Ageism and the unrealisability of old age

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Summary

This paper addresses the topic of ageism through the lens provided by Simone de Beauvoir concerning the subjective 'unrealisability' of age. In her book on *Old Age*, she adopted the terminology of existentialism to argue that old age was one of the 'unrealisables', phenomena that can be grasped only through their 'otherness'. Old age, in her view, can only ever be understood as an object position, or rather a multiplicity of object positions, none of which aligns with the experiencing self. This inherent otherness of age provides a ready template for viewing agedness as an undesired and undesirable and fundamentally alien characteristic. The outwardly ageing subject's view of him or her self remains always ageless, distinct from such otherness, experienced as more real than any self reflected aged other. But while age's unrealisability may sustain the individual's subject position as ageless, it risks perpetuating the devaluation of the aged as always a collective other. Rather than demanding a resolution of such object and subject positions, I suggest that a more realizable goal may be to accept this inevitable opposition and focus instead upon improving the objective conditions of later life. Enriching the actual relations of care might constitute such an objectively 'realisable' goal, one that is also in keeping with the social intent of de Beauvoir's book.

Ageism and the unrealisability of old age

"The slow accumulation of events and experience that gradually create a character is one of the myths of the late nineteenth century and of empiricism. I don't think it really exists. I don't have a life, an experience, behind me that I can turn into maxims, formulae, ways of living. So since I don't believe that I possess experience, I am the same at close on seventy as I was at thirty."

J.P. Sartre, cited in De Beauvoir, *Adieux* 324

Introduction

Since Robert Butler coined the term ageism to denote a form of bigotry akin to racism and sexism, it has become a key term in gerontology. Subsequent formulations vary in the emphasis they place in representing it as political ideology, social attitude or individual bias. While the first implicates the operation of group interests and systems of power and oppression, the second and third primarily concern values and opinions, either molded and expressed within a socio-cultural context, or mediated through interpersonal experience. The linkage between the individual and the societal devaluation of older people lies less in their dislike for old people as other persons, but more for a distinct characteristic of such persons, namely their agedness. What is notable about ageism is that the characteristics that mark how agedness is realised are attached only contingently to persons or things. In themselves, they embody not some stable characteristic but temporality, a past that is observed but not experienced, and a present that questions both becoming and being old (Shane 218). While time and circumstances may influence attitudes to ethnicity and gender, the characteristics defining these categories represent the antithesis of change, possessing an apparent unchanging sameness in which difference is realized. They embody not just the whole person but the whole life of a person.

Judgements of agedness do not. They are inextricably time dependent. Every aged person was for most of their life, not an aged person: maybe a person who long disliked both

agedness and aged persons. In contrast to the 'self-hatred' of persons holding racist or sexist values and opinions who nevertheless share the same social identity as those they denigrate, persons who acquire the characteristics of agedness may have long disliked the idea of age and agedness. Such persons cannot be simply assumed, at this particular stage in their life, to have acquired bad faith. At most they can be said to be put off by their imagined future self (Nelson). Despite acquiring the aged patina of the people they long disliked, are they not yet the same person, the same self 'inside'? And does not their dislike of age reflect no more than this self-sameness[i]? Raising such questions renders ageism, in any of its putative forms, more problematic than those other forms of bigotry with which Butler sought to ally ageism.

Simone de Beauvoir's account of old age provides one of the first, and arguably one of the more penetrating attempts to make sense of this dilemma. The aim of this paper is to draw upon her writing to help illuminate the inherent problematic of treating ageism as merely one among many other 'isms' by which particular social groups are devalued and discredited (ableism, classism, racism, sexism etc.). Her emphasis upon the 'unrealisability' of old age and the incommensurability of the 'object' and 'subject' positions of ageing, can, I suggest, help explicate the conditions that foster and maintain a dislike, not necessarily of old people, but of old age as a condition or state of life that remains alien and unwanted. Central to de Beauvoir's account is her distinction between 'subject' and 'object' positions. While the former emphasizes authorship, agency and experience – positions privileged by their framing as first-person narratives – the latter emphasizes a person's social identity and observed status – positions distinguished by third-person accounts, of selves and persons viewed and narrated by and through others. This distinction is similar to that made by the American sociologist, George Mead, between representing the self as both an experiencing 'I' and an experienced 'me' (Mead); and within existentialist philosophy, between the body-

for-itself (my experiencing) and the body-in-itself (myself experienced)[ii]. De Beauvoir was one of the first to align these positions with the state of old age.

The paper consists of three sections. In the first section, I outline de Beauvoir's general thesis concerning the unrealisability of old age and the various interpretations that have since been made of her writing on this theme. In the second, I draw out the consequences of age's unrealisability in creating a growing division between one's body and one's self, part of what I have termed the normal abnormality of age. In the third and final section, I consider the consequences of this perspective for ageing studies and particularly the dilemmas it poses between the maintenance of individual wholeness and the diminution of age's otherness. Not just a recognition but a degree of acceptance of age's unrealisability as a unified subject and object position, I suggest, can prevent the issue of 'authenticity' in later life from being pursued down various blind alleys, diverting energy and attention away from pragmatic measures to reduce the objective disadvantages that many people face in later life.

Simone de Beauvoir and the unrealisability of old age

In examining the phenomenology of ageing, de Beauvoir set up a dialectic, contrasting the view of one's self derived from and presaged upon the viewpoint of others, subject to the externality of time with a view of one's self as an unmarked subjectivity, driven forward by desires, plans and projects. She writes: "it is the Other within us who is old"; in contrast, "our private, inward experience does not tell us the number of our years; no fresh perception comes into being" (316). But, she adds, while we do not accept this otherness as ours, "in the end we submit to the outsider's point of view" (323). In so doing, we assume "a reality that is certainly ourselves although it reaches us from the outside and although we cannot grasp it" (320). This 'insoluble contradiction' leads people to waver in their identity as an aged person, vacillating between an assertive, intentional ageless 'I' and an observed and

objectified aged 'me' without "managing to hold them both firmly together" (323). The reason, she argues, for this unmanageability lies in the status of old age as one of those "unrealizables", phenomena the self as subject cannot fully experience or internalize but which remain forever external, always a self observed, never a being-for-itself (325). While it is possible to imagine and even understand oneself *becoming* old, whether seeking it or resisting it, it is impossible to understand oneself as *being* aged, faced with the multiple othernesses by which old age is represented.[iii]

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre draws upon the phenomenological tradition established by Husserl to distinguish between ways of being that are intrinsically of the world, locatable in time and space, and ways of being that are realized in the world through intentionality – not as objects of experience but as the experience of experiencing itself; not as observed embodied beings but as the subjective perception of embodiment itself. The former – 'being-in-itself' – is identifiable as the body which is observed, which is capable of being understood as an object of consciousness, but not consciousness itself. Always an object to others, it is thereby an object to itself, a self that corresponds with, but is yet incapable of being realized in and through its embodiment, its 'being-for-itself'. De Beauvoir drew upon Sartre's existential philosophy in formulating her idea of a person's agedness as an example of 'being-in-itself', an observed object who is subject to a certain agedness, but which is set apart from, and hence unrealizable to the person understood as subject, author and agent of his or her own intentions[iv].

De Beauvoir's phenomenological account of old age, however, goes beyond such metaphysical otherness. She seeks to incorporate into this understanding of otherness the subjective sense of discomfort that is elicited by confronting one's agedness as more than simply 'other' but an 'uncanny' unsettling otherness (Freud, *The Uncanny*). At the end of his essay on *The Uncanny*, Freud describes how, in one of his few experiences of uncanniness,

sitting alone in the sleeping compartment of a train, “the door of the adjacent toilet swung open and an elderly gentleman in a dressing gown and travelling cap entered my compartment” (162). At first startled, Freud soon realized that the intruder was none other than himself. It was not so much a fear that was evoked by this ‘double’ but a distinct displeasure born of confronting an unexpected and ‘unhomely’ image of one’s self first as other then as self. It is this affective component of ‘unfamiliarity’ that de Beauvoir latches onto when articulating her view of the unrealisability of age. Aside from the intellectual unrealisability associated with the otherness of one’s aged self, she highlights the emotional reaction – the unsettlement induced by confronting oneself as some aged other.

The Jungian analyst, Sylvia Perera reports a similar experience when, following hip surgery, “as I was hobbling down the street, a jovial invitation from an elderly, disabled man to ‘join the cane brigade’ still came to me with a shock. It served as both a dubious welcome into a new community that knew about suffering bodies and a shaming rebuke to my now delusional and unfortunately still habitual, social identity as a fully active, ageless person” (Perera 140). The active upset that arises from this encounter with one’s self –as-aged-other seems rooted in the uncanniness induced in a ‘homely’ ageless self by the distinctly ‘unhomely’ experience of othernesss when confronting one’s aged object position. The marks of agedness serve mostly as the initial signs of this othering, an early estrangement that is noted perhaps more acutely by those who, like de Beauvoir, writing her book shortly after passing the age of sixty, or Jean Améry, whose vitriolic book on ageing (which the latter characterizes as “worse than torture”) was written when he was 58, were on the threshold of old age.

Améry wrote of ageing as becoming a stranger to oneself and the emotional dislocation this caused, in a book that was published a couple of years before de Beauvoir’s but which was not translated into English until nearly twenty years later. He too noted how

“[a]s aging people we become alien to our bodies and at the same time closer to their sluggish mass (sic) than ever before” (Améry, 127). Most of life, Améry observed, is experienced at a distance from agedness; aged persons are consequently encountered first and foremost as others. This habitual otherness is not the alterity which post-colonialist writers describe because, unlike the subaltern, the otherness of the aged body is also the necessary future of the not yet aged body. Hence, framing ageism as akin to the ‘alterity’ of the subaltern, as some writers have tried to do (e.g. Zimmerman), misses the point. What Améry and de Beauvoir recognized is the division is located within the person – the fundamental division between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* of Descartes – not constructed out of any inter-subjectivity. No social structure engineers it, in the way that the divisions of class and race are engineered. Its origin lies in the very nature of being, an inevitable duplicity that resides within us, between the object position of our ‘being-in-the-world’ and our subject position, our ‘being-for-the world’ as Sartre puts it (*Being and Nothingness* 330).

This doubling of age’s otherness – its emotional and ontological disjunction - makes de Beauvoir’s account the more powerful. She, like Améry, feels the pain, the alienation and invisibility of age, both as an author and as an agent, belittled by “the pox of time for which there is no cure” (*Force of Circumstance* 673). Unlike Améry, however, she both feels it, experiences it, and goes on to theorise it. As Kathleen Woodward, referring to de Beauvoir’s writing, has noted in her perceptive essay on old age’s representation in literature, “[s]ocial values do indeed condition the way we perceive the physical condition of the elderly as a class, but [de Beauvoir’s] conclusion is more radical and demoralizing than that. She believes that no matter what the social distribution of power, no matter what our cultural values, we reject that decrepit body” (Woodward, *Instant Repulsion* 44). For de Beauvoir, that rejection rests in large part upon age’s inevitable otherness – its unrealisability.

Woodward's own analysis of old age is framed by a somewhat different form of 'unrealisability', the inversion of the imaginary whole the child is said to form of and for itself as a becoming being, during the mirror stage of its development (*Instant Repulsion* 60). Just as Lacan imagined the child discovering in the mirror a wholeness that belied the disparate conflicts and experiences which he or she experiences in infancy, a wholeness that becomes an ego ideal, so Woodward suggests the perception of one's self as aged 'in the mirror' lead to confronting an other, fragmented imaginary, the unassimilated other that contrasts with the desired and valued wholeness the infant had experienced and that the adult still sustains (*Aging and its Discontents* 68). This alienation of the aged self as other involves not just a perceiving/thinking otherness, but an affectively inflected otherness, an injurious agedness "summed up by the words decrepitude, ugliness and ill-health" (de Beauvoir, cited in *Aging and Its Discontents* 70).

What Woodward is pointing to is the unrealizable imaginary by which old age is represented, whether one's own or that of others. While the affective response to the uncanny experience of confronting oneself as an aged other might be understandable, the more general response to the imaginary agedness of others suggest that factors other than the pure narcissistic injury of confronting oneself as an aged other are operating. Woodward believes that "as we approach the extremity of old age we approach…the limit of the pure cultural construction of aging" (*Aging and its Discontents* 194). The mirror image we are faced with is a real disjunction that cannot be realized otherwise. Despite increasing opportunities for new projects and new intentions, there remain limits in later life - limits both of desire and a limited affordance for realizing those desires. All that continues of that subject self, when bodily fragmentation becomes 'biologically natural', is itself potentially fragmented by that aged fragmentation (Woodward, 1991: 187). What might be called the discursive or narrative self provides the sole potential for realizing a transcendent ageing, rejecting the mere look of

the other with the voice of the ageing agless I, the old, disembodied storyteller whose voice can be found in so many of Samuel Beckett's stories[v].

Ageing in the third person: from the look to the story

In contrast to sociological and social gerontological accounts of ageism produced by forces outside of the person – whether fashioned by interests and powers into the collective consciousness of an ageist society or simply inherited from the cultural traditions of the past —de Beauvoir's concerns with the unrealisability of ageing hinge upon its *intrinsic* otherness, the irreconcilable oppositionality that age brings to bear on the still desiring, still intending subject. The signs of age from which de Beauvoir recoiled were largely the observations of the aged body, the various ways time becomes inscribed like rust on the aged body. The 'look'[vi], for her, is central to the split that she describes between the self as a socially mediated material object, a person subjected to the views and judgements of others, and the self as a subject agent, an intentional experiencing author of one's destiny, a self not fated to look forever in the rear view mirror of the past but who continues to fashions a future for him or her self. Whether understood as Woodward suggests as the inversion of the mirror stage of development or as the inexorable assimilation of the other's gaze, as de Beauvoir considers, the unrealisability of any subject position for old age seems either way to be presaged upon the impossibility of our ever seeing ourselves as 'whole'. Being looked at, but not being acknowledged, interpellated rather than recognized, prevents one's subjectivity from being fully realized through the gaze. As Améry notes, "bit by bit [this] makes social life 'insufferable' because we need to exist for others" (Améry, 68). Observed and interpellated only as an object, an aged social being, denies the possibility of our ageless subjectivity to successfully reach beyond the mirror.

De Beauvoir writes how “biological decay…kills all projects” creating “the impossibility of surpassing oneself and of becoming passionately concerned with anything” (de Beauvoir, 1977: 494). From how age makes the body look – its external status as ‘body-in-itself’- she segues to its internality, its status as ‘body-for-itself’, the body as the embodiment of personal agency. If visible decrepitude and signs of physical spoliation were removed from the fashioning of agedness, if these characteristics were instead applied as stable characteristics of some bodies, some identities, would they elicit the same degree of othering, the same affective response of distaste, fear or sense of unease? In short is de Beauvoir simply guilty of ‘lookism’, of thinking of herself as ageing always and only in the mirror of the other, through which she comes to define herself as “an object of horror in my own eyes” (de Beauvoir, 1968: 598)? Is there, in short, another way of addressing agedness beyond the objectifying look?

As Woodward points out, family members are less often attributed with such signs of otherness; even as they age, they remain familiar figures, attracting our affections precisely because of their familiarity, their homeliness (Woodward, 1983: 45). Framed as family, they remain their old selves whose signs of ageing go unattended within the family, unless or until some transition or trauma ‘reveals’ that they are in fact no longer quite who they were, no longer ‘our’ mother, father, brother or sister. Such moments of biographical disruption may halt – or at least threaten - the ‘age-transcendence’ that their familiarity had thus far achieved. It is perhaps no coincidence that neither Améry nor de Beauvoir had children, though both of course had experiences of being parented. In de Beauvoir’s own account of her mother’s dying, she describes how she witnessed: “this body, suddenly reduced by her capitulation to being a body and nothing more, hardly differing at all from a corpse - a poor defenseless carcass” (de Beauvoir, p.25, cited in Woodward, 1983: 46). No words are spoken: all is in the

look, the passive observation of her mother's unmoving aged body, an observation itself without precedent and without conversation.

People in constant contact with older friends or family members rarely see them as objects of age. Most spend more time talking with them than looking at them, more time sharing common activities and concerns, fashioning and re-fashioning their respective stories rather than observing each other's bodies, effectively muting any potential 'ageism' by the dominance of their first and second person narratives (see Ojala, Pietilä and Nikander). De Beauvoir's book is not itself without narratives, but the narratives she draws upon come mostly from diaries, letters, and novels – from artists and especially writers professionally concerned with observing and reconstituting a world to be re-imagined by their readers. Unsurprising then, that the characterstics of agedness are re-created through reflections and observations rather than in direct or indirect speech, what was seen rather than what was said. Such accounts dwell upon the moment of a person – a glimpse in the mirror, a flash of surprise at seeing some sign of age marked as a moment in time. In contrast, people realized as persons in the context of interpersonal exchange are realized first and foremost as authored and authoring persons – as I's and me's, we's and you's – whose subjective identities are embedded in these continuing discourses, as talking and talked to subject selves.

Only when such first or second person narratives become those of third persons, when the '*ageless*' narrating self becomes the narrated other, that a transformation occurs and the person becomes a talked about '*aged*' other. This happens when a health or social care professional arrives and adult children start talking *about* their parents, or wives start talking *about* their husbands, in short as third persons to this other witness. Such shifts from second to the third person create the possibility for a discursive othering, exemplified when health and care staff address a patient's or client's husband or wife, son or daughter as his or her 'carer'. The fragility of this discursive balance between first and second versus third person

accounts depends upon both the opportunity and the ability for the third person to enter in to, and to challenge such discourse. Putting forward – authoring – an account that lacks credibility, in the context of the unequal power relationship of professional provider versus potential patient or client can then only further undermine (render inaudible or invalid) such first person accounts, as when for example the aged relative accuses his or her son or daughter of stealing his or her money or of wanting to have him or her 'put away in a home'. Granted that then, even such first- person accounts can undermine the authority of a subject position because of what is being said and not just who is saying it; nevertheless, narrative – and narrative egos—provide scope for resisting the third person othering by the gaze. Discourse, at least, offers the possibility of "more optimistic counter-narratives springing up" out of the 'insoluble contradiction' of persons-in-themselves and persons-for-themselves (McIlvanny, 287). The I's who insist on referring to other 'old people' as 'they's' and 'them's' not only manage to distance their subject self from any agedness-in-itself, but also continue to structure their self as still an agent, an authorial, meaning conferring person, as the quotation at the start of this paper from Sartre evinces, and, indeed, as de Beauvoir herself enables it to be said. This seems to be what one researcher has called 'older people talking as if they are not older people' (Jones).

If de Beauvoir's lookism implies a one-way street toward the incremental objectification of age, discourse serves a more nuanced function, allowing age to be othered, of course, but equally enabling the corporeality of age to remain unmarked because unspoken. While fashion and style can also succeed in dominating the body that remains beneath the clothes, and looking good at eighty can portray an active ageing aesthetic, by concealing age, age is thereby revealed in its very performativity. Photographs can draw upon agedness as a source of aesthetic pleasure, the lines and furrows of the ageing skin appearing as a richly surreal landscape. But such images are no more than objects of the

camera's art; as such, they are always and only objects not persons. As Sontag has noted, the photograph can make anything and everything an object of beauty, precisely because of "its weakness as a means of conveying truth" (Sontag 112). Photographing age, like performing age, creates a surreality of the body. It opens no doors to another subjectivity. To seek to realise age otherwise remains an impossible venture; better to talk of other things, of current plans and future projects, and speak of old age as always another place.

Ageism and its affordances

While de Beauvoir can be criticized for the 'lookism' that dominates much of her othering of age, age's corporeality goes beyond both discourse and appearance. It impacts on function and what might be called the totality of 'bodily affordances' – the multiplicity of ways and functions that human bodies can perform. As we develop, as we grow up, chronological age helps us realize ourselves as agents; within time and through our bodies we develop, building the platforms from which our desires can be, to some degree at least, realised. While contemporary society confers more emphasis upon the look of our bodies than in the past, over and above our bodies' look is the sheer instrumentality our bodies carry and confer. Even if, as de Beauvoir and Sartre suggest, our consciousness – our intentions and plans – remain more or less unaffected by age, ageing introduces new barriers between our conscious projects and their realization. During development, time is on our side: we acquire ever more affordances with which to realise our plans and projects, affordances realized through our embodied mind. Of course, throughout our lives we are confronted by desires and projects that prove unrealizable, and in which agedness arguably plays little part. But when we are young, growing older (and hence up) offers the prospect of our becoming more, more likely to achieve our goals; by contrast, after we have grown up , growing older (but no longer up) makes the prospect of becoming more less likely – what de Beauvoir

summarises as ‘a limited future and a frozen past’ (*Old Age* 421). Most people learn, in Baltes’ terms, how to selectively optimize their plans and projects, while compensating for any age-related weaknesses (Baltes and Baltes). Most people learn to limit their horizons to what is realizable; and most people manage to maintain a kind of distance between their own subjectivity and the multiplicity of otherness. Reminding ourselves of what we have lost, what hopes we have shed, and what we have unconsciously abandoned as subjectively realizable might by some be called ‘wisdom’. But for de Beauvoir, it felt more like being worn down into the otherness that others impose – ‘whether we like it or not’, she writes, ‘in the end we submit to the outsider’s point of view’ (*Old Age* 323).

Socially embedded perceptions of what old age is and what old people can and cannot do may, however, serve the interests of old people viewed as individual subjects, beings-for-themselves, even as such perceptions risk demoting and marginalizing the collective interests of old people. I am not them; and they are not me. This paradox, it seems to me, sustains the othering of age; the very unrealisability of age providing the condition under which such selective othering can take place. The more negative view one has of what old people do, feel and suffer, the more old people become distant from us as subject beings. Instead they form a plurality of othernesses, of third persons whose collective otherness is easily rejected by the inner, same subject self of the otherwise outwardly aged person. Rather than seeking a home in a common, collective identity, where the signs of ageing might be actively displayed and privileged, resisting and rejecting age as a common identity instead privileges the subject self as a distinct doing, feeling, and becoming self, a perpetual first and second person, the author of one’s own personal narrative (cf. Bodner 1005).

Examples of such distancing strategies are not hard to find. Perera’s comment, noted earlier, exemplifies this desire not to be part of any ‘caned community’ of elders. Laura Hurd Clarke’s ethnography offers further examples (Hurd). While the conscious and unconscious

desire of older age groups to differentiate themselves from the 'really' old age group may "emerge from the internalization of negative age stereotypes, a growing body of research indicates that a younger subjective age is positively associated with diverse subjective and objective outcomes such as improved physical and cognitive functioning, health, psychological wellbeing, and longevity" (Lev, Wurm and Ayalon 65). Such a strategy may confer measurable benefits over that associated with 'objectively' representing oneself as the aged self that others would ascribe. Resistance to such age-othering works, but arguably at a cost. The personal experience of ageism, of being ignored, passed over or excluded from civic spaces, cultural fora and social opportunities still hurts. The benefits conferred by individuals not identifying themselves with agedness are balanced by the costs incurred to the collective social, object selves of older people *en masse*.

Within families, and in friendship or work networks, older subject selves may be less often confronted by social exclusion and marginality, retaining their identity as first and second persons within such inter-subjective contexts. So long as older people expose themselves only infrequently within the public sphere, the advantages to the subject self of silently othering others' old age may prove a sustainable self-preserving strategy. However, as older people play an increasingly evident public role in society – as senior citizen consumers and as active and productive exemplary agers - ageism may become a more personal concern and the objectification of their age a more public affair. The paradox is that the expanding cultural, material and social capital of older people in contemporary society is itself creating new dilemmas of how to meet these new expectations of being 'visibly' old but vitally involved. Rising social expectations concerning the vital involvement of older people may threaten to expose the very narrowness of one's own rather limited 'ageless' plans and desires and reveal the somewhat restricted affordances one's 'agelessly' ageing body permits.

As the performative expectations of ageing citizens increase, a greater and more profound unsettling of people's subject selves may emerge in place of the old invisibility of age, shaming them instead for not being more 'active' 'productive' and 'vital'; for failing to fit the expectations of a fit and fabulous agelessness, reversing in effect the realisation of the object and subject positions conferred by one's chronology.

Only the prospect of a progressive rectangularisation of the lifespan and the shrinking of that period of life designated 'real' old age seems likely to terminate what otherwise may prove an interminable ageism[vii]. Short of realizing that goal, the options left seem to depend upon maintaining a strong and salient narrative network of social relations in which the aged person's voice retains its first-and second-person status, while leaving it to the invisible hand of the market to ensure sufficient material opportunities to develop and sustain one's projects in later life, whatever the limiting affordances presented by their particular ageing body. Legislation limiting overt age discrimination no doubt serves a protective function but its impact is constrained by the status of chronological age it nevertheless upholds. Similarly, attempts whether by the state, markets or third sector organisations to rebadge one form of 'them' with another better them (replacing old with successfully old; aged with actively aged, pensioners with workers; retired persons with volunteers, and so forth) seem as likely to demoralize as lift the spirits of individual older persons. Improving the objective image of older people, as a new and vital collective, itself risks compromising the subject position of the individual accustomed to thinking well of him or her self by comparison with the 'really' old.

Conclusions

Simone de Beauvoir concluded her work on old age with the call not merely to improve the welfare of the aged but "to change life itself" (*Old Age*: 604). Despite her

negative characterization of old age, both her own and all the other imaginary, symbolic and real agednesses that she drew upon, this did not prevent her from seeing how, in much of the Western world at least, the aged as a group were (and perhaps, to some degree, still are) culturally, economically and socially marginalized. The more the old grow older, the more marginalized they become. However unattractive old age may be, however alien agedness may feel to us as beings-for-ourselves, growing old is an objective aspect of our humanity, our species and our social being. At the beginning of her book, de Beauvoir comments on the uniquely human aspect of growing old, the extensiveness and multiplicity of the changes human ageing instigates compared with other animals' aging that renders them merely thinner and weaker (*Old Age*: 11).

Expressing no interest in denying the narratives of decline, nor of promoting an ageing aesthetic in its place, her goal was broader. It was to enrich everyone's life, always and equally, for those outside as well as for those inside the relations of production. The unrealisability of age remains a matter of individual subjectivity; by contrast the marginalization of older people she felt was a matter of collective society. Changing the former for her was an impossibility, without changing what it means to be a finite, embodied human being. While it can be argued that the importance given to individualism and the valuing and enriching of the subject position is itself a product of social and cultural change – the duality of human nature seems inescapable. By contrast, changing the objective circumstances of older people is quite possible, whether through fiscal policy, housing policy, technological developments and enhanced systems of health and social care.

Arguably much change in the position of later life has already taken place since de Beauvoir wrote her book. "In our days", she wrote, 'old and poor' is almost a tautology" (*Old Age* 309). It is no longer. Rather a divide has opened up between the lot of the comfortable majority, increasingly annoyed at being collectivised as 'the elderly' and a smaller, disabled

and discredited minority, secluded within the institutional structures of 'care'. Looked after by the low paid, the migrant and the frequently marginalized, these denizens of the fourth age remain an invisible minority, led into and framed by an unauthored old age, authorized as real by a complex of care and uncaring.

As far as the study of ageing is concerned, the task of the humanities is, and arguably always has been, to illuminate the tension between the subject and the object position of ageing and to interpret and illuminate age in a way that makes sense, encourages reflection and, in Jean Améry's terms, helps "make their negation in the look of the others into something of their own and rise up against it" (Améry 77). The task of the social scientist is rather different. Without trampling upon, or denying the importance of subjectivity, social science should aim, first and foremost, to understand and change the structures of society and the part they play in determining the objective conditions under which later life is lived. In the present context and at the present moment, this means especially changing not the discourse about but the objective social relations of care[viii].   For all her subjective distaste for agedness as a human condition, de Beauvoir recognized this crucial distinction and the need to act upon it.

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Notes

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[i] Studies of the development and stability of social attitudes suggest that they change little unless they have been formed on the basis of limited or highly context specific information (Schwarz). Arguably the thirty or forty years of exposure to agedness that most people will experience would imply a relatively stable basis for forming attitudes toward age and agedness. From the pre-school years onwards, it seems, these are consistently negative (for a review, see Gilbert and Ricketts).

[ii] A vast literature on subjectivity and the subject/object divide exists, going back at least as far as Descartes' distinction between 'observing things' (*res cogitans*) and 'observed things' (*res extensa*). Within the existentialist tradition associated with Sartre the distinction is often framed between 'being-in-the-world' – our objective being - and 'being-for-the-world' our subjective being (see, for example, Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations: An introduction to phenomenology* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*).

[iii] As Alison Martin observes: "The reluctance to assume old age she explains in terms of the transcendental ego which is constituted by a multitude of representations of age by others: the conflicting for-itself intentionality of others generates a vague and generalized image of oneself as ageing which, formed as it is by many others, cannot possibly be realized" (128).

[iv] The authorship of the concept of 'unrealisability' has recently been reframed, suggesting that it arose out of the wartime correspondence between Sartre and de Beauvoir, beginning not with Sartre but with de Beauvoir herself (see Clayton).

[v] Beginning with his first trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and the *Unnamable*) through to his last, (*Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*) though the narrator in most of Samuel Beckett's stories is usually an old man or woman telling the story an old life, Beckett manages nevertheless to convey these as also ageless stories (for a recent review of the place of age in Beckett's works, see the special issue of *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui,* vol. 28. 2, titled "Clinique et poétique du vieillir dans le théâtre de Beckett / Clinics and Poetics: Beckett's Theatre and Aging").

[vi] de Beauvoir draws upon Sartre's theorizing of the Look in his *Being and Nothingness*, as constituting ourselves as 'selves' through how our body is presented to others (whether present, imagined or absent). It is through the 'look' that others cast upon the older person that others them as old, not their inner experience. For those close to us, she writes, it "is still our face – its sameness outweigh[ing] the deterioration" but "for outsiders it is the ordinary face of a person..of seventy" (*Old Age* 330). Since our experience of looking at ourselves is always only partial – our bodily existence is at one level more complete and more objective when observed in the eyes of the other. At the same time the other can never experience our experiencing; cannot look through our eyes. Hence the 'look' embodies and reflects this distinction between subject and object positions just as language symbolizes it. For further discussion of the role of 'the look' in Sartre's (and de Beauvoir's) existential philosophy, see Dolezal (2012).

[vii] The prospect of a gradual 'rectangularisation of the lifespan' was first outlined by James Fries, who theorised that the progressive amelioration of late life morbidity will lead to an increasing proportion of the population reaching the limits of human longevity in good health, before dying.

[viii] I am referring especially to the conditions facing paid and unpaid carers and the people being cared for, as the COVID-19 pandemic sweeps through society's ill equipped nursing homes.