Focus on Ageing- A neglected aspect of Simone de Beauvoir`s radicalism

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FOCUS ON AGEING – A NEGLECTED ASPECT
OF SIMONE DE BEAUVIOR’S RADICALISM

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Abstract

My paper focuses on a particular aspect of Simone de Beauvoir’s work, namely her treatment of the ageing process. She draws on her own experience of nursing her mother, and the way this brought home to her own mortality. She is aware that although everyone experiences ageing, apart from those who have an early death, each person experiences it in a different way. For some it is a long drawn-out process with or without painful illness. The various modalities of ageing appeared in her various writings and perhaps have not received much attention before.

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French-speaking philosophers among others in recent years. In what follows, the radicality of her analysis of the process of ageing will be our focus.

As she moved into her sixties the experiences of growing old resulted in the writing of *La Vieillesse* (Fr. edn. 1970), tr. in English as *The Coming of Age* and more appropriately translated as *Old Age*. She wrote in detail about the death of her mother in *A Very Easy Death* (1964), and about Sartre’s illness and death in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre* (1981). As she writes about the death of Sartre, and of her mother, she at the same time explores her own situated, ageing self. “As a woman, I managed to explain the feminine condition. As I approached old age, I wished to understand what it means to be old.”

Drawing on different perspectives, she sets out “to break the conspiracy of silence” about ageing, showing that, with regard to the aged, society “is not only guilty but downright criminal.” She draws attention to the “barbarous” treatment the elderly suffer, concluding that in most countries the financial condition of the elderly people is perilous. Young people can earn and be productive. But many are unemployed and the process of ageing sets in early among the underprivileged. If the elderly are “used” by others, it is usually for the benefit of others e.g. looking after grandchildren. This can apply to both men and women. In the case of elderly women it amounts to an extension of something that Beauvoir stresses in her writing, namely the fact that women spend their time in making an environment in which others can live.

Beauvoir is something of a pioneer in recognizing that sexual desire often persists in old age, hardly recognized in her own day but accepted today. At the age of thirty she felt that she was old, that her youth was lost. As we age, the body is transformed not only in the physical sense but more importantly in the sense of restricted existential possibilities. Objectively they are seen as deteriorating. They ask “Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?” Eventually they recognize themselves the same way as others see them. As Beauvoir puts it “in order to resolve the ‘identification crisis’ we must unresolvedly accept a new image of ourselves.” How people view the elderly varies. But “they all agree in stating that our face is that of an elderly person...”

Beauvoir writes in her memoirs that age has taken her by surprise and she is terrified by her appearance when looking at her image in the mirror. In this case she is a victim of her own “look” when she confronts herself as an ageing

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4 *Ibidem*.
5 *Ibidem*, p. 283.
6 *Ibidem*, p. 296.
7 *Ibidem*, p. 296, 297.
woman. Confrontation with the ageing process, and along with it the increasing sense of frustration augmented with desperation, lead her to contemplate her own death – these are the themes that find expression in her work. Moreover, in her deeply felt analysis of ageing, we are made aware of a stage in life which is left out of consideration when we quote the truism “All men are mortal”.

In *Old Age* Beauvoir writes that women generally live longer than men. Women continue to perform household work and derive satisfaction from this as long as they are not overburdened by the task. She remembers that her mother experienced intense freedom and independence as an ageing woman, and that in spite of limited and diminished bodily capacities she was willing to embark on new activities during her last days of life. Men seem less able to do this. She writes: “From the day a woman consents to growing old, her situation changes. Up to that time she was still a young woman, intent on struggling against a misfortune that was mysteriously disfiguring and deforming her, now she becomes a different being, unsexed but complete: an old woman.”

The old undergo a further deprivation – the loss of contemporaries through death. “The death of someone who is close to us, of a friend”, Beauvoir wrote in *Old Age*, “deprives us not only of a presence but also of that whole part of our life which was entwined with theirs”. She is plagued by the anguish of death, her own non-existence. “I have the feel of nothingness in my bones.” This anguish had always been the opposite side of her immense desire to live and to be happy. “The idea of death”, she wrote, “provokes a reflex toward life”. Awareness of our mortality is the basic source of anxiety.

Beauvoir’s mother was in bed for three months, suffering from a broken pelvic bone and cancer. At first she felt that her mother was not going to die. At the same time it seemed that to be seventy-eight was an ideal age for death. She never felt the same way when she imagined her own death or that of Sartre’s. She did in fact nurse Sartre. In her mother’s suffering body she saw her own ageing body, and when her mother died she experienced an intimation of her own death. “For the aged person death is no longer a general, abstract fate: it is a personal event, an event that is near at hand”, for, as one grows old, death becomes closer.

During her mother’s illness Beauvoir had the chance to look back not just to her past but also to her mother’s past. Having lived with and through it, when she writes about the close mother-daughter relationship, which is not an easy relationship in general, she also acknowledges its conflictual nature. As it

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10 SIMONE de BEAUVOIR, *All Said and Done*, p. 360.
11 Ibidem, p. 50.
happens, Beauvoir’s memoirs relate to two illnesses of her own and two almost fatal accidents when she was close to death. All this made her realize that a sick person loses individuality, withdraws from engagement with others, becoming an object for others, and is reduced to flesh. In this way she shows how bodily changes alter our experience of time.

We act in the present in the light of the more or less specific goals relating to the future. This is how transcendence is accomplished. But, for the elderly, the future looks brief. For them “the world falls silent.” Sometimes time seems to pass more quickly. At other times, just the opposite. With age comes the consciousness of mortality, leading man to cognize the time limit onto his own life. “As the years go by the future shortens while our past grows heavier.” The elderly identify themselves with the projects they executed in the past. In the present, projects are undertaken by those younger than themselves, while the elderly daydream and think of the past. So, old age, according to Beauvoir, is haunted by the memories of childhood and youth. Because of the shrinkage of the future, the elderly “take refuge in habit” and repetitive behaviour. Memory links us to the past. But, in old age, memory is unreliable. Beauvoir gives several examples of this from her personal experience. Looking at a photograph of herself in 1929, she does not recognize herself or the surroundings.

While Beauvoir reminds us that ageing is a universal existential process, it is not the same for each person. In addition to conditions of health, socio-cultural situations are all-important. She exemplifies her own view that a more privileged old age is available to an intellectual, and to the rich, than to the manual worker. As a true existentialist she followed the advice she gave in *Old Age* up to her last year, up to her death, “to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning – devotion to individuals, to groups, or to causes, social, political, intellectual, or creative work.” Her life is an example of her own philosophy that “one’s life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion.” She surrounded herself with intimate relationships in her old age.

Moreover, her book *Old Age* also has an ethical purpose. The aged have their own dignity in spite of enduring biological deterioration. In a society based on equal human worth their lives still have meaning and value for us all. She writes “old age exposed the failure of our entire civilization. It is the whole man that must be remade, it is the whole relation between man and man that must be recast if we wish the old person’s state to be acceptable.” And so she

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13 *Ibidem*, p. 484.
15 *Ibidem*, p. 466.
17 *Ibidem*, p. 541.
18 *Ibidem*, p. 806.
advocates radical transformation of the whole society as a solution of the problems of the old. This shows her debt to the Marxist preoccupations of the France of her day. But unlike the Marxists, she is anxious to stress human individuality as against collectivism. In Beauvoir’s ideal society old age will cease to be feared. She concludes that “we must live a life so committed, so justified, that we can continue to cherish it even when all our illusions are lost and our ardor for life has cooled.”\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) *Ibidem*, p. 567.