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Scope

The purpose of this series is to foster the development of phenomenological philosophy through creative research. Contemporary issues in philosophy, other disciplines and in culture generally, offer opportunities for the application of phenomenological methods that call for creative responses. Although the work of several generations of thinkers has provided phenomenology with many results with which to approach these challenges, a truly successful response to them will require building on this work with new analyses and methodological innovations.

THE EXISTENTIAL
PHENOMENOLOGY
OF

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rejecting the traditional notion of time experienced by the subject as a flow because this presupposes the existence of an external witness who observes time. According to Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, I do not observe time passing in this way because I am always already part of events. The witness's vantage point which Beauvoir assumes in her memoirs is therefore both a narrative device and a specific response to history.

In her autobiography, particularly in her diary extracts of the Second World War and the Algerian War, Beauvoir sometimes represents events as they happen in all their contingency, attempting to attribute them with no more apparent significance than at the time of their occurrence. By representing events across different time scales, she represents the mechanisms of history. But this technique of representing historical events contingently has sometimes resulted in charges of political naivety being levelled at Beauvoir by those who claim the benefit of hindsight and imaginatively recreate these historical events decades later.⁴⁷ As she recognises, the reader always has the privilege to perform this temporal synthesis in autobiography for, as we have seen, it is how personal and collective histories are recreated and thereby live on.

Justifying her largely chronological approach to self-representation in autobiography in *La force des choses*, Beauvoir observes:

But what counts above all in my life is that time goes by; I grow older, the world changes, my relationship to it changes; to show the transformations, the developments, the irreversible deteriorations of others and myself—nothing is more important to me than that.⁴⁸

Representing a variety of temporal experiences in autobiography, philosophy, and fiction, Beauvoir has literally shown us the times of our lives.

47. See, for example, the controversial Gilbert Joseph, *Une si douce occupation... Simone de Beauvoir et Jean-Paul Sartre 1940-1944* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991).

48. *La force des choses I*, 375-76/288 (tr. adapted).

The Lived Experience of Doubling: Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Old Age

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Abstract: This essay demonstrates that Beauvoir's La vieillesse is a phenomenological study of old age indebted to Husserl's phenomenology of the body. Beauvoir's depiction of the doubling in the lived experience of the elderly—a division between outsiders' awareness of the elderly's decline and the elderly's own inner understanding of old age—serves as a specific illustration of Beauvoir's particular method of description and analysis.

We must stop cheating: the whole meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us. If we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are: let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. It must be done if we are to take upon ourselves the entirety of our human state. And when it is done we will no longer acquiesce in the misery of the last age; we will no longer be indifferent, because we shall feel concerned, as indeed we are.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *La vieillesse*

Re-reading *La vieillesse*: A Phenomenology of Old Age

Simone de Beauvoir dares to tell forbidden stories about the elderly, their lives, and their bodies.¹ By so doing she disturbs a cultural system which

1. Simone de Beauvoir's works after her fiftieth year are remarkable for the portraits of old age which they provide. Unflinching in nature, she demands that her readers confront the deep-seated disgust which arises within them when contemplating the aging body through her portrayal of female protagonists in works such as *Les belles images* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), translated by Patrick O'Brian as *Les belles images* (New York: Putnam, 1968) and *Le femme rompiée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), translated by Patrick O'Brian as *The Woman Destroyed* (New York: Putnam, 1969). Beauvoir explores both the psychological and the social difficulties associated with aging as Elaine Marks notes in "Transgressing the (In)cont(in)ent Boundaries: The Body in Decline," *Yale French Studies*, no. 72 (1986), 189. It is not only in her autobiographical and fictional works that such subjects are of great

demands that such things be kept from view. The epigraph above functions as a clue to her corpus, posing the challenge found throughout her work on old age: can we come to recognize ourselves in the aging men and women we see? In 1970 Beauvoir advanced this specific challenge in a lengthy work entitled *La vieillesse*, translated as *The Coming of Age*.² Through her critics' censure, she has paid the price for daring to raise such an impertinent question. As a scholarly work, *La vieillesse* has received little philosophical attention. While the fiftieth anniversary of the French publication of *Le deuxième sexe* has spurred a resurgence of interest in Beauvoir's writing, scholars still largely overlook her work on old age, deeming it unworthy of specifically philosophical investigation.³

In this essay I seek to redress this neglect. I read *La vieillesse* with an eye toward the philosophical contributions Beauvoir offers therein. Specifically, I argue that *La vieillesse* is a work of phenomenology, one which continues the research begun by Edmund Husserl and thereafter refined by such authors as Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁴ Beauvoir uses the methodological apparatus of

import. *La vieillesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) is Beauvoir's theoretical treatment of the topic.

2. In its first American edition, *La vieillesse* appeared as *The Coming of Age*, translated by Patrick O'Brian (New York: Putnam, 1972). Commenting upon this particular translation of the title, Margaret Simons notes, "Beauvoir published *Old Age* [which was] euphemistically translated as *The Coming of Age*...." Margaret Simons, "Introduction," in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Margaret Simons (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 5.

3. Important exceptions to this oversight include Debra B. Bergoffen's treatment of *La vieillesse* in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) and Penelope Deutscher's discussions in "Bodies, Lost and Found: Simone de Beauvoir from *The Second Sex* to *Old Age*," *Radical Philosophy*, No. 96 (July/August 1999), 6-16 and in "Living Aged Skin: Simone de Beauvoir on Desire, Embodiment and Old Age," in *Thinking Through the Skin*, eds. S. Ahmed et al. (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

4. See Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zur einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*. Zweites Buch: *Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, edited by Marly Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952), translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer as *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Second Book: *Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution. Collected Works*, vol. 3. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989); Edmund Husserl, *Cartesiansche Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, edited by S. Strasser (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff,

a phenomenology of the body to conduct her study of senectitude. She presents a phenomenology of old age which treats the lived experience of being old. Approached from this perspective, the novelty and complexity of Beauvoir's phenomenology—particularly of her analysis of the lived experience of doubling—become clear. Recently, scholars have begun to examine the phenomenological roots of *Le deuxième sexe*.⁵ Exploring *La vieillesse* in a similar manner can give rise to a better understanding of the significance of this substantial work. In particular, we can discover what *La vieillesse* offers in terms of a continued effort to understand Beauvoir's relation to phenomenology. Previously, she had focused on what Debra Bergoffen calls "the phenomenological-existentialist project of historicizing the embodied subject" by noting that "subjective embodiment... is always sexed and gendered."⁶ Beauvoir extends this observation in *La vieillesse*, discerning not only that subjective embodiment is always sexed and gendered, but also that it is continuously involved in a process of aging. The penultimate stage of such subjective embodiment, more often than not, is old age.

Old age is of particular interest for a phenomenology of the body because aging, quite obviously, is a process which every human being experiences. As embodied creatures, we all age. In this sense, the body is indeed a site of a kind of universal: barring premature death, all humans will experience old age. In *La vieillesse*, Beauvoir sets herself to the task of creating phenomenological descriptions of the embodied experience of old age.

1973), translated by Donion Cairns as *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960); and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), translated by Colin Smith as *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

5. Such discussions include those of Debra Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*; Sara Heinämaa, "Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Sexual Difference," *Hypatia*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Fall 1999), 114-132; Eva Lundgren-Gohlén, *Kön och existens. Studier i Simone de Beauvoir's 'Le Deuxième Sexe'* (Göteborg: Daidalos, 1991), translated by Linda Schenk as *Sex and Existence: Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex'* (Hanover, Conn. and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Jo-Ann Pflardi, *Simone de Beauvoir Writing the Self: Philosophy Becomes Autobiography* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1999); and Karen Viniges, *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir*, trans. Anne Lavelle (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

6. Debra B. Bergoffen, "From Husserl to de Beauvoir: Gendering the Perceiving Subject," *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 27, nos. 1 & 2 (January/April 1996), 57.

Wanting to avoid a pitfall of *Le deuxième sexe*, Beauvoir is careful not to approach this task with the assumption that she can describe *the experience* of the aged, as if there exists a single experience shared by all the elderly. Rather, the acknowledged universality of the experience is limited to recognition of the biological certitude of one's progression into old age. Beauvoir clarifies that although all human beings undergo aging, there is necessarily a wide variety of experiences of this biological certainty.⁷

But what historical basis is there for an exploration of *La vieilllesse* as a phenomenological work? What kind and extent of exposure did Beauvoir have to phenomenology? Though a full historical treatment of the trajectory of Beauvoir's development as a phenomenologist is beyond the scope of this essay, the two following points serve to demonstrate her familiarity with its methodology.⁸ Recognizing the significance of Husserl and Heidegger's theories for his own philosophical development, Sartre traveled to Berlin to engage their work in the 1930s. Beauvoir, wanting to follow the progression of Sartre's thought, also conducted a thorough study of these two phenomenologists.⁹ Through her own efforts and in conversation with Sartre, Beauvoir absorbed the practice of the phenomenological method.¹⁰ Second, Beauvoir exhibits her familiarity with Merleau-Ponty's development of Husserl's notion of the lived body in writings such as *Le deuxième sexe*, wherein she refers to Merleau-Ponty when discussing women and embodiment. In addition, in 1945 Beauvoir reviewed Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* in *Les temps modernes*, thus concretizing her familiarity with Merleau-Ponty's development of Husserl's

7. In the Preface to *La vieilllesse*, Beauvoir writes: "Hitherto I have spoken of old age as though that expression stood for a clearly defined reality. In fact, as far as our own species is concerned old age is by no means easy to define...although old age, considered as a biological fate, is a reality that goes beyond history, it is nevertheless true that this fate is experienced in a way that varies according to the social context" (15-16/9-10).

8. See Margaret Simon's essay entitled "The Beginnings of Beauvoir's Existential Phenomenology," in this volume, wherein she reveals that Beauvoir most likely had an even earlier understanding of phenomenology than scholars have previously known.

9. Eva Gothlin examines this influence in the context of Beauvoir's philosophy of history in "Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Phenomenology and Philosophy of History in *Le deuxième sexe*," in this volume.

10. Vintges, 35.

phenomenology of the lived body.¹¹

The approach which Beauvoir takes in *La vieilllesse* will not be foreign to readers who have already covered the terrain of *Le deuxième sexe*, as the phenomenological methodology behind the two texts is similar. Like *Le deuxième sexe*, in *La vieilllesse* Beauvoir considers the situation of a particular group of people. No longer solely concerned with women's situation, though still querying this problem to some extent, *La vieilllesse* details the circumstances of the lives of the elderly in modern Western culture. In so doing, she renders a treatment of the aged as *situated* human beings. According to Beauvoir, the aged lead a marginalized existence largely determined by society's designation of them as Other. Reflecting an approach aligned with the phenomenological perspective of philosophical anthropology,¹² Beauvoir discusses what she in *Le deuxième sexe* termed the "total situation" of senectitude. Hence, she attempts to comment upon all possible aspects of the elderly's multifold situation. As a phenomenologist, Beauvoir begins her investigation from the supposition that the elderly are human beings situated within the complex context of the world. One can only truly shed light on the meaning of their situation through a careful consideration of the various facets of this complexity. Her approach to the topic necessarily reflects this complexity.

Beauvoir's interest in the phenomenon of old age spans a panoply of areas. She exposes its biological significance (in terms of the physical organism), its psychological consequences, and its existential dimension. Moreover, Beauvoir insists upon the interdependence of these standpoints. It is not possible to truly understand any one part divorced from the others. Rather, a rich understanding can only be achieved when considering the ways in which these views interpenetrate one another, thus bringing forth a careful comprehension of the significance of old age. How exactly, however, are these views interrelated? Beauvoir provides the following illustrative explanation: "what is termed the individual's psychic or spiritual life can only be understood in light of his existential situation: this situation, therefore, also affects his physical organism. And the converse applies, for he experiences his relationship with time differently according to whether his body is more or

11. Sara Heinämaa provides a more detailed discussion of Beauvoir's phenomenological roots in "Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Sexual Difference."

12. Vintges, 34.

less impaired."¹³ Thus Beauvoir reveals that one can only understand the psychic life of an individual in old age in the light of that individual's existential situation. This existential situation affects the individual's aging physical organism. The reverse also holds true as the extent to which an individual's body is impaired as he or she ages affects that individual's existential experience of temporality. Beauvoir's descriptive analysis of old age thus adeptly weaves multiple strands of the experience of aging. As she later states: "old age can only be understood as a whole: it is not solely a biological but also a cultural fact."¹⁴

Beauvoir also conceptualizes the means of approaching old age theoretically as split between an outside perspective (involving descriptions from the standpoint of biology and sociology, for example) and an inside perspective (amounting to individuals' own inner understanding of their experience of old age).¹⁵ Beauvoir divides the work fairly evenly between these two perspectives in Part One and Part Two of *La vieillesse*. Importantly, however, they can be heard to be in conversation with one another throughout the work. In the first part, Beauvoir describes old age from an "outside" point of view, explicitly acknowledging that she considers aged individuals as *objects*, viewed in turn from a scientific, historical, and social standpoint. She entertains what the disciplines of biology, sociology, history, and anthropology have to contribute to a discussion of old age. If in the first part of *La vieillesse* Beauvoir renders the elderly as objects, in the second half she illuminates their position as subjects, as Part Two of her work is devoted to the elderly's own inward experience of old age. In this way, the structure of *La vieillesse* highlights a phenomenological framework, as Beauvoir reveals the lived experience of the elderly to be one in which they are both objects and subjects. Concerning the aged's inward experience of senectitude, Beauvoir treats three separate, yet intertwined issues: the transformation which takes place in the relationships of individuals with their bodies and their body images, the changes which occur in the temporal experience in old age, and the differences apparent in old persons'

13. *La vieillesse*, 15/9.

14. *Ibid.*, 19/13.

15. This theoretical approach is mirrored in Beauvoir's descriptions of the lived experience of doubling, as I discuss at the beginning of the second section of this essay.

relationships with others in the world.¹⁶ Beauvoir carefully reminds her readers that though she may tease out each strand in turn, the "various factors that define the old person's state influence one another... none has its real meaning except in its relationship with the others... [and] must be read from the viewpoint of a final synthesis."¹⁷

Such an approach is to be expected from one schooled in Husserlian phenomenology. When directing specific attention to the resonance between Husserlian phenomenology and Beauvoir's project in *La vieillesse*, several points of convergence emerge. For the purposes of the present discussion, one such point is perhaps most salient. Like Husserl, Beauvoir maintains a certain distrust of the sciences as offering *the* singular, correct view. As Karen Vintges observes: "...there is a question of division of tasks between the sciences and philosophy; philosophy places the results of the sciences in a broader framework. Beauvoir's view in *The Second Sex* is in line with Husserl's on this point. Her point of departure is also the necessity of a broad, direct approach, as opposed to the reductionism of the sciences."¹⁸ What Vintges says about *Le deuxième sexe* can also be applied to *La vieillesse*. Careful to avoid the reductionism of the sciences, Beauvoir's point of departure in *La vieillesse* is decidedly broad—spanning multiple disciplines—as we have seen above. This insight into the purposive breadth of Beauvoir's analysis helps to make sense of what critics have denounced as a far too expansive and vaguely disorganized work.

These critical reactions to Beauvoir's discussions of aging also uncover clues leading to the source of the cultural bias against aged bodies. Swift and severe in their condemnation, her critics were quick to engage in a "systematic disparagement of this content,"¹⁹ complaining about the meticulous attention to detail which Beauvoir employed when writing about the failing bodies of the elderly, including her friends and family members.²⁰ In comments so brutal

16. *La vieillesse*, 299-300/279.

17. *Ibid.*, 299-300/279.

18. Vintges, 37.

19. Marks, 187.

20. In an interview with Madeleine Gobeil, Beauvoir responds to this criticism. Gobeil observes, "Some critics and readers have felt that you spoke about old age in an unpleasant way." Beauvoir responds: "A lot of people didn't like what I said because they want to believe that all periods of life are delightful, that children are innocent, that all newlyweds

that they border on the humorous, *Time* magazine provided the following critique of Beauvoir's writing in 1966: "A merciless record of the trivia of death—old age and bed wetting, pubic baldness, enemas...." *The Spectator*, in 1972, scathingly denounced her then recent work as consisting of "just short of five hundred obsessive and ultimately negative pages."²¹

To what can we attribute the strength of reaction against Beauvoir's portrayals of old age? Elaine Marks provides one answer, observing that what Beauvoir may be guilty of in the eyes of the press is not only that she drones on too long about things far too depressing, but also that she crosses boundaries into unmentionable topics. Marks suggests, "the question is then: to what degree is Simone de Beauvoir being accused of transgressing boundaries established by phallogocentric discourse... boundaries that have made and maintained certain areas taboo: incontinence, old age, dying?"²² Marks illuminates the possibility that the "bad taste" of which Beauvoir's critics accuse her actually serves as the site of her originality. Specifically, Beauvoir crosses boundaries of genre, daring to write about that which previously had been contained within limits established by "the institutionalization of specialized discourses on the body...."²³ Pushing this analysis beyond a recognition of her originality, it seems that her "bad taste" is indicative of her radical focus upon the bodies of aging persons. Disregarding the suggested rules of literary discourse, Beauvoir demands that her readers view in plain light the embodied existence of aging. She includes material which disturbs people precisely because it makes visible that which they do not want to see. This move of Beauvoir's is both courageous and useful. Professionally, she risked much in repeatedly choosing to make visible

are happy, that all old people are serene. I've rebelled against such notions all my life, and there's no doubt about the fact that the moment, which for me is not about old age but the beginning of old age, represents—even if one has all the resources one wants, affection, work to be done—represents a change in one's existence, a change that is manifested by the loss of a great number of things. If one isn't sorry to lose them it's because one didn't love them. I think that people who glorify old age or death too readily are people who really don't love life." Simone de Beauvoir, interviewed by Madeleine Gobel, in *Women Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Random House, 1998), 154-55.

21. Quoted in Marks, 187-88.

22. *Ibid.*, 188.

23. *Ibid.*, 190.

the abject bodies of old men and women in her texts. The critical reaction to such visibility serves as a concrete demonstration of the attempted cultural denial of the embodied reality of aging.

Karen Viniges provides another line of reasoning which sheds light on the critics' vituperative response, one which employs a phenomenological framework in the process of explanation. In illuminating the structure of *Le deuil de sexe*, she uncovers a key to understanding the work as a systematic whole. We have already seen the fruitful way in which application of Viniges's insights regarding *Le deuil de sexe* to *La vieillesse* can aid in grasping how Beauvoir endeavored to examine the total situation of the elderly and to resist the reductionism of the sciences in favor of the broader starting point of phenomenology. In addition, Viniges suggests analyzing *Le deuil de sexe* against "the backdrop of phenomenological epistemology, in which the immediate experience is decisive...."²⁴ Doing the same with *La vieillesse* reveals the inventive way in which Beauvoir turns to the variety of lived experience of the elderly in order to bring two points into relief: first, the inherent injustice of their situation and second, the falsity of many supposed truisms about the elderly. By drawing attention to the fact that the purported truisms are not representative of the varied experience of the elderly, but rather function as misguiding and convenient stereotypes, she opens an important possibility: to consider the lives of the aged apart from the various stereotypes which pigeonhole them into certain styles of existence. Within Beauvoir's phenomenological framework, the meanings which old age has are allowed to come forth in all their diversity—diversity arising from the lived cultural, historical and class specificity of the situated existence of the elderly. Ultimately, the opportunity for such a realization originates within the phenomenological method: without the weight placed upon the embodied lived experience of the elderly—weight which a phenomenological approach encourages—the myths surrounding old age would go unchallenged. Thus, her method of accumulating an extensive stockpile of examples from the lives of numerous elderly individuals is "totally in line with the methodology of philosophical phenomenology; in this approach examples are not used as empirical evidence but rather as a means to show something, to pass on a specific insight."²⁵ When viewing *La vieillesse* through a phenomenological lens, what Beauvoir's critics deemed "a merciless record of the trivia of... old

24. Viniges, 37.

25. *Ibid.*, 37.

age" can be understood as part of Beauvoir's systematic structuring of a phenomenological study of old age.

Lest we mistakenly cast Beauvoir in the shadow of the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, we should pause to note a remarkable contribution which she makes. A frequent criticism made of Husserl entails charges that his phenomenology is, in fact, locked in an epistemological perspective. Such a perspective certainly accounts for a subject who is a knowing subject, but limitation thereto ignores other crucial matters. Beauvoir eschews such limitation, instead insightfully signaling and, as Debra Bergoffen has noted, insisting upon the relationship between phenomenology and ethics.²⁶ More specifically, Beauvoir accomplishes this through an analysis of the embodied subjectivity of the elderly. By advancing what Gail Weiss has termed "bodily imperatives,"²⁷ she moves beyond a solely epistemological perspective to consider the ethical import of such subjectivity. In calling attention to the ethical ramifications of the elderly's embodied subjectivity, Beauvoir provides a subtle critique of the strongly epistemological nature of Husserl's phenomenology.

It is certain that *La vieillesse* is not only a phenomenological study, but also an ethical work. In it Beauvoir does not simply wish to put forth descriptions of the myriad ways in which people experience old age. Rather, she does so with a particular ethical purpose in mind: to set in plain view the "criminal" way in which Western society forces their aged to live their last years, hence rendering an implicit critique of Husserl's phenomenology which avoided the political and ethical implications of describing lived phenomena. Like *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Beauvoir's essay on old age is normative as well as descriptive.²⁸ Also indebted to the Marxist tradition, she reproaches a capitalist world wherein "long-term interests no longer have any influence: the ruling class that determines the fate of the masses has no fear of sharing that fate."²⁹ With its emphasis on profit, the market economy has little time for the old person who no longer generates such profit. Beauvoir points to societies wherein those "active" members of

26. Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 21.

27. For a discussion of this notion, see Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 129-163.

28. Eva Lundgren-Gothlin makes a similar observation in *Sex and Existence*, 152.

29. *La vieillesse*, 12/6.

the community (who can still provide for themselves, unlike the elderly, who cannot), with an eye to the future, devise compromises between their current and long-term interests. Doing so, she maintains, would redress the dehumanizing treatment which the elderly receive. Beauvoir believes that calling for such changes will catalyze no less than a complete upheaval of society.

In *La vieillesse*, Beauvoir clearly succeeds in challenging the limits of the discourse on old age, as Elaine Marks has argued. Beauvoir, however, has something greater and more practical at stake than her desire to transgress certain limits of phallogocentric discourse: she seeks to give voice to the suffering and discomfort of the neglected elderly of her time. She writes:

Society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that is unseen to mention. . . . And that indeed is the very reason why I am writing this book. I mean to break the conspiracy of silence. As far as old people are concerned this society is not only guilty but downright criminal. . . . To reconcile this barbarous treatment with the humanist morality they profess to follow, the ruling class adopts the convenient plan of refusing to consider them as real people: if their voices were heard, the hearers would be forced to acknowledge that these were human voices. I shall compel my readers to hear them. I shall describe the position that is allotted to the old and the way in which they live: I shall tell what in fact happens in their minds and their hearts. . . .³⁰

These strong words of Beauvoir's firmly root her work in the practical, thus lending support to Bergoffen's claim that in *La vieillesse* Beauvoir corrects what she saw to be a significant flaw in *Le deuxième sexe*. By focusing less upon "the abstract issue of consciousness" and more upon "the material conditions of scarcity,"³¹ she places one foot squarely in the realm of praxis, a position from which she can powerfully portray the real suffering of the elderly. She seeks to give voice to "old people" whom she feels are treated unjustly by their society. Beauvoir charges that society refuses to hear the voices of the aged, hence denying them their humanity. Extending this sentiment, we can say that the same society refuses to see the aged—and in refusing to see them it also denies them their humanity. Revealing the intimate connection between recognition and identification of the humanity of others,

30. *Ibid.*, 7-8/1-2.

31. Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 187.

she helps us to begin to understand the ethical insight that the invisibility which we force upon the bodies of the elderly functions to relegate them to a sub-human class. Perhaps fearing our own inevitable entrance into old age, we neglectfully turn our focus elsewhere, searching for affirmation of a perpetual youthfulness for which our culture obsessively yearns.

Doubling: A Phenomenological Example of the Lived Experience of the Elderly

Having demonstrated that *La vieillesse* is a phenomenological study of old age, I now explore a key component of this work: Beauvoir's description of the *doubling* in the lived experience of the elderly. My examination of doubling is meant to serve as a specific illustration of the kind of observation and analysis which her phenomenological study of senescence entails. Beauvoir's exploration of doubling employs the general phenomenological methodology found in *La vieillesse*, a methodology which I have treated in the first section of this essay. An investigation of doubling, therefore, can offer a richer understanding of the role of phenomenology in her work on the elderly. Doubling functions as a particular phenomenological example which elucidates the approach she takes in *La vieillesse*. Doubling is imbedded in Beauvoir's phenomenology in a significant way: structurally, *La vieillesse* displays Beauvoir's theoretical approach to senescence as a split between an outside perspective and an inside perspective. Practically, this cleft is evidenced in the different subject matter of Part One and Part Two of her work. In the second section I will reveal that this cleft is also represented in the particular phenomenological description of the elderly's lived experience of doubling. In such an experience, the elderly endure divergences between outsiders' awareness of their decline and their internal sense of self. Phenomenologically, the elderly's lived experience is one in which they are both subject and object.

In using the term *doubling*, Beauvoir attempts to capture a sense of a split: a split between the elderly's own inward feeling of constancy of identity as they age and external observers' objective awareness of the declining bodies of the elderly. One can conceptualize this split as occurring between the in-itself and the for-itself, as indeed Beauvoir does in *La vieillesse*. I will analyze this distinction in order to shed light upon its import for her phenomenological description of old age. Generally, Beauvoir characterizes doubling in two different, though decidedly related ways. The first directly stems from a

phenomenology of the body: she describes the process of doubling in terms of the aged's own embodiment. Second, Beauvoir analyzes the relationship between self and other, specifically examining the impact of the beliefs of outside viewers upon the identity of the elderly.

When focusing upon embodiment specifically, doubling amounts to an assertion of the realness of an internal and constant sense of self over and against an external, deteriorating appearance. The aged maintain an internal self apart from the negative changes of decline which happen to their bodies as they grow older. Doubling thus functions as a way to combat the inevitable deterioration that occurs in old age. The elderly may believe that if they do not acknowledge such forms of decline as intimately part of themselves, this decline can not then challenge their established internal sense of self and will not have to comprise a significant aspect of their lives. Senescent individuals cannot remedy this rupture which occurs in their subjectivity. They cannot reconcile that which they see in the mirror with that which they understand themselves to be. Their "I" consists not of those wrinkles, that gray hair. Speaking for the elderly, Beauvoir explains that the identity of old age is difficult to assume "because we have always regarded it as something alien, a foreign species: 'Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?'"³² As they peer into the mirror in a disbelieving fashion, what *do* they come to see? When gazing into the mirror, the elderly can reject their own embodied existence to such an extent that that which they see is a wrinkled, grayed object which is *not their self*. Though eventually they must come to recognize in themselves that which society sees—a sadly fading object from which to avert one's eyes—initially, their double no longer resembles them.³³

In *La vieillesse*, Beauvoir offers an extended philosophical discussion regarding the doubling which arises in conjunction with the process of aging. The resulting division rests upon a distinction which Beauvoir, drawing upon Sartrean ontology, makes between the in-itself and the for-itself. She explains that "it is impossible for us to experience what we are for others in the for-

32. *La vieillesse*, 301/283.

33. One may object that the portrait of old age that Beauvoir provides in her discussion of doubling is unduly negative. Though it is not the focus of the present discussion, it is interesting to note and then to question both Beauvoir's general tone of negativity concerning old age and the viability of her solution to the "identification crisis" that doubling represents.

itself mode....³⁴ The in-itself, then, is related to what we are for outside viewers. Our experience of our own lives for ourselves comprises the for-itself mode. "Age," however, "is not experienced in the for-itself mode...."³⁵ Others' objective awareness of the aging of our bodies comprises the in-itself mode, whereas the inward feeling of constancy (a feeling of eternal youth, of never changing) encompasses the for-itself mode. Revealing a key to the motivation behind doubling, Beauvoir elaborates upon the "benefits" for the subject of maintaining a distance between the in-itself and the for-itself. Through this separation the subject lays claim to a sense of everlasting youth.³⁶ When the elderly keep other's perceptions regarding the aging of their bodies apart from their own conception of themselves, they are able to maintain a constant internal sense of youthfulness which is not then challenged by how others see them. Ultimately, however, the split between the in-itself and the for-itself is a moment of "identification crisis,"³⁷ one in which "there is an insoluble contraction between the obvious clarity of the inward feeling that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation. All we can do is waver from the one to the other, never managing to hold them both firmly together."³⁸

Though Beauvoir's use of the theoretical apparatus of the in-itself and for-itself is certainly indebted to Sartrean ontology, the way in which this distinction plays out in the context of her description of the lived experience of old age illuminates her additions to Sartre's theory. As Jo-Ann Pilardi elucidates, "the sovereignty of the subject [the self as for-itself] can be 'disturbed' in two ways. Both disturbances have to do with the existence of other people... First, the subject can also be an object for others. Second, the subject, though it is an individual, is also... a being-with-others." Beauvoir's contribution to Sartre's existentialist-phenomenological ontology manifests itself in her "combining these two disturbances of subjectivity...."³⁹ Doubling renders the nature of this combination particularly clear. The lived experience

34. *La vieillesse*, 309/291.

35. *Ibid.*, 311/292.

36. *Ibid.*, 311-12/293.

37. *Ibid.*, 314/296.

38. *Ibid.*, 309/290.

39. Pilardi, 16.

of doubling disturbs the subjectivity of an elderly individuals because of their capacity to be viewed as deteriorating objects by a community of external observers.

La vieillesse also contains a second contribution by Beauvoir to Sartre's ontology. In this work, Beauvoir identifies the challenge to the for-itself's transcendence by its facticity.⁴⁰ Pilardi explains, "an ontological system which rejects determinism and virtually equates the human being with freedom, as did Sartrean existentialism, must make at least some concession to the hindrances or resistances which freedom encounters.... they include one's place, one's body, one's past, one's general environment, other human beings, and one's death."⁴¹ Certainly, old age is yet another resistance which freedom encounters, one which issues forth from the human situation of being embodied. Beauvoir's phenomenology of old age accounts for the ways in which facticity—in the form of bodily decline and outsiders' interpretation of this decline—creates a hindrance for freedom in a way in which Sartre never did. As Penelope Deutscher observes, Beauvoir "increasingly rejects freedom of consciousness as primary in relation to one's situation. She comes up against a limit point for which freedom of consciousness offers little consolation."⁴² Old age is this limit point. In this way, *La vieillesse* perhaps emphasizes that which *Le deuxième sexe* never emphasized enough: the individual subject cannot always affirm freedom. Old age makes this point abundantly clear: the elderly are saddled with the reality of physiological decline and with societal interpretation of such decline, both of which can offer significant challenges to an assertion of freedom.⁴³

The notion of doubling also appears in *Le deuxième sexe*, in a chapter entitled "From Maturity to Old Age." In this chapter Beauvoir likens the

40. Beauvoir also articulates this challenge in *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947); translated by Bernard Frechtman as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948).

41. Pilardi, 17.

42. Deutscher, "Bodies, Lost and Found: Simone de Beauvoir from *The Second Sex* to *Old Age*," 8.

43. Beauvoir emphasizes the importance of the societal interpretation of the elderly's decline: "A clear statement of what constitutes advance or retreat for man implies the knowledge of a certain goal: but there is no given *a priori* end, existing in the absolute. Every society creates its own values; and it is in the social context that the word *decline* takes on an exact meaning." *La vieillesse*, 19/13.

doubling which occurs in old age to that which one withstands in a near-death experience:

Individuals also who have in full health come close to death say that they experienced a curious sense of doubling; when one feels oneself a conscious, active, free being, the passive object on which the fatality is operating seems necessarily as if it were another: this is not *I* being knocked down by an automobile; this cannot be *I*, this old woman reflected in the mirror! The woman who "never felt so young in her life" and who has never seen herself so old does not succeed in reconciling these two aspects of herself.... The woman puts trust in what is clear to her inner eye rather than in that strange world... where her double no longer resembles her, where the outcome has betrayed her.⁴⁴

In the passage, Beauvoir defines doubling as the incongruity which arises when one feels oneself to be "a conscious, active, free being" and yet also must necessarily acknowledge oneself as a passive object upon which a force acts, thus clearly articulating a Sartrean tension between freedom and facticity. In the case of a near-death experience, a potential fatality acts upon an object which is oneself. In the case of aging, *Chronos* himself registers his mark upon the passive body. During such experiences, Beauvoir maintains that we distance ourselves from the trauma to such an extent that the body seems to belong to another person, not to ourselves. Simultaneously, the unconscious mind "clings to the illusion of perpetual youth."⁴⁵ The split between an internal sense of self and a sense of self linked to the body is complete.

Beauvoir formulates what she takes to be the only possible solution to doubling (though she acknowledges the inadequacy of the solution): "In order to resolve the 'identification crisis' we must unresolvedly accept a new image of ourselves."⁴⁶ Perhaps surprisingly, the new image which Beauvoir suggests the elderly must endeavor to accept is the image established by external observers. Phenomenologically, however, what is the scope and nature of the "image" to which Beauvoir refers? Michel Philibert, in "The

44. Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), II 283; translated by H. M. Parshley as *The Second Sex* (New York: Random House, 1989), 580.

45. *La vieillesse*, 310/292.

46. *Ibid.*, 314-15/296.

Phenomenological Approach to Images of Aging," explains that *images* of the elderly "constitute orientations or perspectives." He employs the term in a general sense, not wishing to limit images "to mental pictures, schemas, dynamic sequences, or mental films." Instead, he explains, "people hold opinions, beliefs, or mental attitudes toward aging that are more or less coherent and that carry images and memories together with the beginnings or outlines of knowledge. We shall call these *multiform constructions* 'images.'⁴⁷

When viewing Beauvoir's assertion above in light of Philibert's analysis of images of old age, her claim becomes lucid. She argues that although no easy task, the elderly must take on new images of themselves which are constituted by external observers, images which carry with them the opinions and beliefs of other people toward old age. Thus, the revelation of the elderly's status as old necessarily comes from outside of themselves.⁴⁸ "This viewing is effected by means of an image: we try to picture what we are through the vision that others have of us. The image itself is not provided in the consciousness: it is a cluster of rays of intentionality directed... towards a missing object."⁴⁹ Beauvoir maintains that the elderly attempt to garner an image of themselves through the images which outside viewers have of them. The intentionality of this effort, however, must be directed toward a missing object, as the aged cannot conceive of themselves as being old. The complex images that outsiders hold of their aging bodies generate a new understanding which, Beauvoir argues, the elderly must adopt in order to ameliorate the identification crisis which old age can induce. "In order to recapture a picture of themselves they are forced to use another's eyes—how does he see me?" How people view the elderly varies. Beauvoir elaborates: "The reply is vague: each man sees us in his own way and it is certain that our own vision does not coincide with any one of theirs." There is, however, one point of certainty: "They all agree in stating that our face is that of an elderly person...."⁵⁰

47. Michel Philibert, "The Phenomenological Approach to Images of Aging" reprinted in *Philosophical Foundations of Gerontology*, ed. Patrick L. McKee (New York: Human Science Press, 1982), 304.

48. *La vieillesse*, 306/288.

49. *Ibid.*, 309/291.

50. *Ibid.*, 315/296-97.

Beauvoir captures the experience of doubling and the complex truth of old age in the following quote, explaining it in terms of a dialectical relationship:

for the outsider it is a dialectical 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. In most cases, for the rest of the world our being is as many-sided as the rest of the world itself. Any observations made about us may be challenged on the basis of some differing opinion. But in this particular instance no challenge is permissible: the words 'a sixty-year-old' interpret the same fact for everybody. They correspond to biological phenomena that may be detected by examination. Yet our private, inward experience does not tell us the number of our years; no fresh perception comes into being to show us the decline of age.⁵¹

For the elderly, the truth of their old age is the Other within themselves. Through a dialectical process thoroughly dependent upon outsiders' definition of their being, the external viewers usher the elderly into an objective realization of their own age. This experience is complex. The one who is old is an Other within the elderly, but this Other is also themselves. This tension is apparent in the above quote. In addition, old age flattens the many-sidedness of being: no challenge can alter the fact of one's age. This fact, however, does not resonate with the inward experience of the elderly. Therefore, the phenomenological lived experience of the elderly is one in which they are both object and subject. The perspective of outsiders confirms the validity of the elderly's decline as biological objects of a certain age. The elderly, however, resist the integration of this information into their inward experience of themselves as subjects. As Beauvoir explains, the "fact" of their age does not easily register in their inward experience.

Although Beauvoir grants that while the view which the elderly hold of themselves may not coincide entirely with the view which external observers hold of them, it is still true that outsiders' views affect the elderly's understanding of themselves. Others' "images" are comprised not only of mental pictures, but also of a system of beliefs regarding the meaning of old age. To the extent that Beauvoir argues that the elderly must take on the images of themselves as constituted by external observers, they necessarily

51. *Ibid.*, 302/284.

also adopt the external observers' beliefs about old age. These beliefs can be quite negative, consisting of fears about bodily decline in old age, or can be restrictive, containing inaccurate stereotypes. Therefore, external social constructions of old age can directly influence how the elderly understand their own old age. Because an unfortunate kind of cultural baggage frequently accompanies the images which people have of senescence, the elderly often assume the weight of society's loathing of the aging body.

In order to protect themselves from such persistent abhorrence, they must necessarily maintain the split between a negative external understanding of the themselves (as failing or withering, for example) and their inward identity (as perpetually youthful). Thus, for Beauvoir, we are never able to have a "full inward experience" of old age. She asserts that old age ultimately exists beyond the lives of the aged.⁵² Though she argues that in the end the elderly submit to the "outsider's point of view" regarding old age, this does not mean that they reconcile this point of view with their inward feeling of constancy.⁵³ This inward feeling remains distinct from the outsider's point of view. It seems here that the lived experience of the elderly is always one characterized by doubling; Beauvoir reports that the elderly's lived experience of old age amounts to a problematic vacillation between the two views.

Conclusion

I have argued that Beauvoir offers a phenomenology of old age in *La vieillesse*. Seeking to redress the way in which scholars have ignored this work, I investigate *La vieillesse* as a philosophical essay, asserting that in it Beauvoir employs the methodological apparatus of a phenomenology of the body—initially developed by Husserl—to conduct her study of senescence. Beauvoir presents a panoply of phenomenological descriptions of the embodied, lived experience of the elderly, wanting to avoid the false presumption that there is one experience which characterizes old age. As a phenomenologist, she begins her investigation from the supposition that the elderly are human beings situated within the complex context of the world. Furthermore, it is impossible to understand the meaning of their multifold situation without considering various facets of this complexity. Beauvoir's approach to the topic necessarily reflects this complexity: she considers old

52. *Ibid.*, 309/291.

53. *Ibid.*, 308-09/290.

age from the vantage point of an impressive array of disciplines, including biology, sociology, history, psychology and anthropology. Moreover, she insists on the interdependence of these standpoints, asserting that a rich understanding can only be achieved when one treats the ways in which these views interpenetrate one another.

Beauvoir turns to the variety of lived experience of the elderly in order to emphasize two points: first, the inherent injustice of their situation, and second, the falsity of many supposed truisms about the elderly. In doing so, she opens up the possibility of allowing the variety of meanings which old age has to come forth in all their diversity. The phenomenological method makes such a realization possible: without its illumination of the embodied, lived experience of the elderly, the myths surrounding old age would go unchallenged. In addition, Beauvoir encourages her readers to consider the ethical importance arising from the descriptions of the elderly's lived experience which she provides, hence moving beyond the restrictive epistemological nature of Husserl's phenomenology into ethics. Speaking from a position of praxis, Beauvoir powerfully portrays the real suffering of the elderly.

As part of her phenomenological methodology, Beauvoir also conceptualizes the means of approaching old age theoretically as a split between an outside perspective (involving descriptions from the standpoint of sociology, for example) and an inside perspective (amounting to individuals' own inner understanding of their experience of old age). Interestingly, these perspectives can be heard to be in conversation with one another throughout *La vieillesse*. This theoretical approach is also reflected in Beauvoir's descriptions of the elderly's lived experience of doubling in that this experience amounts to a division between outsiders' awareness of the elderly's decline and their own inner understanding of old age. Continuing the thread of discussion regarding phenomenology, my treatment of doubling serves as an exploration of one particular way in which Beauvoir details her phenomenology of old age. It is an example of the kind of observation and analysis which Beauvoir's phenomenology of senectitude entails.

One can describe doubling in several different sets of terms. With the word *doubling*, Beauvoir attempts to capture a sense of a split: a split between the elderly's own inward feeling of constancy of identity as they age and external observers' awareness of the elderly's decline. In terms of embodiment, doubling amounts to an assertion of the realness of an internal and constant sense of self over and against an external, deteriorating appearance. In terms

indebted to Sartrean ontology, doubling is a split between the in-itself and the for-itself. Though Beauvoir initially identifies some "benefits" of maintaining distance between others' objective awareness of the elderly's aging bodies and the elderly's own inner experience of old age, ultimately she recognizes that this is a moment of "identification crisis" which must be resolved. Beauvoir proposes a difficult solution to this problem: the elderly must take on new images of themselves which are constituted by external observers, images which carry with them the opinions and beliefs of other people toward senectitude. Through a dialectical process thoroughly dependent upon outsiders' definition of their being, the external viewers usher the elderly into a realization of their old age. The fact of their old age is difficult for the aged to acknowledge. Their inward feeling of constancy as subjects remains distinct from the outsiders' view of the them as deteriorating objects. Thus the lived experience of the elderly remains one characterized by doubling. Phenomenologically, the elderly experience themselves as both subject and object. Ultimately, Beauvoir maintains that their experience of old age is one of an uncomfortable wavering between the two perspectives.