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THE TEMPORALITY OF REMAINING TRAPPED. BEAUVOIR ON AGING AS A GENDERED PHENOMENON

abstract

In this contribution, we discuss the phenomenon of aging as gender-based with the help of Beauvoir's account of aging, temporality, and gender. We explore how the social centring of the reproductive capacities of women's bodies impacts the ways in which they might tend to experience growing old. The first section frames our analysis within Beauvoir's philosophical project and thus poses the issue of elderly women as people who cease being able to fulfil their reproductive 'duties' in patriarchal societies; in the second section we stress the relationship between temporality and gender as transcendental structures of the self. This methodological basis allows us to explore in the third section the core of the Beauvoirian thesis by addressing the existential dimension of aging for women, who still have – even in an advanced age – to navigate challenging experiences related to sexuality and reproduction.

keywords

Simone de Beauvoir, gender, aging, temporality, othering, patriarchy

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The truly old woman's body thereby moves beyond the pale. Flat, wrinkled, greatly sagging, the old woman's breasts signify for the ageist dominant culture a woman no longer useful for sex or reproduction, a woman used up. (Young, 1980, p. 80).

1. Being a woman who ages: patriarchal *othering*

When considering the topics of ageing and old age, one straightforwardly encounters the *temporal* dimension of human being: common sense suggests that ageing has to do with time passing. It is therefore phenomenologically accurate to start from the lived experiences of ageing people to sketch some of the transcendental structures of ageing. The phenomenon of ageing is of course far from being univocal. How one experiences getting old and even *whether* one experiences it and at what point in one's life, will depend hugely on several factors of one's existence, among them, on one's physical and psychic condition and on how one is socially positioned with regard to gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship, class, etc. It will additionally depend upon how the society one is embedded in views age and ageing, and what provisions it offers to support different forms of life in advanced age. A seminal work in which both the lived experiences of ageing and the social structures that shape them are meticulously analysed is Simone de Beauvoir´s *Coming of Age* (or *Old Age*, as the more appropriate translation of *La Vieilesse* would be[1]), published in the 1970s. This is not the only work where Beauvoir writes about old age, but it is one of the first works in the European philosophical tradition to offer a comprehensive non-medical, philosophical, existential, but also sociological and anthropological analysis of the phenomenon of ageing.[2] As Beauvoir herself remarked in *Old Age*, this work is comparable – in structure, in length, in scope, and

1 In the following we therefore use this title when referring to the work.

2 Beauvoir reflects on aging, the declining body, and the experience of the inexorable passing of time also in her memoires *The Force of Circumstance* (1965) and *All Said and Done* (1993), and even more centrally in her account of accompanying her mother on her deathbed, *A Very Easy Death* (1966), and in her dispassionate account of Sartre´s last months, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre* (1984). *Old Age,* however, is the only of her works that aims at offering a systematic account of what it means to age.

As it often happens, also in these cases the titles of Beauvoir´s works have been translated in a puzzling way. *La Vieilesse* literally means old age/being old, and has nothing of the euphemistic "coming of age" with which it has been translated for the US market; her reflection on her mother´s dying is titled *Une mort très douce*, which means a gentle, not an easy, death; and her recollection of Sartre´s dying is titled *La Cérémonie des adieux*, which translates as the farewell ceremony/the ceremony of farewells. "Sartre" is nowhere in its original title, the focus being on the "ceremony" or the activity of saying goodbye, not on the man himself.

even in topic or central thesis – to *The Second Sex* (1996, p. 85), and the similarities have been noted also in recent scholarship (on this see Stoller, 2014, pp. 2-4). In both works, as Beauvoir emphasises, her aim was to analyse the ways in which, respectively, women and the elderly are *othered* in our societies: how they are accorded secondary social status, how their possibilities are closed down, their capacities stymied, i.e. how they are exploited and/or denied the support necessary to live fully human lives and authentic existences, with the language of existential ethics.

In *Old Age,* however, the effect of *gendering* upon our temporal experience tends to be treated only in passing. Beauvoir even claims that old age might be more of a problem for men than it is for women. Once retired, men lose their value as labourers or professionals in the eyes of society; women, meanwhile, often continue to perform labour in the house and in caring for relatives more than men do, and are therefore less likely to experience such a stark loss of power and meaning: "Age does not bring women down from such height; there are more things they can still do; and not being so embittered, so demanding, they 'uncommit' themselves less" (Beauvoir, 1996, p. 475). This could be one of the reasons why Beauvoir pays more attention to ageing as it tends to be lived by men in *Old Age,* often discussing it as *the* problem of ageing in general, and why she is much less attuned to the difficulties women undergo as they, in the eyes of society, lose sexual and reproductive capacity as they age. As Anja Weiberg (in Stoller, 2014) writes: "In this book she is not primarily a feminist but an advocate for the aged" (p. 67). For these reasons, in the following we discuss Beauvoir's analysis of women's experience of ageing especially as she develops it in *The Second Sex*, where gendered experience is indeed foregrounded, and we do not devote as much attention to *Old Age*.

There are of course other seminal works in the history of European philosophy that deal with how time structures human experience, from Augustine to Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger, to name just the best-known authors. However, these philosophers have not significantly discussed how temporal experience and self-perception tend to vary with age, nor how they are, as we argue, *constitutively* affected by other facets of one´s social existence, such as gender, race, or class. Rather – we agree here with feminist philosophers and other critical theorists (e.g., Schües *et al.,* 2011; Fielding and Olkowski, 2017) – they assumed a neutral and falsely universal subject of experience. For this reason, in our exploration of the temporalisation of the self at the intersection of age and gender in this article, we take cue from Beauvoir´s original contribution, which instead *does* foreground the social determinations of our existential situations.

In this contribution we especially focus upon the issue of *reproduction* and how its temporality is lived by ageing individuals ascribed the female sex at birth, in modern Western societies most often gendered as women. Being reduced to reproductive (and sexual) bodies is for Beauvoir a salient feature of women's situation in patriarchal societies, which she meticulously analysed in *The Second Sex* (first published in 1949), and it is closely tied to the experience of a socially and biologically *limited temporality*, which we discuss below. The ageing of what in most societies still today is understood to be 'the' reproductive body – the female body – thus presents an especially apt opportunity to reflect upon how the experience of time as one ages is both essential to one's lived experience of oneself and is shaped by the social structures and positionalities one is embedded in.

2. Temporality: Ageing, Gender, and the Transcendental Self

In addressing the issue from a phenomenological perspective, Sara Heinämaa argues that ageing is "fundamentally a personal transformation, a change in one's relation to oneself, to others and to the world which is not accountable by mere biological or social factors" (Heinämaa, 2014, p. 186). Silvia Stoller analogously warrants that "the debate over female temporality should not be reduced to biology in general or the biological bodies of

women in particular" (2011, p. 81). Ageing is then neither solely a matter of culture nor of nature, rather it fundamentally concerns three ontological levels of human life, namely its temporality, its bodily dimension, and its objectification in intersubjective encounters (Heinämaa, 2014, p. 186). Acknowledging that the phenomenon of ageing touches the core of lived experiences, by interrogating the sense of self of ageing subjects and how they renegotiate their social lives, is the *conditio sine qua non* for further framing ageing as a gender-related phenomenon. Perhaps it is almost tautological to say that ageing primarily affects the temporality of the subject, which phenomenological and existential philosophy tends to consider a transcendental structure of the human self. Temporality, according to this tradition, ought not to be understood simply as an *object of our knowledge*, but rather as a *dimension of our being* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). However, feminist approaches in the phenomenological tradition, with which we concur, argue that there is an underlying flaw in traditional phenomenological analyses, namely the tendency to present temporality as a general, universal structure of human existence, which would apply indiscriminately to all and every human being in more or less the same way (on this see Stoller 2011).

Moreover, in Heinämaa's work one finds the argument that sexed differences themselves ought to be understood in their transcendental depth, following a note Husserl made in passing in the *Krisis,* according to which sexed differences would not be bare empirical accidents; rather they would pertain to the structures of human experience itself (Husserl, 1970, pp. 187-188). According to Heinämaa, the Husserlian understanding of birth, death, and sexual differences as transcendental occurrences opens a path of investigation that does not insist on explaining these phenomena, but rather on exploring their role in the constitution of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity (Heinämaa, 2014, p. 167). Along these lines, embodied sexed differences do not concern so much the potential or the lack thereof of having certain experiences (e.g., menstruations, menopause, pregnancy), but rather the peculiar ways the self may experience its own subjectivity along *temporal* structures. If we accept that ageing is a phenomenon affecting "not just our futural horizon but equally all temporal registers and ultimately the whole structure of lived time" (Heinämaa, 2014, p. 169), and that sexed differences pertain to the transcendental layer of human subjectivity, just as temporality does, the question then arises of whether temporality is intrinsically gender-related. If this is the case, then one's sense of time passing would have to be under certain aspects related to one's gender. More than that, gender and temporality would appear as two co-constitutive phenomena that are inherent to the transcendental self.

Before delving into the articulation of ageing as a gendered phenomenon, we therefore propose to further explore the nexus temporality-gender as detailed by Beauvoir. In *The Second Sex*, she describes the intrinsic relationship between gender and temporality: women are part of the gender group whose existence can tend to be, in some respects, one of waiting and staying in a suspended time. As she writes, "the woman protests against the long wait that is her own life. In one sense, her whole existence is a waiting" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 649). By reworking the Beauvoirian analysis of temporality that she offers in volume II of *The Second Sex*, Megan Burke argues that women's existences and their social subordination produce and are produced through a suspended sense of time, which they define as *passive present*. As Burke explains, "for Beauvoir, waiting is a temporal hiatus between the past and the future, which means that waiting is a distinctive experience of the present as passive – it neither reaches back to the past nor toward the future" (Burke, 2018, p. 117). Not only do women *live* this kind of temporality, but they properly *are* it. Echoing the famous Beauvoirian distinction between being and becoming (a woman), Burke thus concludes that "becoming a woman is to become a waiting" (Burke, 2018, p. 112). If lived

time is constitutive of one's embodied gender, if temporality, body and gender are of the same transcendental nature, then the temporal structures that underlie woman's life ought to be understood as related to her *situation*.

Following this understanding, the temporality of waiting that characterises women's existence is not subsequential to their biological setting, instead it is the mirror and the *expression* of their immanent position in patriarchal society: the life of a woman is punctuated by social duties and norms that reinforce her position as *relative* to the universe of men and keep her stuck in suspension between immanence and transcendence. Beauvoir thus discusses the institution and the experience of marriage as the very event that reifies woman's existence into an eternal present, a "temporal limbo" where she is annexed into her husband's life (Burke, 2018, p. 118). In Burke's words (2018), "steeped in the present, a woman embodies a temporal state of repose or passivity" (119). From there, Burke took the route of exploring the correlation between sexual objectification and the passive present, while we would like to broaden and rethink their intuition that *temporalities are gendered* by further making the case for a *transcendental* understanding of *gendered ageing*. Supporting our argument is the fact that women's ageing is related to the end of their reproductive potential entailed by menopause, which in Western patriarchal societies tends to mark the perceived end of their sexual availability and the end of their reproductive abilities.

How, then, does it come to be that ageing is a transcendental phenomenon and at the same time a gender-related one? Ageing, as time passing, is one of the constitutive conditions of human being – insofar as we all live a progressive temporality that starts with our own birth, and we are all affected by ageing in terms of changing our own sense of temporality. Our gender is meanwhile a precondition of our bodily, affective, and cognitive experience in extant societies, to the point that it is not an empirical accident, but, following the feminist phenomenologists we refer to above, a transcendental feature of our living in the world and interacting with reality. If we accept that both our temporal structures and our gender are transcendental, then we need to grasp the phenomenon of ageing as related to peculiar ways of experiencing time, embodiment, and reality that cannot be understood as accidental and contingent to one's particular lived experiences. Rather, they would be understood, essentially, as features of the transcendental self, of a subject that embodies a certain gender and given temporal structures. According to this perspective, women's ageing is not only the process of 'time passing' applied to a general or universal self, but rather consists of a quite specific experiencing of temporality that, as we will see following Beauvoir's discussion in *The Second Sex*, sometimes entails the reiteration and in some cases even the worsening of oppressive relations to space, the self, and others.

3. The social constitution of temporal experience in *The Second Sex*

In the chapter "From Maturity to Old Age" of Part II – Lived Experience of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir discusses the experience of temporality that she takes to be typical for ageing women in patriarchal societies: as opposed to men, who gradually grow older, women would tend to experience getting old as *a crisis.* Beauvoir writes:

> Every period of a woman's life is fixed and monotonous: but the passages from one stage to another are dangerously abrupt: they reveal themselves in far more decisive crises than those of the male: puberty, sexual initiation, menopause. While the male grows older continuously, the woman is brusquely stripped of her femininity; still young, she loses sexual attraction and fertility, from which, in society's and in her own eyes, she derives the justification of her existence and her chances of happiness: bereft of all futures, she has approximately half of her adult life still to live. (2011, p. 619).

The 'crisis' that women experience as their age advances is especially acute in menopause, when they lose their fertility and, according to Beauvoir, their "sexual attraction" (2011, p. 619). For female-bodied persons this is especially pronounced; the fertility of male-bodied persons also diminishes with age but is not abruptly over after one marked period of hormonal change. Beauvoir, however, makes clear that while physiological changes brought about by age, including those related to reproduction and secondary sexual characteristics, are undeniable, the existential dependence on physiological givens for females is largely a function of the patriarchal social relations in which they are (today still prevalently, though of course not exclusively) gendered as women. It is because women are socially often reduced to their reproductive role and sexually objectified in patriarchal societies, that the loss of reproductive capacity and socially perceived diminishment of femininity might be experienced as a loss and a crisis, especially for cis women: "The history of woman – *because she is still trapped in her female functions* – depends much more than man's on her physiological destiny [...]" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 619, emphasis added); "The 'dangerous age' is characterised by certain organic troubles, but the symbolic value they embody gives them their importance. [...] In this situation as in others, women's disorders come less from the body itself than from their anxious consciousness of it" (p. 619). Thus, according to Beauvoir, menopause and growing old in general, and especially losing their fertility and sexual allure, will be "felt much less acutely by women who have not staked everything on their femininity" (2011, p. 619), which includes those that work "in their home or outside" (p. 619), peasant women, and wives of workers, who might find relief in not having to worry about getting pregnant anymore, and even in not having to menstruate each month (p. 619).

Menopause catches up with virtually all female-bodied subjects if they reach a certain age. Yet, following Beauvoir, the acuity of the sense of *crisis* of self that it opens up will be experienced differently, depending on what kind of relationship these subjects have managed to construct throughout their lives with respect to the patriarchal norms of femininity that present female bodies primarily as sexual and reproductive ones. For Beauvoir this should not be viewed as a personal failing, such as vanity; women's social positioning – unlike men, women in patriarchal societies are "expected to have the passive qualities of an object" (2011, p. 619) – directs them towards grasping themselves in their "being-for-men" (p. 156), that is, as Beauvoir writes earlier in the book, as primarily sexual and reproductive beings: "she has not been allowed a hold on the world except through man's mediation: What will become of her when she no longer has a hold on him?" (p. 620).

According to Beauvoir, what in old age jeopardises women's social existential status of objects that please men is not simply physical changes or decline. Rather, it is the wealth of experience, the potential confidence they have gained, a certain access to freedom that in patriarchal societies is almost incompatible with feminine sexual allure: "The aging woman well knows that if she has ceased being a sexual object, it is not only because her flesh no longer provides man with fresh treasures: it is also that her *past* and her *experience* make a person of her whether she likes it or not; she has fought, loved, wanted, suffered, and taken pleasure for herself: this autonomy is intimidating; she tries to disavow it" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 621, emphasis added). Beauvoir describes a few ways in which ageing women might try to escape this newly found possibility of autonomy, and thus to keep, or to re-live their status of primarily sexual objects and reproducers who facilitate the existence of others. Women might escape into fantasies of what once was and what could have been; they might take young lovers and embark on adventures; they might fantasise; they might rediscover religious piousness; they might live vicarious existences through their sons and daughters, through taking care of their grandchildren, or find younger protegees to mentor; they might throw themselves into charity work (Beauvoir, 2011, pp. 620-624, 628-635). Beauvoir´s descriptions

of the typical ways in which women engage in these pursuits leave one with the impression that only rarely do ageing women manage to come to terms with themselves, their lives, their past and their future, and those around them. When they do not exasperate those around them in a tyrannical way, following Beauvoir it seems that they can only resign, once again, to the typically feminine temporality of *passive waiting* that we discussed above: "They remain available facing the desert of the future, prey to solitude, regret, and ennui" (2011, p. 633).

Old age is then for Beauvoir the time when women try to come to terms with who they are, which primarily means with their social situation:

> [...] she brusquely finds herself, without resources, face-to face with herself. [...] she will do no more than survive; her body will be without promise; the dreams and desires she has not realised will forever remain unaccomplished; [...] the time has come to draw the line, to take stock. And she is horrified by the narrow strictures inflicted on her life. [...] she denies her finitude; to the poverty of existence, she contrasts the nebulous treasures of her personality. Because as a woman she endured her destiny more or less passively, she feels that her chances were taken from her, that she was duped, that she slid from youth to maturity without being aware of it (2011, p. 620).

Thus, following Beauvoir, for many women it might be harder to come to terms with their past of social objectification than it is to accept this last period of their lives as such. They might thus struggle with the peculiar experiences of *depersonalisation* and *reversed temporality*:

> One of the most salient characteristics in the aging woman is the feeling of depersonalisation that makes her lose all objective landmarks. People in good health who have come close to death also say they have felt a curious impression of doubling; when one feels oneself to be consciousness, activity, and freedom, the passive object affected by fate seems necessarily like another: *I* am not the one run over by a car; *I* am not the old woman the mirror shows me. (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 624)

Old age then might often bring women the disquieting realisation that one has led a life of social objectification in the passive temporality of waiting, in Burke's words. Yet, as mentioned, it might also harbour the possibility for a new sense of autonomy, an "*other* time" (Beauvoir, 2011, 624, emphasis in the original). Beauvoir had alluded to this already in the chapter "Biological Data" of Part I – Facts and Myths, when she described menopausal and post-menopausal women as a "third sex" of sorts, relieved of the danger of conception and the burden of maternity, who might find a "health, vitality, and vigour they did not previously have" (2011, p. 43). In the chapter "From Maturity to Old Age", however, Beauvoir also describes those women that consider their advanced age a "new life" (2011, p. 624) and a new beginning as in fact naïve and mistaken: they attempt to relive their youth, possibly as a better one than it actually was. If they end up disappointed, according to Beauvoir, this might be, we can suppose, because one cannot actually relive one's life; one cannot change one's past, even if it was a past of objectification, of waiting for someone else to justify one's existence, to use Beauvoir´s existentialist conceptual framework. However, we can *accept* this past, *and* the renewed possibility for freedom that experience acquired through age can open up for us.

Relieved of reproduction and many conjugal duties, women can also find renewed freedom in old age. But in patriarchal societies – and, as Beauvoir will highlight in *Old Age* (1996), especially in capitalist ones (see for instance pp. 272-277) - there are few structures in place that support the pursuit of projects of the ageing, and especially of those, like women, whose

possibilities to pursue projects of their own will have been to a significant extent curtailed already in their past adult lives:

> Relieved of her duties, she finally discovers her freedom. Unfortunately, every woman's history repeats the fact we have observed throughout the history of woman: she discovers this freedom when she can find nothing more to do with it. This repetition has nothing coincidental about it: patriarchal society has made all feminine functions servile; woman escapes slavery only when she loses all productivity. At fifty, she is in full possession of her strength, she feels rich in experience [...] She has only been taught to devote herself, and there is no one who requires her devotion anymore. Useless, unjustified, she contemplates these long years without promise she still has to live and murmurs: 'No one needs me!' (2011, p. 627).

If, as Burke writes, the typical temporal experience that characterises feminine existence in patriarchal societies is the passive temporality of waiting, despite the fact that freedom from reproductive possibilities and from sexual objectification appears to open an "*other* time" (Beauvoir, 2011, 624) for women after menopause, the burden of that past temporal passivisation often turns out to be too strong, if we follow Beauvoir. As she concludes her chapter "From Maturity to Old Age", women "in no time of her life [...] succeed in being both effective and independent" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 637). As mentioned above, in *Old Age* Beauvoir (1996) described the typical experiences of temporality characterising existence in advanced age as if they applied to all subjects regardless of gender. However, the way she describes post-menopausal and elderly women in *The Second Sex* indicates her earlier recognition that these experiences remain highly gendered ones, and mostly, unfortunately, in a way that is far removed from the experience of the liberated "third gender" that Beauvoir ascribes to post-menopausal women in the chapter "Biological Data." The temporality of passive waiting tends to continue for many women in old age, according to Beauvoir – only what one can now wait and hope for markedly shrinks.

4. Concluding remarks

Beauvoir's analysis of the experiences of temporality typical for women in old age, especially in relation to their waning reproductive capacities and their socially and culturally perceived status of sexual objects, is indeed very much dire. It should be read, we propose, in conjunction with her passionate denunciation of the way especially modern Western societies treat the aged in *Old Age*, and of her critique of women's socially inflicted otherness in *The Second Sex*. Being relieved of reproductive capacities and duties and of their sexual objectification can bring a renewed sense of freedom to some women; however, as long as patriarchal societies relegate women to an endless passive waiting, this newly found freedom will hardly be effective.

There are, indeed, also lacunas in Beauvoir´s account, ones that become especially evident today, as medical advancement has prolonged life even further and as social changes have brought non-binary, trans, gender non-conforming and queer identities and lifestyles into the mainstream. Beauvoir's binary account should thus be expanded with phenomenological and socially critical reflections upon the ways in which subjects other than cis men and cis women who tend to live in heteronormative family structures will likely experience ageing and its peculiar temporalities in perhaps different familial and generational constellations. Another issue that Beauvoir fails to discuss, even in *Old Age,* are the very old, and those who might be chronically ill or severely disabled. What kind of experience of temporality is characteristic for those for whom avenues for action are *physiologically*, as well as socially, very much restricted? How are these latter peculiarly articulated in different kinds of gendered existence?

The theoretical lacunas inherent in Beauvoir's philosophical project do not however, in our view, invalidate the relevance of her account for a broader understanding of ageing as a gendered process that is shaped by social norms and cultural presuppositions, while also constituting the transcendental level of the self. How the tension between the transcendental and the social/historical should be philosophically accounted for in the case of ageing and gender will have to remain, for now, an arena for further exploration. Unveiling the *fil rouge* that reconnects gender, ageing, and temporality as transcendental structures that are socially shaped nevertheless paves the way for a comprehension of ourselves as ageing and gendered subjects that is not merely empirical, but that instead touches the core of human experiences.

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