

2020

Beauvoir's Concept of "Decline"

Matthew R. McLennan
Saint Paul University
mmclennan@ustpaul.ca

Recommended Citation

McLennan, Matthew R. "Beauvoir's Concept of 'Decline.'" *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 6 (3). Article 2.

Beauvoir’s Concept of “Decline”¹

Matthew R. McLennan

Abstract

This paper explicates Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of “decline” in ageing and assesses both its plausibility and its ethical and political promise. Though I maintain that the concept is largely plausible, and that it helps us to envision social justice for the aged, I also note certain limitations, and these lead me to suggest philosophical and ethical caution as to its range of application. Briefly, both in theory and in practice, Beauvoir appears to questionably conflate the decline of the phenomenological subject with that of a younger adult version of the psychological self or structure of the personality. Through examinations of Beauvoir’s account of dementia and her paternalism towards her dying mother and the declining Jean-Paul Sartre, I suggest how her concept of decline may fall short, but also how her rich phenomenological descriptions point the way to a pluralistic approach to ageing as a social justice issue.

Keywords: Beauvoir, decline, ageing, dementia, phenomenology, intersectionality, disability, social justice

With certain notable exceptions, Simone de Beauvoir’s work on ageing has suffered scholarly neglect. This is surprising since ageing is a near-constant preoccupation in her writings. In a recent volume devoted to Beauvoir’s impressive if still controversial² 1970 study *La vieillesse*, Silvia Stoller (2014) plausibly reconstructs the reasons for this neglect, opining that the time is now ripe for reassessment.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the two anonymous reviewers at *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* whose wonderfully insightful comments helped to improve this paper. Monique Lanoix and Iva Apostolova also gave much appreciated comments on an earlier version.

² Martha Nussbaum has recently devoted a few scathing pages to Beauvoir’s study. Claiming that it fails to grasp her own experience of ageing, Nussbaum calls the book “worse than preposterous: I see it as an act of collaboration with social stigma and injustice” (Nussbaum and Levmore 2017, 20).

In what follows, I hope to contribute to this reassessment through an interrogation of the concept of “decline” as it emerges in Beauvoir’s account of ageing. Showing first how it fits with her overall methodology, I argue that Beauvoir’s concept of decline in general is quite plausible and politically promising, at least to the extent that it provides grist for a feminist approach to ageing—that is, one that foregrounds equity and social justice for the aged. However, I subsequently examine what I claim are some limitations or difficulties with Beauvoir’s concept. In particular, I discuss the extent to which she apparently conflates, both in theory and in practice, the decline of the phenomenological subject with that of a younger adult version of the psychological self or structure of the personality. I claim that this move is contestable, and in support of this I will devote considerable space to Beauvoir’s theorization of dementia. In short, while decline and its remediation as Beauvoir construes them contribute to a compelling model of social justice for the aged, I urge philosophical and ethical caution as to their range of application. As limit cases, different forms of dementia remind us that the ethics and politics of remediation beg a pluralistic approach to ageing as a social justice issue.

Beauvoir’s Methodology

A key thing to note by way of beginning is that despite their vastly uneven reception, a case can be made that *La vieillesse* is essentially on par with the much better known *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 2011). This is certainly my view, and one reason in support of it is methodological. The two studies are admittedly distinct, in that Beauvoir deploys key categories of Jean-Paul Sartre’s later materialism in the book on ageing (such as the practico-inert, praxis, exis, and scarcity) (Kruks 2014). Nonetheless, they follow the same basic methodological blueprint; each treats its central category—age and sex, respectively—in a “total” way; that is, as a “situation” to be explained through minute attention to its myriad aspects. Beauvoir groups these aspects under objective (“exterior”) and subjective (“interior”) headings; this is to say that age and sex are each conceived as a complex, interlocking totality of objective and subjective factors.³ More specifically, Beauvoir divides *La vieillesse* between “the exterior point of view” and “being-in-the-world.” Thus, for example, one’s being a woman or an elderly person of either sex always implies that one is so *for others*, that one is the “object of a knowledge” (Beauvoir 1970, 16; my translation)—folk knowledge certainly, but also biology, sociology, gerontology, and the like. But being a woman or an elderly person is also always a “lived experience” (ibid.). Consequently, womanhood and old age (or indeed any

³ As I will discuss below, Beauvoir’s emphasis on interlocking factors is suggestive of intersectionality. I thank the anonymous reviewer who termed this Beauvoir’s “proto-intersectionality,” a term I think is apt.

other human situation) must be grasped in a double, complementary movement of exterior (i.e., sociological, historical, economic, ethnographic) and interior (i.e., phenomenological, introspective, "physio-psychological") analyses.⁴

The case for reading *La vieillesse* as on par with *The Second Sex* gains further support if we consider how the two studies complement each other. One's age and one's sex, apart from constituting a particular meeting of objective and subjective factors, also interlock with each other in complex ways on Beauvoir's view. This can be seen, for example, through various controlling myths such as that of the old maid (Beauvoir 2011, 174), or in the perceived relative impotence and social uselessness of the retired male worker compared to the older woman who has managed and continues to manage the home (Beauvoir 1970, 321–322). Moreover, both age and sex interact with other factors composing one's situation. Though she makes certain errors on this score (for example, speaking in general of "blacks" and "women" but seemingly forgetting about black women [Beauvoir 2011, 311–312]), Beauvoir's approach is remarkable for its time in grasping situations as nested in broader and increasingly complex, comprehensive situations. Arguably it is to some extent suggestive of intersectionality, before the letter and in parallel with its development by African American and other marginalized women (Collins and Bilge 2016, 65–77; Crenshaw 1989). Further, and similar to intersectionality's own status as an open, politically engaged, and critical social theory (Collins and Bilge 2016, 31–62; Collins 2019), Beauvoir draws attention in both of her major books to her own ethical and political partiality.⁵ She makes clear how the idea of the total nature of situations lends itself not to a static conception of the social but rather to a dynamic one that is welded to a progressive program for social change.⁶

⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work served as a major resource in writing of *The Second Sex*, gives an excellent overview of how the sociological, the historical, and the "physio-psychological" together constitute the situation or total social fact. As he puts it, "Any interpretation [in the social sciences] has to square the objectivity of historical or comparative analysis with the subjectivity of lived experience" (2012, 24; my translation).

⁵ As Beauvoir puts it, "Every so-called objective description is set against an ethical background" (2011, 16).

⁶ This approach finds echoes in contemporary disability studies, which underscores how disability is a social *as well as* a medical problem. As Sunaura Taylor puts it, "What disability scholars and activists refer to as 'the medical model of disability' positions the disabled body as working incorrectly, as being unhealthy and abnormal, as needing a cure" (Taylor 2017, 13). But this is a misleading picture, since there is also a compelling "social model of disability"; according to this view, "disability is not simply a medical problem; it is a social justice one" (ibid.). If, for

To see how this is so, consider that for Beauvoir there are many ways in which, for a given person, the objective and subjective dimensions of womanhood, ageing, or any other situation may be, or may fall, or may be pushed out of sync.⁷ This, then, suggests ways that one could be alienated or fail to be “at home” in one’s body and/or one’s social world. It also raises the question of whether or not remediation is possible—and if so, whether or not access to remediation could be framed as a social justice issue.⁸ The social totalities Beauvoir describes are in any case open and dynamic, and she makes no claim to produce exhaustive knowledge of either womanhood or old age, notwithstanding her totalizing approach and the impressive array of empirical examples she provides. Regarding old age in particular, she claims that neither form of analysis, exterior or interior, nor indeed the two combined, permits us to define it in general; there are rather “multiple faces of old age, each irreducible to the others” (1970, 17; my translation). Nonetheless, as I will argue in the next section, Beauvoir largely cleaves to a vision of ageing as *decline*—precisely, as a process in which objective and subjective dimensions of the person fall out of sync.

With the preceding considerations in mind, I will therefore broadly affirm the philosophical importance and the social and political relevance of *La vieillesse*; though comparatively neglected, it has the potential, at least, to do for our understanding of ageing what *The Second Sex* did for our understanding of sex.⁹ It is possible, though, that the approach Beauvoir uses so forcefully and convincingly in *The Second Sex* hits an impasse in *La vieillesse*, since some realities befalling the

medical reasons, I am unable to use my legs to walk and climb stairs, this does not automatically disqualify me from attending an institution such as a university. If, however, there are no ramps and elevators at the university, then I am de facto disqualified. Thus, the true measure of my disability includes an analysis of the social environment in which I function, and this facilitates both social critique and innovation.

⁷ The final pages of *La force des choses II* are an exceptionally pained meditation on Beauvoir’s own contradictory experience of growing old, which includes the strange feeling of “no longer being a body” (1963, 506; my translation). She will subsequently lighten and nuance this bleak assessment in *Tout compte fait* (1972).

⁸ For example, the possibility of occupational therapy raises the question of “occupational justice” (Townsend and Wilcock 2004). I am indebted to Kaelen Bray for bringing the concept of occupational justice to my attention.

⁹ It is interesting to note however that the older Beauvoir, having completed *La vieillesse*, criticized *The Second Sex* for its optimism about social evolution and underscored the need for a more materially grounded analysis and concerted political action (1972, 623–624).

ageing are qualitatively different than what she encounters under the more general rubric of sex. As we will see, this comes to a head in her dealings with ageing friends and family members: arguably her mother Françoise de Beauvoir (Beauvoir 1964), but quite obviously her companion and intellectual collaborator Jean-Paul Sartre (Beauvoir 1981). In particular, the vision of *decline* that Beauvoir privileges appears to be only one possible means of conceptualizing what happens to the person suffering from dementia, and it arguably proves restrictive or troubling in the context of her own intimate relationships.

Beauvoir on Ageing as Decline

Beauvoir views ageing as a process; there is no "old age" qua static state (1970, 17). Nonetheless, the process she envisions invariably includes decline as one of its central aspects. What she has in mind is that the ageing person's bodily, cognitive, and social grasp of (or their ability to interface with) the world diminishes over time.¹⁰ For the sake of discussing Beauvoir's view I will talk about decline in biomedical terms, as though body, cognition, and social interaction are separate things (a methodological point). I am actually unsure, however, as to what extent a meaningful distinction can be drawn between them (an ontological point).¹¹ Beauvoir herself is aware of the artificiality of such an approach, having been a keen reader of Merleau-Ponty's (2013) phenomenology of embodiment. She states for example, in *The Second Sex*, that "if the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects" (2011, 46; my translation, italics in original).¹²

Beauvoir defines decline as "disadvantageous change" in the Preamble to *La vieillesse* (1970, 17). But her definition is immediately problematized by the fact that what counts as "disadvantageous" is always relative to a given value judgment; there is only ever progress or regression according to a posited goal or criterion (*ibid.*). This relativity of ageing as decline accounts for why an athlete who is only in her thirties might feel that she is no longer young (1970, 17–18), or why a pregnant woman over 35 may be told by medical professionals that she is of "advanced

¹⁰ I take "cognitive" here in the broad, functional sense favored by scientists like Frans de Waal: "The transformation of sensory input into knowledge about the environment, and the application of this knowledge" (2016, 319).

¹¹ See Kontos 2012.

¹² Elsewhere, Beauvoir claims, "Doubtless, every one casts himself into [the world] on the basis of his physiological possibilities, but the body itself is not a brute fact. It expresses our relationship to the world, and that is why it is an object of sympathy or repulsion. And on the other hand, it *determines* no behavior" (1976, 41).

maternal age” or presents a case of “geriatric pregnancy.”¹³ If it were possible just to consider the body on its own, decline would on Beauvoir’s view be a case of disadvantageous change which outstrips the body’s own resources of adaptation and palliation; we can say unequivocally for Beauvoir that there is age-related decline when “the body becomes fragile and more or less impotent” (1970, 17, 19; my translation). But Beauvoir cautions us that things become more complicated when we consider the individual in her totality—that is, by adding on subjective as well as more broadly social metrics of decline (1970, 19). As I have already suggested, exterior and interior aspects of ageing may be out of sync. In my “old age,” or after some other change like acquiring a physical impairment, I may feel unchanged or undiminished. I may even feel that I have in some sense grown or improved but then discover that my society judges otherwise. Moreover, “each society creates its own values: it is in the social context that the word ‘decline’ finds a precise sense” (1970, 20; my translation). This entails that Beauvoir’s definition of decline is one of “disadvantageous change” within a shifting, total set of criteria for disadvantage.

Beauvoir on Dementia: A Form of Decline?

“Dementia” names several distinct but descriptively related conditions caused by neurodegenerative diseases and associated with ageing. For reasons given above, approaching dementia from Beauvoir’s point of view entails treating it as a complex and interlocking set of phenomena, resistant to any strict mental, neurophysiological, or environmental reductionism. One way to construe the irreducibility of any form of dementia could be in terms of a putative interactive dualism between its “subjective” and its “objective” aspects. Such a construal is indeed encapsulated in *La vieillesse* and elsewhere. Attention to the subjective and objective aspects of dementia does not appear, however, to shield Beauvoir from reductionist thinking and overgeneralization on some points, precisely where it is a question of affirming the relative persistence or identity-over-time of the subjective factor.

We saw that for Beauvoir, the metric for disadvantageous change is socially relative. However, the notion that the body, cognition, and social interaction all “decline” with age—that is, that I lose my grip on the world—implies both a situation *in which* this happens (exterior) as well as someone or something *for whom* this change is disadvantageous (interior). Put differently, decline is both something that happens in a total situation (according to a posited value or values)

¹³ Such examples are highly suggestive of Beauvoir’s phenomenological method. A purely “exterior” account of these women’s situations would be liable to miss a great deal of what is significant to them.

but also, and analytically separately, as a lived experience (which is admittedly always framed in a social context). Thus, "disadvantageous change" happens to a *subject*¹⁴ whose body, cognitive apparatus, and social network are changing, but who remains on Beauvoir's view more or less identical over time.

Put differently, as I age my grasp on the world typically weakens—I can take less in and I can accomplish less—but it is nonetheless in some sense "I" who suffers this decline. I remain me; I am who I was before. According to Beauvoir in one of her strongest formulations of this idea, "Things change, we change: but without losing our identity. Our roots, our past, our anchorage in the world are immutable" (1970, 490; my translation). This is part of what makes ageing tragic on her view; I can observe and must live through to the end a widening gap between myself and my grasp on the world in which, on account of the comparative ease with which I used to navigate it, I most likely used to feel more at home. But further, not all putative situations of decline are initially experienced *as* decline, until social mediation reveals (or rather imposes) the individual's state as one of old age and impairment. This is especially the case if, as Beauvoir recounts, one's exigencies have diminished at the same pace as one's capacities (1970, 350). Thus, ageing (or rather, one's having become old) can and usually does come as a shock.

Beauvoir gives multiple iterations of this idea in her works. For example, in the short story "L'âge de discretion," the ageing narrator describes her loss of sexuality. While indifference to sexuality is not something that automatically comes with age—and Beauvoir certainly recognizes this (1970, 386–440)—the narrator explicitly ties loss of libido to ageing in her own case. She recounts how she initially experienced this indifference to sex as a kind of "serenity." She subsequently realizes however that her disinterest in sex has led her to systematically underestimate certain realities—like how the physical closeness of her son with her daughter-in-law factors into and buttresses their joint opposition to her expressed wishes. She sees "all of a sudden" that her indifference to sex is "an infirmity, a loss of sense" that blinds her to certain joys and pains that are of critical importance to others (1967, 27; my translation). Decline is thus construed as something discovered (or imposed), experienced, and recounted in a narrative by the self-identical subject.

Note, however, that a further division could be made on the "interior" plane of analysis, between the *subject* and the *personality*. In the broadly Sartrian

¹⁴ Beauvoir and Sartre generally favor the terms "subject" and "subjectivity" in their writings. Reading subject as "mind" or even "self" would be somewhat misleading, because they are speaking of the intentional boundary of a world and the transcendental condition for personal freedom, not the structure or activities of a particular personality that would be the measurable objects of psychology (see Sartre 2016).

phenomenological position that Beauvoir assumes,¹⁵ “I” am the active dimension of a transcendent ego—that is, the subjective boundary of the world that “I” experience. The bundle of psychological structures or properties which forms my *personality*, on the other hand, is comparatively passive and immanent; in other words, the personality is a feature of the world and, in some sense, may be the object of representation not only for the “I” but also for others. Significantly, my memories form part of this immanent complex (that is, the memory contents themselves and their effect on me, my ability to call them up and the affects they prompt, and not the bare fact of the memories having been “mine”). An implication of this view seems to be that in a certain sense I can persist even in a situation where I am radically disoriented. But in such a situation “I” may no longer be “me,” if we assume (on a Lockean view of personal identity [Locke 2008]) that the survival of a given personality requires the guarantee of memory to hold it together.

Beauvoir comes close to recognizing this difficulty in a brief remark on what she calls “senile dementia,” apparently posited as an extreme case of ordinary age-related forgetfulness. She grants that forgetting certain details is a necessary condition of remembrance—otherwise we would be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of sensory information we take in—and that this could account for the tendency to lose more and more as we grow older (1970, 444). Further, however, in the same passage she seems to posit the healthy brain as a necessary condition for remembrance and takes for granted that neurological decline can be cashed out subjectively as mnemonic decline. But in her telling, it is always a case of *my* remembered history that has gaps in it when memory fails. The suggestion seems to be that the *subject* suffering from dementia retains some kind of link to a basic *personality*. But these are conceptually distinct: the subject is pure intentionality or the transcendental border of a world, whereas the personality, qua psychological structure and the mnemonic contents that would hold it together on a Lockean view, is a feature of the world. To draw this distinction is to recognize that lived experience, the “interior” aspect of ageing, actually possesses its own exterior and interior aspects. That which is most interior is construed in Beauvoir’s study as subject proper, as opposed to the personality.

We can question, however, whether the subject and the personality do always go together, and whether a slippage between them has occurred in Beauvoir’s writing. Regarding the first question, the thrust of Pia Kontos’s reflections on dementia has been to suggest that we better construe subjectivity according to “embodied selfhood,”—that is, “a prereflective notion of agency that resides below the threshold of cognition and is manifest primarily in corporeal ways” (2012, 3). It is precisely such embodied selfhood that persists “even with severe dementia” (*ibid.*),

¹⁵ See Sartre 2017.

and it arguably affords us a vision of the subject/personality distinction as a false dichotomy. Beauvoir, on the other hand, operates throughout her work on the assumption that the subject, qua transcendental boundary of the world, is conceptually distinct from the immanence of psychological structures and behaviours, and is always already bound up in an intentional stance. Thus she describes the case of a woman whose cognitive memory, arguably a key if not determinant component of her personality, has been destroyed, but who is at least *aware that she can’t remember* and otherwise displays regular personality traits and the ability to take refuge in habit, or embodied memory (1970, 568).¹⁶ Though her embodied memory prevails, this way of construing the woman’s case appears to give her “interior” as opposed to her embodied selfhood priority; after all, it is capable of “taking refuge” in habit (1970, 566) and is therefore, in some sense, both distinct and free from it.

This picture is borne out by the more systematic but admittedly brief section, totaling about six pages, that Beauvoir devotes to “senile dementia.” Addressing my second question, an apparent slippage between subject and personality indeed occurs therein. Dementia figures as a case of severe cognitive decline, an extreme case of the “normal abnormality” (1970, 348) of old age (with social aspects, as per Beauvoir’s methodology) (1970, 612–613). This holds up even where it is explicitly a question of personal identity in decline. And it is arguably a question for Beauvoir of the *subject-as-personality* who forgets, who has trouble adjusting, and the like.

Indeed, for Beauvoir it is a normal part of ageing that a person struggles to retain their sense of identity—particularly since acknowledging that one is old, that one is not what one used to be and that, in a sense, one’s life story has begun to elude one’s grasp and return in the form of the “practico-inert”¹⁷ (Kruks 2014),

¹⁶ “Refuge in habit” refers to the ordering of the disoriented person’s life according to simple patterns of behaviour she has retained in spite of her illness. While this certainly resonates with Kontos’s concept of embodied selfhood as explored, for example, through the notion of “musical embodiment” (2014), the point about “habit” could be generalized to encompass whatever has been well-established and endures. As Muireann Irish (2019) points out, “There remains a vast repository of life experiences, personal history, stories and fables that endures, even late into the illness. At moderate to severe stages of dementia, activities such as art, dance and music therapy provide important nonverbal means of communicating and fostering social interaction even when, on the surface, many core capabilities might seem to be lost.”

¹⁷ The concept of the “practico-inert,” borrowed from Sartre (2004), describes a person’s praxis (practical, goal-directed activity) coming back to haunt her as an

implies that one has become in some sense other to oneself (1970, 354–355).¹⁸ In addition to falling out of sync with past projects and corporeal aspects of her situation, an ageing person generally struggles to retain her sense of identity since she loses her social role as defined by work (and, we could add, by gender, sexuality, class, family role, and the like) (1970, 600). As Linda Fisher puts it, “My ‘previous identity’ and prior self-image have now been compromised, insofar as not only am I no longer what I was, but to my mind I am no longer as good as I was” (Fisher 2014, 117). But while Beauvoir seems to uphold a notion that personal identity changes, she ultimately cleaves to what Fisher calls “a notion of a default ‘myself’” (ibid., 118). That default “myself” “seems to be my younger, more attractive, healthier, more capable self: in short, the phenomenological ‘I can’ in an all-encompassing sense, contrasted now with the ‘I cannot’ of old age” (ibid.). It appears then that Beauvoir identifies the subject—the transcendent hence realest, or fundamental, or potentially most “authentic” myself—with the youthful “I can.”¹⁹ The latter is in some sense atemporal, even if the lived (empirical and phenomenological) self

inert, alienated reality. In short, the things that she does escape her and will become brute realities she will need to contend with when she is older.

¹⁸ In describing old age and death, Beauvoir adopts the Sartrean concept of “l’irréalisable,” that which I must confront as my own innermost reality but which I am incapable of “realizing,” i.e. of bringing to fruition or harmonizing according to my life’s project (1970, 354).

¹⁹ “Authentic” could be taken here in a loose sense, as synonymous with “real” or “actual” or “true.” But it also alludes to how the earlier Beauvoir and Sartre conceptualize authenticity, an issue germane to existentialism that lies beyond the scope of the paper. Briefly, both arguably construe authenticity in terms of one’s lucidly asserting and assuming what they describe as the ambiguity at the core of the human condition. As Beauvoir puts it, “In the very condition of man there enters the possibility of not fulfilling this condition. In order to fulfill it, he must assume himself as a being who ‘makes himself a lack of being so that there might be being.’ But the trick of dishonesty [i.e., Sartrean “bad faith”] permits stopping at any moment whatsoever” (Beauvoir 1976, 34). Note the baseline of maturity this description entails; one must presumably become capable of authenticity and of constantly striving for it, and it would be fascinating to consider the theme of the default or authentic self in light of how the child in Beauvoir’s picture develops into the adult self (see Beauvoir 2018 for a personal memoir of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood which is highly suggestive on this score, and Beauvoir 2011 [283–382] for a more general analysis foregrounding gender). For my purposes it is also noteworthy when Sartre briefly describes authenticity in terms of a “self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted” (Sartre 1992, 116n).

changes, since assumption of the “I cannot” is, in the final analysis, impossible.²⁰ But insofar as it is “youthful,” which is to say fixed at an early point in a temporal trajectory and unburdened by a long past, the subject on Beauvoir’s picture has taken on something of an empirical cast. This speaks precisely to the tendency on her part to identify the default self with the younger adult self. Such a view not only informs her concept of dementia as decline but, as we will see later, her own dealings with ageing loved ones.

The question then is whether or not Beauvoir, by appearing to identify the younger with the default myself, thereby conflates *subject* with the younger *personality*—thereby slipping from the transcendental to the relatively empirical, from what could be called the “interior interior” to the “exterior interior.” Evidence that she avoids conflating subject and personality *in general* may be found in a remarkable footnote in *La vieillesse*, where she seems to conceive of sudden neurological accident along the lines of a precipitous decline that would cleave subject from personality, or at least seriously throw into question the link between the two. She describes how certain ageing people have no control over the circumstances of their decline, and cites the case of Auguste Rodin. After suffering the second of two “attacks,” he knew neither where he was nor who his life-long companion, Rose Beuret, was. Hence, Beauvoir admits (in an admittedly speculative fashion, not knowing the clinical details of Rodin’s case) the conceptual possibility that a first-person point of view can persist after a drastic and sudden reorganization of the personality and its world. She goes on to state, however, that such cases, when they really occur, can teach us nothing from the point of view of the inner experience of ageing (1970, 368). Put differently, it appears to be conceptually possible for Beauvoir that the same subject can abruptly become a different person,²¹ but then she dismisses the problem by announcing that this is

²⁰ Here again the concept of “l’irréalisable” is apposite.

²¹ This is the thrust of Catherine Malabou’s writings on “destructive neuroplasticity,” which run counter to Beauvoir and risk oversimplification of dementia from another angle. She relates the following about her grandmother (who, it is reasonable to assume from the description, was already in the advanced stages of Alzheimer’s disease): “It seemed to me that my grandmother, or, at least, the new and ultimate version of her, was the work of the disease, its opus, its own sculpture. Indeed, this was not a diminished person in front of me, the same woman weaker than she used to be, lessened, spoiled. No, this was a stranger who didn’t recognize me, who didn’t recognize herself because she had undoubtedly never met her before. Behind the familiar halo of hair, the tone of her voice, the blue of her eyes: the absolutely incontestable presence of *someone else*” (Malabou 2012, xi–xii). Elsewhere, Malabou contentiously describes the (presumably advanced) Alzheimer’s patient as

not what she has in mind in her study (such cases being of interest to “geriatric medicine”) (1970, 368). There indeed appear to be clinical cases (not restricted to ageing but also occurring in various forms of trauma) where, if indeed “I” remain “I,” “I” do not remain “me.”²² Someone is still home, but it is not clear who. In another remarkable passage, Beauvoir will explicitly call such cases, wherein someone becomes unmoored from her own ends and alienated from those around her, “pathological cases of depersonalization” (1970, 266; my translation). Although it is a clinical question how to diagnose such cases with precision, the difficulty here is that Beauvoir is forced to admit that cases of dementia, in particular, can differ widely from each other.²³ She can be forgiven for having written at a time when there was much less scientific information on dementia, and in any case, she was overall more interested in the typical phenomenological rather than the abnormal clinical side of ageing. But it is hard to avoid the following conclusion: that it is far from obvious that dementia is always usefully construed as a case where a subject, pictured more or less as the younger personality, grapples with steep neurological decline.²⁴

Commenting on Beauvoir, Stoller offers a formula that appears intuitive on first glance: “Alzheimer’s and dementia, that is to say mental decline” (2014, 18).

“not—or not only—someone who has ‘changed’ or been ‘modified’ but rather *a subject who has become someone else*” (2012, 15).

²² Susan J. Brison (2003) explores her own traumatic transformation after her rape and attempted murder along these lines.

²³ Not to mention that a single case of dementia may contain phases that differ widely from each other as well, and not necessarily in a linear process of decline.

²⁴ In terms of the contemporary neuropsychological picture, Strikwerda-Brown et al. (2019) argue for a pluralistic approach to dementia that recognizes the diversity of its characteristics vis-à-vis memory and personal identity: “Extant research suggests that the impoverished capacity for episodic expressions of past and future thinking in AD [Alzheimer’s Disease] may lead to a global decay in subjective self-continuity across temporal contexts. By contrast, the impaired recent, but spared remote, personal semantic memory in these patients may allow for a preserved, though outdated, self-narrative. SD [Semantic Dementia] patients, however, appear to retain subjective and narrative self-continuity for the recent past, but not the remote past or future, leading to a self defined predominantly by recent experiences. Finally, bvFTD [Behavioural variant of frontotemporal dementia] results in globally impaired subjective and narrative self-continuity, with the absence of an appropriate self-schema to guide and regulate behaviour.” Here we have a remarkable expression of what Beauvoir appears to recognize but has difficulty theorizing under the rubric of decline.

But we have just seen why it is not clear that this equivalency always holds. We have also seen that Beauvoir herself, despite largely lumping dementia and the broader category of mental disorders of old age under the concept of decline, at times seems aware of this. In addition to the example of Rodin, Beauvoir also speaks of alterations of the personality through psychosis, wherein the latter takes on a "new structure," and the phenomenon of "melancholia of involution" wherein the loss of ego is at issue and which closely resembles descriptions of traumatized subjectivities (1970, 602; Malabou 2012; Brison 2003). Rather than pursue this line of thought to the end, however, Beauvoir falls back into the "notion of a default myself" described by Fisher (2014, 118). It is interesting to see how this plays itself out in her life in two notable cases of age-related "mental decline."

First, take the case of Beauvoir's mother Françoise. Her hospitalization from a fall, her surgery, and her subsequent death from cancer are movingly recounted in the short 1964 book *Une mort très douce*. Arguably the book furnishes a good deal of material for *The Coming of Age*, which will appear six years later. What is important about it for our purposes is that Beauvoir comes to terms with her mother's precipitous decline and death—basically senseless, like all deaths—by reconstructing her personality through reminiscences and attempts at identification. Beauvoir struggles with the fact that her mother and her mother's body have apparently become two distinct entities, to the point that the latter overdetermines the former, rendering Françoise confused, alienated, and passing in and out of lucidity. Beauvoir refuses to tell Françoise the truth of her condition. After Françoise undergoes surgery to remove her tumor and is resuscitated, Beauvoir starkly questions why she should be subjected to such suffering and denied a quicker death. On the one hand, she admits that her dying mother, here and now, clings tightly to her remaining days as if they were the most precious thing in the world; on the other, she cannot help but grasp her mother's state as unlivable, *even for Françoise herself*, and seeks to impose her own order on the disintegration she is witnessing. A key element in this imposition of order is a search through literary recollection for the "real" Françoise, and it is far from obvious that there is any valid justification for Beauvoir's search, beyond her own need to make sense of what she is witnessing.

Second, consider Beauvoir's paternalism with respect to the ageing Sartre. His last interviews with Benny Lévy caused a scandal when they were published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* just before his death, in 1980. A debate arose over their authenticity, given Sartre's decline, the arguably uncharacteristic opinions he expresses, and the force and omnipresence of his secretary Lévy's personality in his life at the time. Beauvoir, who had previously dissuaded Sartre from publishing texts written with Lévy (Beauvoir 1981, 154–155), did not question the authenticity of the transcript. But she denied that these were Sartre's last words. She claimed that Lévy

had manipulated the blind, exhausted and almost totally dependent Sartre into expressing his, Lévy's, own views (Beauvoir 1981, 165–167). Beauvoir describes the affair as a *détournement de vieillard* (1981, 166), which Ronald Aronson renders in English as “abduction of an old man” (modeled upon *détournement de mineur*, i.e., “leading a young person astray”) (Sartre and Lévy 2007, 7). By way of responding to the publication, Beauvoir released her own account of Sartre's decline in *La cérémonie des adieux* in 1981, which appends a series of interviews recorded in 1974. These, through Beauvoir's editorial gesture, are presented as Sartre's *real* last words, even though they were recorded six years before his death—that is, they are presented as a testament and therefore as most in keeping with his true thoughts and representing his previous points of view. While all of this might sound reasonable enough given Beauvoir's concerns about the role of Lévy, note some of the problems it raises. Sartre, who long understood his own thought to be a living, dialectical process, is frozen here by Beauvoir before the worst of his decline and years before his death. The idea that he could develop his thinking to the very end, even if he was in fact “declining,” is apparently not entertained. Some of his ideas are deemed uncharacteristic, therefore not his. He has become, even before his death, a monument to his past, and Beauvoir appoints herself as the gatekeeper who decides upon the shape of the monument. Sartre has become, in sum, *un vieillard*—that is, an alienated being who is less than Sartre—which is ironic given Beauvoir's insistence, eleven years earlier, that the old person is primarily old because that is what others make of him.

Beauvoir's responses to the “mental decline” of loved ones are telling. It seems that in the cases we have looked at, she defers to a version of the values, tastes, priorities, sensibilities, characteristics—in short, the personality—of the declining person that is no longer there, or at least that is no longer fully or in the same sense there, because the elder has changed significantly. Moreover, she seems to conflate this version of the personality with the subjectivity of that person. This entails a contestable conception of the elder as in essence a younger person falling further and further out of sync with the world.

But what if, finally, the philosophical inconsistency this suggests is beside the point? What if the real lessons here are phenomenological and ethical? Earlier I remarked that for Beauvoir there are “multiple faces of old age, each irreducible to the others” (1970, 17; my translation). How others age *for me* is one of those faces, and in its concreteness, it is irreducible to the demands of philosophical rigor. Perhaps the putatively default or authentic selves Beauvoir strives to protect through her denials and paternalism represent above all how her mother and Sartre once were *for her*, and not as they are for themselves. If this is the case, we gain through a reading of Beauvoir in terms of the phenomenological richness of her accounts. But we also find another indication that our approach to ageing should be

one of ethical caution, lest we reduce and crowd out the selves who are really present to us, here and now.

Conclusion

If I have succeeded in this paper, the reader should now have a clear picture of how Beauvoir's methodology structures an account of age-related decline as a socially mediated process. While arguing that this account is powerful from the point of view of social justice for the aged, underscoring as it does a social and even "proto-intersectional" approach to age-related difficulties with functioning and flourishing, I have devoted most of the essay to unpacking why dementia in particular is troublesome for the view that Beauvoir is defending. On one hand, dementia appears predominantly in her work as a form of mental decline in which the subject—problematically conflated with a younger version of the personality—loses her grasp on the world (both the "external" world and her own memories and cognitive processes, *qua* immanent). On the other hand, precisely where it presents as a radical rupture between the subject and *any* past personality—that is, where the decline model breaks down—Beauvoir waves it away as a problem of geriatric pathology, taking an uncharacteristically reductionist or one-sided approach. The missed opportunity here is that Beauvoir could have highlighted how dementia presents as considerably diverse and therefore confronts us with deep ethical questions about how to welcome, accommodate, and accompany persons with different clinical profiles. She can be forgiven on that score given the state of geriatric science at the time of her writing, but as we noted, her tendency, both in *La vieillesse* and when faced with evidence of the mental decline of her loved ones, was to privilege a contestable and arguably monolithic vision of the declining default or authentic person.

Beauvoir's methodology and the richness of her phenomenological descriptions both suggest that we should guard against reductionism and overgeneralization, whatever the outcomes of her own thought process or practice. Picking up the spirit if not the letter of her inquiries into dementia in particular, what remains to be thought is whether and how we may construe it in terms that overemphasize neither authenticity nor pathology, but rather highlight the challenge of welcoming changing and emergent personalities to our ageing society.

References

- Beauvoir, Simone de. 1963. *La force des choses II*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
———. 1964. *Une mort très douce*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
———. 1967. *La femme rompue*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
———. 1970. *La vieillesse*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

- . 1972. *Tout compte fait*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- . 1976. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. New York: Citadel Press.
- . 1981. *La cérémonie des adieux, suivi de Entretiens avec Jean-Paul Sartre*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- . 2011. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 2018. *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- Brisson, Susan J. 2003. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2019. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge. 2016. *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics." *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* vol. 1989: 139–167.
- De Waal, Frans. 2016. *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* New York: W. W. Norton.
- Fisher, Linda. 2014. "The Other Without and the Other Within: The Alterity of Aging and the Aged in Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*." In *Simone De Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, and Time*, edited by Silvia Stoller, 107–121. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Irish, Muireann. 2019. "The Self in Dementia Is Not Lost, and Can Be Reached with Care." *Aeon*, November 13. <https://aeon.co/ideas/the-self-in-dementia-is-not-lost-and-can-be-reached-with-care?fbclid=IwAR2qUIRCiAkbYiEbAtnmF335MFbBLCX25K8Z-jpCFumKd9GGpIPQBk5vcg>.
- Kontos, Pia C. 2012. "Alzheimer Expressions or Expressions Despite Alzheimer's? Philosophical Reflections on Selfhood and Embodiment." *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 4 (May 31).
- . 2014. "Musical Embodiment, Selfhood, and Dementia." In *Beyond Loss: Dementia, Identity, Personhood*, edited by Lars-Christer Hydén, Hilde Lindemann, and Jens Brockmeier, 107–119. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kruks, Sonia. 2014. "Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* and Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: The Material Mediations of Age as Lived Experience." In *Simone De Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, and Time*, edited by Silvia Stoller, 89–101. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 2012. *Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.

- Locke, John. 2008. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Malabou, Catherine. 2012. *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*. Translated by Steven Miller. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2013. *La phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Nussbaum, Martha C., and Saul Levmore. 2017. *Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations about Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, and Regret*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1992. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.
- . 2004. *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume One*. Translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith, edited by Jonathan Rée. London: Verso.
- . 2016. *What is Subjectivity?* Translated by David Broder and Trista Selous. London: Verso.
- . 2017. *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Translated by Andrew Brown. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Benny Lévy. 2007. *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*. Translated by Adrian van den Hoven. Introduction by Ronald Aronson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stoller, Silvia, ed. 2014. *Simone De Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, and Time*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Strikwerda-Brown, Cherie, Matthew D. Grilli, Jessica Andrews-Hanna, and Muireann Irish. 2019. "'All Is Not Lost': Rethinking the Nature of Memory and the Self in Dementia." *Ageing Research Reviews* 54, September, article 100932. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.arr.2019.100932>.
- Taylor, Sunaura. 2017. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. New York: The New Press.
- Townsend, Elizabeth, and Ann A. Wilcock. 2004. "Occupational Justice and Client-Centred Practice: A Dialogue in Progress." *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 71 (2): 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000841740407100203>.

MATTHEW R. McLENNAN is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Philosophy and the School of Ethics, Social Justice and Public Service at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada. He is the author of *Philosophy and Vulnerability* (2019) and *Philosophy, Sophistry, Antiphilosophy* (2015), both published by Bloomsbury Academic.