoir (along with Jean-Paul Sartre) posits human being as the activity which negates the givenness of the world rather than as a thing like other things with a fixed and knowable essence. This idea can be captured by the term "project," which Beauvoir utilizes throughout her writings. A project is a

conscious, freely-chosen action that is not only willed in the present moment, but into the future as well. This brings together not only her emphasis on radical freedom, but its critical counterpoint of total responsibility. If I will, for example, to fire an insubordinate employee today, I must be sure that I freely choose and will this act and all of the consequences that follow from it into the future as well. Nothing in my situation forces me to fire this individual—no matter, for example, how much pressure my superiors may give me to do so—rather, I alone make this decision. The idea of the project is therefore crucial to understanding the acting agent. The project reveals the very freedom that allows us to surpass our situation—those aspects of our existence that we do not choose but which serve as the limits that allow our freedom to realize itself through transcendence. For Beauvoir, one's project is in no way predetermined or valuable in itself. What I choose to do takes on meaning and value by the very fact that I choose it. As such, *no* project is in itself good or evil, but becomes so as it is chosen by a particular individual, in a particular social, political and temporal milieu.

Central to this model of freedom is the idea that we transcend our finitude into an indefinite and open future. As such, the future, rather than being a set "place" or "goal" that we are running to meet, serves as the condition of possibility for all of our actions. Heavily influenced by her reading of Martin Heidegger at this stage in her philosophical development, Beauvoir addresses the idea of the ultimate future destination—one's own death. Arguing against Heidegger's notion of being-for-death as the most commanding weight on our actions, she states instead that "human being exists in the form of projects that are not projects toward death but projects toward singular ends" (PC, 115). Beauvoir means to emphasize that human beings undertake meaningful actions not because they are going to die, but because to choose a course of action, to infuse it

with value through the act of choosing it, is the clearest expression of our freedom. Death is certainly a future event, but one that we never actually experience and thus it is not the driving force of our projective activity. Death can not be the ultimate limit of our finitude because, "for the living me, my death is not" and further, "while I am living, death is not here" (PC, 114). In other words, according to Beauvoir early in her philosophical career, not only is the future a pure opening of possibilities that allows me to act in the present, but my finitude is found within the heart of my actions themselves and *not* in the fact of my eventual biological termination.¹

Beauvoir wholeheartedly rejects what she considers to be the "attitude of seriousness" throughout her early ethics. The serious attitude and all of its variations reveals itself any time an individual adheres to an impersonal universal (such as the state, a particular religion, a profession, etc.) at the expense of taking responsibility for adopting this set of beliefs. Any time I try to avoid responsibility for an action by appealing to the dictates of my country/religion/profession, I am acting in the spirit of seriousness. The unapologetic emphasis on individual freedom and the rejection of absolute values certainly drew criticism from many different fronts. For example, in 1945 Beauvoir wrote an article entitled "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom," which defends existentialism against critics who chide that it focuses on humanity's wretchedness and denies any possibility for true love or friendship. Rebutting these assertions, she writes: "existentialists affirm that man is transcendence; his life is engagement in the world, movement toward the Other, *surpassing of the present toward a future that even death does not limit*" (EPW, 212; italics my own). Remaining true to her earlier embrace of the project and the rejection of the Heideggerian understanding of being-for-death, Beauvoir reiterates her stance that the ultimate end is not death but rather the free surpassing of the present moment into the

future. These ideas are largely inchoate in earlier texts, but are given a full-blooded account in her next major ethical treatise.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948) Beauvoir elucidates her understanding of metaphysical freedom in situation more fully than in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. In this work, she begins from the understanding of the fundamental ambiguity of each existent. For Beauvoir, a human being is both a part of the world (our facticity) and yet nothing (totally free). Instead of trying to overcome this ambiguity—a strategy most philosophers historically attempt—Beauvoir asks that we paradoxically assume it. To deny that we are either free or wholly outside of any situation is a form of inauthenticity.² To say that existence is ambiguous "is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won" (EA, 129). As such, Beauvoir emphasizes transcendence over immanence, or what can be understood as choice over brute facticity.³ Furthermore, she recommits to her earlier idea that one's project is not predetermined and that value is not fixed in any given end but lies in the choice itself. An authentic individual refuses "to set up as absolutes the ends toward which my transcendence thrusts itself" (EA, 14) because of a recognition that the "project is never founded; it founds itself" (EA, 26). Beauvoir adheres to the position that the very act of choosing to pursue an end makes that end worth pursuing. Although there is nothing intrinsically "good" or "evil" in any action, clearly it becomes so once it is chosen in a particular social and political situation. Murder is not intrinsically evil as there are no absolutes (and one could imagine a scenario where murder might be justified) but becomes so, for example, in the historical context of the mass-murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust.

Expounding upon the notion of the project, Beauvoir focuses on the relationship of the past and future to present action. In a philosophically rich discussion of childhood, she explains that the reason no moral question presents itself to children is because they do not have a fully developed experience of time. Up until the crises of adolescence, children generally do not recognize themselves in the past nor do they project themselves into the future. Until this happens, the child is not a moral agent as mature action requires that we return to the past to justify it and give it meaning. In addition, "my freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future" (EA, 82). This two-fold movement into the past and future gives each act its particularly human dimension. Without such vigilance, the past becomes "no longer anything but a stupid and opaque fact" (EA, 27) and my future is nothing more than a vague agitation.

Central to Beauvoir's theory of time is the idea that the future in particular is not a definite end point but is the very possibility of action. As such, it should not matter *when* the actual conclusion of life falls because the future is always indeterminate. In theory, then, how old a person is should in no way make the future more determined than any other time of life. True, it may be easier to deceive oneself about the end of life when one is young and healthy. However, from an existentialist standpoint, the ability to deceive oneself is in no way a sign of moral strength but rather a clear indication of bad faith. We may conclude from this brief study of her early ethics that one's age is merely one element among many that make up the situation. Age, like race, physical ability, sex, etc., is a limit only insofar as it presents us with the opportunity to exercise our freedom through transcendence. In this light, I turn to Beauvoir's later existentialism where we see the extensive impact her studies of old age have on her ethics.

Part II: The Ethics of Ageing

In the *Force of Circumstance Vol. 2*, a mature Beauvoir writes of her own ageing in a less than positive light. At the age of fifty-five, she tells us in her memoirs that age has taken her by surprise and she is horrified by its appearance. She sees herself as "dead and mummified" in the eyes of the youth (FOC, 376) and ravaged by time when gazing at her reflection in the looking glass. In her ruminations on senescence, she writes:

To grow old is to set limits on oneself, to shrink. I have fought always not to let them label me but I have not been able to prevent the years from enmeshing me. I shall live for a long time in this little landscape where my life has come to rest...For years I thought my work still lay ahead, and now I find it is behind me. (FOC, 377)

These words surprise those readers of Beauvoir's early existentialist writings as she so bluntly seems to contradict her earlier beliefs. Ageing should not set limits on the world (any more than any other aspect of one's facticity) as the world of possibilities is always infinite. Certainly, being labeled anything—old, the Other, woman, etc.—only truly impacts us if we submit to it of our own free will; time cannot ensnare us any more than an external judgment by another makes us into what they say we are.⁴ Age should in no way prevent us from engaging in projects because creation does not belong solely to young people but to *all* people insofar as we are human. Penelope Deutscher is thus correct when she writes that Beauvoir loses "the potential for an important critique of herself" (Deutscher, 14) in her musings on the limitations and drawbacks of ageing.

Although Beauvoir's memoirs offer fruitful ground for exploring her changing ethical ideas on how age figures into freedom, projective activity, and the moral agent in general, it is clear that the most philosophically appropriate text to turn to is her monumental study of senectitude, *Old Age*. Often compared to *The Second Sex* in format and approach, *Old Age* (translated in English euphemistically as *The Coming of Age*) exhaustively studies the elderly through the lenses of sociology, anthropology, biology, history, literature, and personal observation.⁵ Much like *The Second Sex* (published twenty years earlier in 1949) it discusses the marginalization of a major segment of society, although often with more radical conclusions. The alienation of the elderly person is even more far-reaching than that of woman as he is "to a far more radical extent than a woman, a mere object. She is necessary to society whereas he is of no worth at all. He cannot be used in barter, nor for reproductive purposes, nor as a producer: he is no longer anything but a burden" (OA, 89). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that women are trapped in a kind of mid-point between subjectivity (free, transcendent self-actualization) and objectivity (characterized by men as body or sex). This fixes them as the Other in the dominant masculine power structure for the purposes of the masculine definition of Self. The elderly, for Beauvoir, turn out to be even more disadvantaged because, unlike women who can offer reproductive and domestic services, they have very little to offer society. With their productive and reproductive powers behind them, the elderly exist simply as parasitic objects in a system which favors youth over experience (OA, 210). This disability is due to a variety of reasons (as Beauvoir is always loathe to boil a problem down to one cause alone) including their declining strength, health and mental abilities, as well as the tendency in most cultures to prioritize the needs and desires of the young. As a result, Beauvoir consistently characterizes the aged as hidden, silenced, nonexistent, marginalized, and scandalized in the societies in

which they live. Consequently, they live lives full of boredom, sadness, fear, and vulnerability.

Whereas the oppression of women is something to which they are conditioned from the moment of birth, old age comes upon all of us as a surprise. It is others who one day tell us that we are old and "Whether we like it or not, in the end we submit to the outsider's point of view" (OA, 290). There is, then, a kind of violence done upon each of us as we suddenly find ourselves being cast as "old" by others around us and by the dominant social structures. And even though everyone carries this potential of age (or this "Other") within themselves, we do not recognize it when it captures us. Only other people get old, we do not. One day, when society determines we are old, it is a most unwelcome shock. As with women in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir locates the problem in the function of the aged as object in the self-definition of the young as subject. However, unlike *The Second Sex*, which found that oftentimes women are complicitous in their own denigration and oppression, *Old Age* places the blame almost entirely on social factors, rather than the individual choices and attitudes of the elderly themselves. This is a tremendous shift for Beauvoir who earlier acknowledged that "If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, *it is because she herself fails to bring about this change*" (SS, xxv; italics my own).⁶ Now, society is almost omnipotent in its ability to discard the elderly into the abyss of dereliction, disregard, and silence.

With the writing of *Old Age*, Beauvoir shifts the focus away from conscious choice and instead targets the ways in which culture denies us our freedom. Deutscher argues that what we find in the transition between *The Second Sex* and *Old Age* is the increasing rejection of "freedom of consciousness as primary in relation to one's situation" (Deutscher, 8). Whereas the young Beauvoir advocated

transcendence as the defining factor in our humanity (so long as one is aware that one is free) the mature Beauvoir places a much greater significance on the situation of the elderly as assuring their wretchedness. In order to tease out how this shift affects her overall existentialist ethics, it is necessary to show the ways in which Beauvoir reconceptualizes her earlier ideas of 1) the project, 2) the future and 3) being-for-death.

II.a. The Project

Beauvoir consistently refers to the aged as “objects” rather than subjects in society. This has everything to do with their physical and mental powerlessness as well as the ways in which society disenfranchises them. When powerless, a person becomes not only an object, but a burden that must be taken care of in some form or another. This powerlessness can also be seen as a direct result of the diminution in projective activity. Beauvoir makes the observation that despite “some exceptions, the old man no longer *does* anything. He is defined by an *exis*, not by a *praxis*: a being, not a doing” (OA, 217). Beauvoir draws our attention to the situation of the elderly who no longer work but who simply “pass the time.” Not contributing anything to society through productive labor (*praxis*) they simply take up space by existing (*exis*). Although they may engage in any number of activities, for Beauvoir, these are not projects in the sense of freely-chosen and willed actions that transcend the current situation into an open future. The real question is: why aren’t they? Surely an outing to the senior center to play table-tennis or a game of chess with a neighbor is not *obviously* a project in the way that writing a novel, acting in a film, or building a house is; yet do these actions not carry within them the necessary elements of free choice and responsibility? Why would sewing a dress count as a project when one is young, but only be a way to pass the time when one is elderly?

In many ways, the answer lies in Beauvoir’s heavy-handed treatment of the social forces at work against the elderly. Since society finds them to be useless (OA, 219) and valueless (OA, 267) then whatever they do can only be seen as empty pursuits. There is certainly some value in Beauvoir submitting her earlier emphasis on the individual’s unlimited freedom to a harsh critique in this later text. However, with this critique Beauvoir has potentially lost a vital component of existentialism and thereby made the solution impossible. Certainly, if society tells me that what I do is useless, I have an uphill battle finding the worth of my actions. But this does not mean that what I do is *in fact* useless, as value is conferred by human beings and is in no way intrinsic to the object itself. If it is in essence worthless, then there is no way to overcome the shameful treatment of the elderly because there is no free existent there to liberate. To facilitate an understanding of how it is that Beauvoir can claim that the elderly (with rare exceptions) do not engage in projects but merely exist, I turn to her discussion of how our experience of time changes as we age.

II.b. Time

In trying to make sense of how our relationship to time and projective activity is altered, Beauvoir writes that:

The time that a man looks upon as his own is that at which he conceives and carries out his projects: then there comes a period when they close behind him...The elderly man, unproductive and powerless, sees himself as a left-over from a former age. That is why he so readily turns towards the past: that was the time that belonged to him, the time when he looked upon himself as a first-class individual, a living being. (OA, 435)

The time for projects now past and seen as belonging to those younger than themselves, the elderly turn away from the future and instead focus on their former experiences.⁷ As a result, the elderly are prone to daydreaming and storytelling about past exploits and are relatively uninterested in future events. As Deutscher observes, the enigma is that, according to Beauvoir's earlier ethics, "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" (Deutscher, 11). Presumably, upon becoming an adult, and thus recognizing oneself in the flow of time, one is caught up in the futural thrust of activity. As no one knows *when* life will end, it should not matter how old one is. Earlier Beauvoirean ethics maintain this position. And yet, Beauvoir's understanding of age shows it profoundly affecting how we experience time. In one and the same breath, Beauvoir writes that, "For human reality, existing means existing in time: in the present we look towards the future by means of plans that go beyond our past" and immediately afterwards states, "*age changes our relationship with time: as the years go by our future shortens, while our past grows heavier*" (OA, 361; italics my own). At first, this might not seem so strange an insight. Common wisdom acknowledges how much time "speeds up" the older we become. What is surprising about Beauvoir's point is the ethical implications of this claim. If our experience of time changes, then what defines action necessarily changes too. As we age, our pasts become more substantial and thus exert a greater pull on us from behind. This movement drives us to focus on the past instead of contemplating future action. At the same time, we paradoxically speed more rapidly into the future as time seems to rush by at an increasingly swift pace. Although we experience time as moving us forward more quickly, the future is no longer the open and indeterminate ground for the possibility of action as such but rather the inevitability of death. Beauvoir explains: "life

bases itself upon self-transcendence. But this transcendence comes up against death, particularly when a great age has been reached" (OA, 372). She continues:

In order to understand to what an extent the old person, confronted with his future, is bound hand and foot, we must now consider how he sees this future. As we shall see, it seems to him *finished*, doubly finished, in that it is both short and closed. It is the more closed the shorter it is, and seems all the shorter for being the more closed. (OA, 373)⁸

Suddenly, Beauvoir characterizes a different lived experience of time for different ages. On the one hand, this is a spectacular phenomenological account of lived experience. As it is true that experiential time changes according to one's situation, Beauvoir presents a novel philosophy of the lived time of the aged. The past becomes so vast as to be able to lose oneself in it and the future appears truncated. As she had done with the child and adolescent in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she now gives voice to the experiences of those left out of most philosophical discussions. On the other hand, this is a far cry from the young Beauvoir who wrote passionately that nothing, not even death, limits my project. Here, my future appears as finished once I cross into old age, and this means necessarily that my activities no longer carry the same ethical weight as those younger than myself. For those who experience the future as open, their choices and responsibilities are somehow greater as they recognize their contribution to the creation of human meaning. However, as one grows old, "One has exchanged an indefinite future—and *one had a tendency to look upon it as infinite*—for a finite future. In earlier days we could see no boundary-mark upon the horizon: now we do see one" (OA, 378; italics my own).

Beauvoir looks almost condescendingly upon the idea that future can appear unlimited, and yet, this very infinitude is what allows for us to choose from boundless potentialities.

The denial of the future has implications on the present as well. Instead of being swept up in the current of time and thrust forward into future possibilities, the elderly tend to engage in repetitive behavior. In an attempt to deal with the anxiety of being vulnerable members of an uncaring society, the elderly “take refuge in habit” (OA, 466). Rather than experiencing the present as novel, it becomes a mere repetition of sedimented behaviors. Whereas the young Beauvoir would have found this to be evidence of bad faith, a mature Beauvoir is sympathetic to the tendency toward routine in the elderly population. Consequently, we find Beauvoir radically reconceptualizing the lived experience of time—past, present and future—which necessarily carries with it an important set of ethical questions concerning individual action, personal responsibility, and the impact of social institutions on both.

II.c. Being-for-death

Returning to *The Force of Circumstance*, we find Beauvoir contemplating her own individual relationship to ageing, the future, and death. Cursing the “pox of time,” she laments:

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. Death is no longer a brutal event in the far distance; it haunts my sleep. Awake, I sense its shadow between the world and me: it has already begun. (FOC, 379)

As prolific of an autobiographer as she was, Beauvoir practically invites her readers to take her own experiences of ageing into consideration when reading her philosophical treatment in *Old Age*. As we see above, Beauvoir felt her being-for-death in an acute and paralyzing way. No longer that anxiety shared by all finite existents who have a sense of their own mortality gnawing at the edge of each of their undertakings, Beauvoir now feels as if death is already present—as if, in fact, she is already in part dead.

The autobiographical sentiments above are echoed in *Old Age* where Beauvoir writes: “For the aged person death is no longer a general, abstract fate: it is a personal event, an event that is near at hand” (OA, 440). What all human beings experience as a vague future event (that is never in fact “here” as other events are⁹) the elderly experience as very real and intimate affair. She is correct that the older one is, the “closer” death can feel. However, such a blanket statement does little to clarify the problem. One is a bit surprised to find the woman who lived through World War II and the Nazi occupation of Paris—whose friends faced and often succumbed to death in war—lamenting that *age* is what makes death less of an abstraction and more “real.” Additionally, such a position neglects the “presence” of death to critically or even terminally ill individuals. Beauvoir herself writes of her own mother’s death to cancer in *A Very Easy Death* (1964) where she depicts the struggle of a woman who is both elderly and ill. In that work, the role of the disease plays a far more profound effect in Madame de Beauvoir’s final days than does her age. It is the cancer that forces her to become a defenseless thing, hardly different than a corpse, whose life carries on due only to “its own stupid momentum” (VED, 20). It seems as if Beauvoir, in the desire to bring both her personal confrontation with mortality, as well as the social plight of the elderly to the foreground, succumbs herself to the over-generalizations that she disdains in her earlier ethics. Instead of elaborating on

the myriad ways that death can be closer or farther away from everyday experience, she makes age the supreme death sentence.

Perhaps the primary theme running throughout *Old Age* is the idea that the Otherness of age is enforced from outside of the elderly individual. We are told by others that we are old. As with women being forced into the subservient role of the Other, no one willingly submits to the definition of being elderly. In fact, whereas some women knowingly buy into the role of secondary individual to garner certain benefits, there is virtually no remuneration for ageing. More significantly, the unwillingness to enter into senescence has to do with the utter sense of uselessness and dependency that is forced upon the aged in most societies. As suggested above, the role the elderly play in society is of the abject—the discarded, rejected and denied limits of human subjectivity.¹⁰ As a result of the deterioration of health and the biological slowdown that accompanies age, the aged experience a kind of inertia which is evocative of death (OA, 11). Because of their nearness to death—the supreme abject—the elderly all too easily serve the purposes of self-definition for those with the power in society. One is young, strong and in control precisely because one is *not* old, decrepit and powerless. Coupled with the biological inertia of ageing, the cultural forces which align the elderly with death are powerful. There is social utility to having segment of society existing “outside” of the “normal” population. Yet, it does not fully explain why Beauvoir makes it seem as if the individuals themselves have no choice but to accept this self-definition.

“Time is carrying him towards an end—death—which is not *his* and which is not postulated or laid down by any project” (OA, 217). What is so fascinating about Beauvoir’s observation is that the general human condition—mortality, finitude and being-for-death—are seen as a problem specific

to the elderly. In a very real sense, all adults who recognize the flow of time are being carried towards death, and yet the elderly have a more concrete experience of this uniquely human phenomenon. As early as *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir rejects Heidegger’s idea of being-for-death as focusing too much on the termination of Dasein’s being-in-the-world and not enough on the concrete projects which engage Dasein’s energies. Struggling against it early in her writings, embracing it more fully in her later works, she was always profoundly influenced by the anxiety caused by the possibility of our own nonexistence. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she locates the attitude of seriousness as one which seeks to flee this anxiety by taking refuge in absolute values. As these absolutes are in fact evidence of bad faith (in that they deny our individual choice and responsibility by adhering to abstract categories) she whole-heartedly rejects them. Yet now, in her later writings, we find Beauvoir almost guilty herself of setting up death as an absolute. The older we are, the closer we are to death, the more power it exerts over us as a limitation to our actions. As we saw in the previous section, Beauvoir’s reconfiguration of time leaves us with the future as a much more clearly defined boundary. Now we see that this is due to the fact that the future has become our own death, rather than the possibility for action. In this way, she has almost adopted an attitude of seriousness about the very thing that she rejected in her earliest ethical writings.

Conclusion

Beauvoir’s philosophical position regarding time changes dramatically as she ages and as the object of her writings shifts to the aged. There is no doubt that Beauvoir moves away from the radical individuality of the ethical existent to the overwhelming power of domineering social structures as her philosophy matures. Additionally, the biological factors of ageing seem to exert a greater force against transcendence

than other kinds of embodiment discussed by Beauvoir's prior ethics. As a result, we lose a sense of the fiery existentialism with which Beauvoir broke onto the philosophical scene with her later emphasis on the social and biological limitations of ageing.¹¹

Although Beauvoir amends her accent on individual choice and responsibility, she never wholly rejects her earlier existential ethics. She clearly struggles with and against the idea that we are radically free and yet at the mercy of forces greater than ourselves from the moment we are born and until the moment we die. Yet, despite her nearly consistent lamentation on the evils and traps of ageing in *Old Age*, she maintains the position that old age is not absolute nor is our lived experience of ageing universally the same.

It is because age is not experienced in the for-itself mode and because we do not have the same lucid knowledge of it that we have of the cogito that we can say we are old quite early in life or think ourselves young to the very end. These choices are evidence of our general relationship with the world. (OA, 292)

Because age is not experienced in the for-itself mode and is instead enforced upon us from outside, it is possible to live this experience in multiple ways. As she continues, "There is nothing that obliges us in our hearts to recognize ourselves in the frightening image that others provide us with. That is why it is possible to reject that image verbally and to refuse it by means of our behaviour" (OA, 294). However, despite the fact that she clings to the desire to preserve the existential freedom of the elderly—even concluding *Old Age* with the half-hearted call for the elderly to continue to pursue meaningful projects—one cannot help but feel the profound shift in Beauvoir's ethics

that her ruminations on ageing provide. Suddenly, projective activity has fallen into the past and the now is merely a slide into a future that is not an opening of possibilities but the inevitability of death. Time itself has shifted from a futural thrust into an empty pondering of the past and habitual practices in the present. As such, we must paradoxically conclude that the ethical demands of the elderly are dramatically different than the rest of the adult population, thus contributing to, rather than combating an understanding of the elderly as not fully human or object. Even the child, not yet an ethical individual, still has the investment of society in his or her future and thus the moral call is present even in its absence. The aged, however, are confined merely to passing time until death and thus seem to exist both within and outside the human community.

Nevertheless, perhaps these difficulties are Beauvoir's greatest contribution to the ethics of ageing. By placing such great weight on the social forces which define the elderly as old and relegate them to the role of useless parasite, the ethical question shifts away from the individual and onto society. Although we must admit that her ethics have undergone a deep rethinking, we may find in this transformation away from the individual and onto the culture a way to redress the violence caused by oppressive practices. As she concludes:

Old age exposes the failure of our entire civilization. It is the whole man that must be re-made, it is the whole relationship between man and man that must be recast if we wish the old person's state to be acceptable...If he were not atomized from his childhood, shut away and isolated among other atoms, and if he shared in a collective life, as necessary and as much a matter of

course as his own, then he would never experience banishment. (OA, 543).

By reorienting the focus away from the individual and onto our collective life, Beauvoir expands her ethics to include the individual and the universal. If we combine the earlier and later works, we find that Beauvoir has given us a true "ethics of ambiguity." In this ethical theory we recognize 1) that the individual is both free and yet the plaything of cultural structures that systematically deny this freedom and 2) the biological, although not a determining factor in human life, exerts forces of varying magnitudes depending on where one is on the spectrum of youth to old age and 3) the universal is a pervasive structure of absolutes that forces itself on individuals; however, this structure is the result of human action and thus can be changed through human intervention. Bridging the two periods we find that, in fact, Beauvoir has attempted to construct an ethical theory capable of promoting individual freedom and challenging oppressive social forces. What we lose with the move away from individual transcendence is compensated for by the rich descriptions of cultural structures and may just provide us with a new approach to existential ethics in general.

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Endnotes

1. Beauvoir returns to the question of Heideggerian being-for-death throughout her career. For example, as I argue with respect to Beauvoir's 1954 novel, *The Mandarins*, the character Anne illustrates the truth of the Beauvoirean absolute as a being-toward-freedom and is thus a rejection of the Heideggerian being-for-death (Mussett, 140-41).
2. As Gail Weiss explains, when an individual fails ethically, it is because of "his failure to live the tension between freedom and facticity...instead of affirming this tension as an inescapable feature of human existence" (Weiss, 111).
3. Andrea Veltman describes the difference between transcendence and immanence by defining the former as constructive activity which engages other freedoms and the latter (a term Veltman says is not fully developed until *The Second Sex*) as the labor necessary to maintain the continuation of life. As such, Veltman shows how

immanence in Beauvoirean philosophy is insufficient as a ground for human existence (Veltman, 113-31).

4. This is not to oversimplify Beauvoir's philosophical project. With the writing of *The Second Sex* we find Beauvoir aware of the nuances of situation and the ways in which it can work to deny the freedom of the existent. In fact, this is one of the advances of Beauvoirean philosophy over early Sartrean existentialism because her conception of situation is more attuned to oppression than Sartre's notion of facticity. I only wish to emphasize that no matter what stage of her career is under consideration, Beauvoir maintains the ontological freedom of the existent even in the face of overwhelming oppression.
5. Debra Bergoffen claims that one of the key differences between the two works is that *Old Age*, more so than *The Second Sex*, recognizes that elderliness is not a universal category but a grouping of many situational differences (Bergoffen, 187). Scholars vary widely on their reading of this text. Although it is similar in approach and conclusions to *The Second Sex*, it has not received nearly the same degree of attention. Commentators such as Sarah Clark Miller simply view this as a glaring omission, resulting from its taboo subject matter, which must be rectified through an investigation into the book's philosophical roots (Miller, 127-47). Although the book clearly has strong philosophical underpinnings, Terry Keefe accurately points out that, although it does draw our attention to important social questions, part of the problem lies in the book's flaws—including misreported and misunderstood facts, exaggerations and over-generalizations (Keefe, 137). I would add that, although there is an obvious presence of both early and late Sartrean philosophy, there is a noticeable dearth of ideas from other philosophers such as Hegel, Kant,

Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Marx, that she had incorporated in past works. Although these names are peppered throughout the work, there is very little developed analysis of their philosophies.

6. This is not to say that Beauvoir did not acknowledge that some individuals find themselves in positions of oppression against which they are simply powerless to struggle (such as the African-Americans during slavery or Muslim women in harems as described in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) only that, given the similarities in the subject matter between both *The Second Sex* and *Old Age*, it is surprising to find such different conclusions regarding the objects under investigation.
7. As Jane Duran explains, Beauvoir sees “the cutting off of the tendency of humans to find their projects as a loss of the for-itself. Thus, for Beauvoir, old age with its less-than-fully-experienced present and its elongated (and filled-in) past is a time when the for-itself cannot be, in most cases, completely established” (Duran, 207). The ethical implications of this are obvious—if one is not a complete for-itself, then one does not have the same degree of freedom and responsibility as one who is. I agree that Beauvoir is in fact making such an argument, but want to stress that such a position is inconsistent with her earlier ethics.
8. Beauvoir drives this point home later: “A limited future and a frozen past: such is the situation that the elderly have to face up to” (OA, 378).
9. Using terminology found in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, Beauvoir locates old age as an “unrealizable” as (quoting Sartre) “my being seen from without which bounds all my choices and which constitutes their reverse aspect” (OA, 291). In other

words, senectitude is a part of my situation in objective form that escapes me and is thus never present to me.

10. The notion of abject that I am employing here is that put forward by Julia Kristeva in her study of the limits of subjectivity, *Powers of Horror*.
11. Regarding this move away from individual choice as paramount Deutscher observes, “the hard-line, young de Beauvoir-as-existential-ethicist would surely have said that the older de Beauvoir ‘chooses poorly’” (Deutscher, 9).