

## **Freud's old age: Recognized but never realized?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores Freud's later life and the extent to which Freud internalized a subject position as aged. Drawing upon Sartre and de Beauvoir's idea of the unrealizability of death and old age, I argue that throughout his adult life while Freud confronted desires, experiences and fears that were previously unacceptable and even unthinkable, including the presence of a death instinct, an intrapsychic desire for oblivion, old age remained to the end for him, always and only an object position. Age was for him no subjectivity, no inner experience upon which to reflect. It remained external, an "old Freud" existing as a third person, a recognition of how he was regarded rather than how he felt. This illustrates what I suggest is a fundamental separateness between the psychic representation of ageing and dying. In practice this has left an unresolved legacy for the profession of psychoanalysis in planning retirement rather than dying by the couch.

**Keywords** Ageing, death, de Beauvoir, Freud, retirement, the unrealisability of age

## **Introduction**

Unconscious processes, wrote Freud, are “timeless”, neither subject to nor organized by time. Despite this being, in his words, “a topic that would merit the most thorough consideration”, it did not in fact receive any such consideration, at least not by Freud himself (Freud, 1920/2006, p. 155). Although much has since been written about the potential (or lack of potential) of older people to benefit from psychoanalytic treatment, made in the light of Freud’s earlier pronouncement that “old people are no longer educable” (Freud, 1905, cited by Junkers, 2006, p. xii), Freud’s stated belief that unconscious psychic processes are untouched by time remains largely unexplored. It was picked up a half century later, however, by Simone de Beauvoir in her book on old age. In doing so, she was the first to draw attention to the “insoluble contradiction between the obvious clarity ... that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation” with age (de Beauvoir, 1970/1977, p. 323).<sup>1</sup> The reason for this contradiction, according to de Beauvoir, “is that old age belongs to that category which Sartre calls the unrealizable” (1970/1977, p. 323). This paper explores the subject of old age as such an unrealizable, how the implications of this can be observed in Freud’s own later life, and the consequences arising from his never confronting this issue.

Unlike Freud, who “did not address himself in any systematic way to aging or old age ... nor leave any extensive meditations on his own old age” (Woodward, 1991, p. 26), de Beauvoir did. While she drew upon Sartre’s existentialist philosophy much more than on psychoanalysis, she was aware of, and indeed actively engaged with psychoanalytic ideas concerning age and time. She quotes the psychoanalyst Martin Grotjahn who argued “our unconscious mind knows nothing of old age” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1977, p. 325). For de Beauvoir, while the self as an object for consciousness can be observed to age, the self as subject, the animated and desiring self cannot feel the ageing it can observe. This seeming

incompatibility between the desiring, subject self, unable to realize age as a potential subjectivity, and the objective, socially realized self that is nevertheless recognized as an old person forms the dilemma of recognizing but not realizing old age. De Beauvoir's representation of old age as "among the unrealizable that surround us ... the one that we are the most urgently required to realize and ... the one that consciously and unconsciously we are the most reluctant to realize" (1970/1977, p. 325) provides a potential key to explaining Freud's own reluctance to explore his own experience of age, despite clearly recognizing his status as "old Freud".<sup>2</sup> It also highlights the consequences this has had for the profession.<sup>3</sup>

As Woodward has pointed out, for Freud, old age was experienced as something largely external, increasingly somatized by his ongoing, terminal cancer. This he variously strove to control, by innumerable operations, and own, by naming it "my dear old cancer with which I have been sharing my existence" (in a letter to Zweig, written in March 1939, cited in Roudinesco, 2014/2016, p. 411). Elsewhere, Freud represented old age as an "accretion", a way of becoming "inorganic" and sterile as "an inner ice age" (Woodward, 1991, pp. 42, 45–46). As Woodward points out in his correspondence with Lou Andreas-Salomé, any attempts by her to promote the gifts or virtues of old age were quickly dismissed (1991, p. 42).

Instead, through regular practice and systematic reading and writing, Freud worked as hard as he could to keep his own ageing resolutely at bay, something he knew about, rather like the notion of his own death, but which he chose as much as possible to ignore, focusing his concerns instead on his health and his medical condition. One consequence was "the occlusion of old age" in his work, an omission "covered up by Freud's emphasis upon death" and the death instinct (Woodward, 1991, p. 380). A further indirect consequence, of course, has been the continuing avoidance of the issue of ageing by most subsequent analysts, rendering problematic the very question of "retirement" among psychoanalytic teachers and practitioners (Eissler, 1975; Klockars, 2013; Weiss & Kaplan, 2000).

In exploring how later life was realized in Freud's life and writings, through the help afforded by Simone de Beauvoir and by the psychoanalytically informed writings of Kathleen Woodward, this paper seeks a rapprochement when approaching old age as an obstacle to subjectivity, drawing on both existentialism and psychoanalytical thought. But before considering the practical and theoretical implications of such a perspective, I want to begin with Freud and his old age, framed, as I think it was, between the undeniable realization of illness and impending death and his inability or unwillingness to explore age as a distinct and different subjectivity. This dilemma between a realizable death and an unrealizable old age was reflected not just in his lived experience but also in much of his later work. His desire for a legacy and his fear for his own ending resulted I believe in the profession being better equipped to confront death than plan for retirement.

### **Freud's Old Age Observed**

When Freud wrote of the timelessness of unconscious processes, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/2006), he was approaching his 64th birthday. He was 83 when he died, but despite deteriorating health, he continued seeing patients until the last weeks of his life at the same time as seeing his last major work published, on Moses and monotheism (Edmundson, 2007, p. 208). These last two decades of his life, his self-ascribed "old age", were not spent idly. Nor, despite the promising hint conveyed in his essay on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, did he seem to have spent much time pondering further the topic of age and time, let alone developing the self-analysis of his own experience of ageing. We know from his own correspondence and comments made by his colleagues that Freud hated growing old (Weiss & Kaplan, 2000, p. 445); that he mostly avoided the subject of his own ageing, disliked any celebration of his birthdays and preferred instead to spend the last years and months of his life seeing patients, writing papers and corresponding with the ever widening number of people who sought his advice, his company and his reputation. (Bergmann, 2011; Razinsky,

2013). The legacy of his “denial of age” was, as several analysts have remarked, two-fold, making “retirement” from the practice and teaching of psychoanalysis forever problematic (Weiss & Kaplan, 2000) while risking the future of psychoanalysis becoming a dead but immortalized body of knowledge, fixed forever by the name of its father and founder.

As Kathleen Woodward has noted, for Freud “the terms “old” and “sick” were inextricably correlated (1991, p. 39), conditions to be endured rather than analyzed. Death, the other element in the triad of woes besetting old age was however, something with which Freud did engage, more it could be said, the older he got. Death, particularly his own death, had always preoccupied Freud, at a personal level at least. By the time he reached his 65th birthday, he had begun examining the part played by death in shaping the unconscious. He published one of the most significant revisions of his theory, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920/2006). Here Freud argued for the existence of an internal force, beyond desire, that is evidenced particularly in response to trauma and the nightmares that seem to “thrust [the patient] back into the situation” (1920/2006, p. 139). This repetition of the trauma suggested to Freud the existence of a drive not to go forwards, to seek the fulfillment of wishes, but to restore a prior state, a fundamental drive to return to inertia.

This led him to consider the possibility that “all organic drives” seek a return to “an old state, a primordial state from which it once departed” making “the goal of all life, death” (Freud, 1920/2006, p. 166). Freud felt that faced with the traumatic neuroses that proliferated after the First World War, the desire to return to the trauma reflected not some distortion of the libido, but a desire or drive that lay beneath the sexual drives, the drive toward life, its preservation and propagation, a more primitive set of drives seeking to return organic life to its earlier inorganic form. Prior to Eros came Thanatos, the search for an end to desire, a primordial desire for oblivion.

As Freud moved through old age, death took on a greater personal immediacy. Three years after publishing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud developed cancer in his jaw. Although he suspected it was malignant, the physician he asked to examine him reassured him it was only “a bad leukoplakia”. Still he advised him to have the growth excised (Gay, 2006, p. 419). The first operation was botched; as was a subsequent course of radiotherapy. A second operation was called for, but even then, his physician, Felix Deutsch, refused to acknowledge the cancerous nature of the growth. According to Freud’s biographer, Peter Gay, one factor that caused Deutsch to hesitate was his fear of suicide, since Freud had at some point asked him to help him “disappear from this world with decency” (Gay, 2006, p. 421). Though death was no less a threat as old age, it was one that Freud not only recognized but personally acknowledged, internalized – and theorized.

His own ill health and the death of his grandson left Freud feeling particularly “aged decrepit and declining” as he approached his eighth decade (Gay, 2006, p. 416). From this point onwards, the cancer in his jaw would be a continuing interruption, a threat to his future, a silencing of his voice and a shadow over his work. All told he had over thirty operations performed on his jaw and several different prostheses fitted. Meantime, his recognition continued to grow. In 1924 he received the freedom of the city of Vienna; in 1930, he was awarded the Goethe prize; the same year he was invited to give the Huxley commemorative lecture while his 75th birthday was widely celebrated by banquets and conferences and, most touchingly of all, the unveiling of a memorial tablet in his native town of Freiberg (Gay, 2006, p. 575). While describing himself variously as “a rather frail old man” , “an impoverished creature who has seen better days” or simply a “very old Freud” (cited in Woodward, 1991, pp. 43, 205; Gay, 2006, p. 573), Freud continued to write, to see patients and to explore, perhaps more profoundly than ever before, his sense of his Jewish identity.

Long since, he had withdrawn from the public meetings of the Vienna group and though he retained an interest in the future of psychoanalysis and its institutional structures, he felt it now fell to others to “plan for a harmonious edifice” while he increasingly turned inward, to matters that had long interested him in his earlier years (Sachs, 1945, p. 168). To others eyes, confronting the reality of Freud in his “body-in-itself” contrasted markedly with his being Freud-in-the-world. The latter showed him as an increasingly global intellectual, while the former conveyed a “picture of bowed-down, icy-grey, shriveled old age” (Sachs, 1945, p. 170). Despite withdrawing much of his external concerns and theoretical preoccupation with the nature of intrapsychic structure, his inner thoughts were freed up, almost, to turn outward, to the broader canvas of society, social identity and the nature of human being, leaving his followers to make what they would of these final reformulations (Bergmann, 2011).

Unlike death and his own impending finitude, old age remained always an “other” to him. While he fully recognized that he, Freud, appeared to others an old man (he had reported the alien “uncanniness” of his agedness back in his 1919 essay on the uncanny<sup>4</sup>) he showed no sign of accommodating to it, of owning it as his subjectivity. He was aware that time and ageing are always to some degree “alien” to the unconscious psyche, which as he often noted was “immortal” and thus the fear of death must be explained by alternative unconscious processes, typically castration (Lifton, 1973, p. 8). As Lifton noted, the paradox between an assumed ever-present death instinct located inchoately within the unconscious and the “unconscious” representation of death anxiety as the reflection of castration anxiety was not resolved in Freud’s lifetime. He never pursued the implications of this in his writings, nor did he develop it further in any of his correspondence, though he would frequently comment on his aged status. Indeed, he told Ernest Jones explicitly that he would “not write anything about youth and old age” despite Jones’s suggestion he might consider doing so (Freud &

Jones, 1995, p. 656). It seems clear that while old age was seriously under-theorized by Freud, death was not. Removed as a feature of old age, Freud viewed death as a drive present from the very beginning of life, a partner, as it were, in desire, not an accompaniment of old age.

Whenever Freud mentions his old age, it is always as something other, a phenomenon of the third person, a feature manifesting first as his own “hypochondria” (Schur, 1972, p. 344) and later as his public persona – his being “old Freud” to others, a notion or image that interfered with, but never represented his desiring self (unlike death, which was increasingly articulated as a desire). When Lou Andreas-Salomé claimed to be hard pressed to judge the better half of her life, Freud could only speak of “crabbed age” having arrived, producing “a state of total disillusionment”, in his letter to Andreas-Salomé written just after his 71st birthday (Freud & Andreas-Salomé, 1985, p.165). This despite the fact that a year earlier he was insisting “that we must be ready to till the vineyard again and again” referring to the revisioning of his theory in *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*.

When, in his late sixties, Freud developed cancer, he saw himself as having contracted “a horrible disease *in middle life*”, condemning him “to crawl about for an indefinite time as an invalid”, “a life under sentence” to which he felt he could not get used (Freud & Andreas-Salomé, 1985, p. 135). Unlike his age, of which his birthdays seemed especially to both remind and discomfort him, his cancer became a persistent presence whose otherness he forced himself to accommodate. It was, arguably, an otherness that he strove to internalize.<sup>5</sup> Whether or not it was these intimations of his own mortality, or simply the effect of the war that triggered his “discovery” of the death instinct,<sup>6</sup> having acknowledged the deep-rootedness of this desire for oblivion, Freud was keen to turn it to use, to externalize it, first in excoriating religion, then later in exorcising the religious basis of his own identity. It was as if discarding all the unwanted aspects of his own legacy, he was intent on purifying



himself, ridding himself of even his most tenacious illusion, his “Moses complex”, before “writing finis” to his own story (Schur, 1972, p. 528).

Eventually this burst of late life energy expired; by the time Max Schur, his personal physician, returned from the United States he was “growing weaker by the day” (Schur, 1972, p. 526). Nothing about living made sense to him anymore; there was only the “death wish” that he would finally realize, in London, when on 22 September 1939 he asked Max Schur to end his life. Even then, it seems to me, old age remained, if not unrealizable, unrealized in his life. He chose his end before being “devoured” by the other growing inside him, comforted it seems by the knowledge that his psychoanalysis, his legacy, would live on, immortal.<sup>7</sup>

### **De Beauvoir and the Unrealizability of Age**

Simone de Beauvoir was even more fervent than Freud in her horror of old age. But she confronted old age, both in its place in her own lived experience and in the wider society. She struggled to make sense of it; and sought to claim a better place for it in society. In that sense, she was a pioneer both of ageing studies and of social gerontology. In her book on old age, de Beauvoir (1970/1977) introduced the notion of the “unrealizability” of old age, drawing upon a concept that she and Sartre had formulated back in their wartime correspondence (Clayton, 2009). For de Beauvoir, only by thinking of ourselves “under the gaze of others” do we attach the term “old” to ourselves. In so doing, it is always the other inside us – “the person I am for the outsider – who is old” (cited in Lennon & Wilde, 2019, p. 37). The subject as subject is ageless, attached to the present, but focusing on the future, his or her “desires and projects” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1977, p. 494), unaware of or untouched by past realities.

In his later years, Freud’s particular focus, his desires and projects were about ensuring his ending, ensuring as far as he could the successful re-location and re-

institutionalization of Freudian analysis, at the same time making sense of his own Jewishness and, it might be added, resolving, or at least creating some distance from, his longstanding messianic identification with Moses (Grubrich-Simitis, 1997, p. 78). Beside the daily round, the everyday motor of his life, his correspondence, reading, seeing patients and managing as far as he could his own self-care, these two tasks continued to drive him forwards, projecting his future while resolving his past, despite the obstacles his aged body put in the way.<sup>8</sup> Age, unlike death, remained an acknowledged presence, but primarily as an external constraint upon realizing his plans, not something with which he chose to wrestle.

When de Beauvoir wrote of the unrealizability of old age, she was employing ideas she had helped Sartre develop. But to the existentialism of Sartre and his idea of the “unrealizable” she also introduced the idea of an intrapsychic conflict in the experiencing of age, the continuing desire for and the impossibility of “transcending the self” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1977, p. 494). While death becomes, in de Beauvoir’s eyes, a less fearful, fantastical phenomenon as people age, this growing capacity to confront death did not constitute an aspect of coming to terms with one’s ageing. Freud’s capacity to endure his cancer, his unblinking knowledge of its terminality has often been deployed to illustrate his courage, integrity and determination in contrast with his presentation of himself as an old man, which seems more one of mannered effect than an expression of his subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> The conflict of ageing lies less in its unpalatability than in its intrusive otherness, not an alliance with death but an obstacle to living and ensuring immortality.

Unlike ageing, the intrapsychic conflict that surrounds death confers a kind of continuity, a self-sameness distinct from the alienation of age. Unlike death, with age there is no possibility of a return, no repetition. Death serves as a line of continuity, a trajectory whose necessary transience creates the conditions, both for repetition and renewal (as expressed in Freud’s essay *On Transience* [1915/1957]) and, equally importantly, for

ultimate rest (as expressed in Freud's account of the death instincts, in *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* [1920/2006]). Ageing promises only discontinuity and the gradual othering of the self and while death was a form of desiring, ageing had no such internal object. This distinction, however, between ageing and dying was never clarified in de Beauvoir's writing and remains poorly recognized by both philosophy and by psychoanalysis.<sup>10</sup>

### **Freud's Ageless Legacy?**

Freud's old age was at most a constant becoming, framed to a considerable degree by his consciousness, not so much of time, but of finitude. He had been preoccupied by the likely age of his death for much of his adult life, fearing that he may be cut short by fate from achieving something more than the mere legacy of longevity from his father. Although he often wrote in his letters how old he was becoming, and how likely or unlikely it was that he would complete his plans, his old age was and remained an impending "other" to himself. Whether signing himself of as "old Freud" or remarking about how he was stepping into old age, or fearing that he was now finished, these recognitions of agedness appear always as external constraints, threatening to curtail his authorial, subject self. Threatening, but never engulfing him. He remained the ageless author, up to and even of, his own death. From early adulthood, Freud had been committed to a life of work, both in his role as a thoughtful healer and as a pioneer-explorer of mind, body and society. Age existed always as an externality, a challenge and obstacle to his plans. Death was a different matter. It dogged his life from an early age and while Freud frequently commented upon the fallacy of seeking immortality and the necessity of a fixed length of life, he evinced no desire to become an "ex" – to retire from his profession and settle into the quiet life of "an old gentleman" (Freud & Jones, 1995, p. 739). Freud would sometimes sign himself off in his letters to Lou Andreas-Salomé as "your old Freud" and she "your old Lou" (Freud & Andreas-Salomé, 1985, pp. 182, 200, 209). This

self-conscious game-playing at the end of their letters evinces the obvious affection each felt for the other, much in the way of “old friends”. Here, old takes on a double meaning – reflecting both their mutual object position as old people alongside their subject positions realized not so much through their agedness as in the longstanding nature of their relationship.

This account of Freud’s later years is not meant to convey something unique about Freud’s lived experience of old age. His is a position lived by many, perhaps most people; but it has been better observed. Approaching his 80th birthday, one of the first analysts actively to engage older people in treatment, Martin Grotjahn reflected upon being, objectively, old. “Facing 80”, he wrote, “I probably have to realize that I am already old, [but] to my surprise. I don't really feel it ... I became a consultant for gerontology in two universities – but I never felt old. Other people around me got old, but I did not ...” (Grotjahn, 1985, p. 294). For Freud as for Grotjahn and for many other analysts, there is no aged “I”; just an ageless “I” observing him or her self becoming aged in and through others’ eyes. As age and ageing have come more to the fore in contemporary society, psychoanalysis as a profession is only now beginning to recognize the problematic in Freud’s legacy, the fantasy of agelessness and the inability to confront and thus plan for retirement within the profession (Junkers, 2013, p. 176). Still, unlike most professions, there are no formal procedures for retirement (Klockars & Hooke, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

While Freud’s later life work illuminated new psychoanalytic theorizing of death, age remained cut off from such concerns. This was true intellectually and experientially. This separation in turn illustrates the separateness of these two processes and helps explain the curious legacy of Freud’s failure to think more about ageing and its place in the profession of

psychoanalysis. While he had been clear in considering age as a serious barrier to becoming an analysand, he had never faced the possibility that it may also be a barrier to practicing psychoanalysis. What de Beauvoir wrote – and thought - about the “unrealizability” of old age seems to apply to Freud. There is no reason why it should not. But recognizing age’s unrealizability and the consequences it may have on a profession like psychoanalysis has taken a long time to percolate, much longer than it has to revise Freud’s view of the impossibility of conducting analysis with an aged analysand. Distinguishing between ageing and mortality, should make it more possible for the profession to think about and plan for retirement, without treating such plans as if they are the equivalent of planning a funeral.

Finally, it may be argued that the lack of retirement planning is not unique to psychoanalysis, that retirement is not unknown to individual psychoanalysts and that the reluctance to retire is not proof of a failure to own one’s ageing. Making a connection between Freud’s reluctance to explore ageing as a subjectivity and the professional lacuna of retirement in nearly all psychoanalytic societies is of course a matter of speculation on my part. Still it is difficult to deny any connection between these phenomena. Freud is long deceased and the assumptions concerning Freud’s “ageless” subjectivity impossible to prove one way or another. Even if as Freud claimed, the unconscious knows nothing of time it is possible for the experience of ageing to be realized through other means than explorations of the unconscious. Still the absence of age and ageing is notable in Freud’s writings and de Beauvoir’s phenomenological exploration of the unrealizability of age offers some insight into the way that absence might be understood and its continuing social consequences acknowledged within and outside the profession.

## **Conflict of Interest**

On behalf of all authors, I declare no conflict of interest in this paper's publication.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Of course, a few psychoanalytic papers on ageing were written between 1920 and 1970, but most concerned accounts of individual analyses of “older” patients (Grotjahn, 1940; Kaufman, 1940; Segal, 1958). Apart from demonstrating the feasibility of psychoanalytic treatment of older people, these reports otherwise failed to engage with, let alone develop, Freud’s remark upon the agelessness of unconscious processes. The one exception, perhaps, was Grotjahn who noted the difficulty he experienced in “feeling” himself old, unlike the agedness he observed in the “pieces” of his body (Grotjahn, 1985; 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of his life, in letters to longstanding friends and colleagues, Freud would occasionally sign himself off as “Your old Freud” (Freud & Jones, 1995, p. 769; Freud & Andreas-Salomé, 1985, p. 209)

<sup>3</sup> The assumption that the practice of psychoanalysis was largely unaffected by, or even benefitted from ageing is well illustrated in Kurt Eissler’s ‘rosy-tinted’ comment that “senescence ...is an improbable conclusion of the life of an analyst” (Eissler, 1975: 329).

<sup>4</sup> See Freud (1919/2003).

<sup>5</sup> One such example is his referring to “my dear neoplasm” in a letter to a colleague, Max Eitingon, written in September 1923 following a consultation with the oral surgeon, Hans Pichler (Schur, 1972, p. 361).

<sup>6</sup> Despite criticism over its ambiguity and vagueness, Freud’s formulation of the death instinct treated it as an inherent drive “to cancel out tensions, the instincts of destruction at work within, aggressiveness directed outwards, the trend toward a state of rest (the Nirvana principle) and the inclination to suffer” (Bibring, 1941, pp. 129–130). With age, Freud seems to imply the antithetical influence of the libido – the drive toward life and reproduction – grew weaker, creating greater opportunities for the death instincts to shape the mind’s conscious intentions.

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<sup>7</sup> Freud had described to Ernest Jones how he had witnessed his friend Anton von Freund “devoured piecemeal by his cancer” (Schur, 1972, p. 318).

<sup>8</sup> Sachs notes how, in his final visit to Freud, despite his evident frailty, Freud was still keeping in touch with the situation of psychoanalysis in America “as closely as he had done for more than thirty years” (Sachs, 1945, p. 186).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Freud wrote how he could no longer pursue to conclusion his essay on Moses, due to his advanced age and failing strength, then, upon arriving in London, promptly went ahead finished the book and arranged for it to be sent to the publishers in Amsterdam (Freud, 1930/2004, pp. 210, 217).

<sup>10</sup> While philosophers have thought a lot about death, they think much less about ageing and old age (Bavidge, 2016, p. 207). Much the same can be said for psychoanalysis.