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Old Age in Existentialist Perspective

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Introduction

I assume it happens to everyone at some point as they age–that shock of looking in the mirror and seeing a strange face reflected there. 'Who is that person?' we ask. Of course we know that it is our own face. But there is a gap between the face that we see in the mirror and who we feel we really are. We feel that the person who is looking in the mirror, mind full of thoughts, plans, feelings, and memories, is the same person we were at 30 years or in adolescence or childhood, and that person does not look like this.

This confrontation with the face in the mirror raises a question that philosophers have mulled over for centuries. For if I am not that aged face in the mirror, who am I? René Descartes in the seventeenth century found there was one thing he could be absolutely certain of, 'I think, therefore I am,' and concluded he was a thinking thing. He had discovered what philosophers call subjectivity. Since then, a number of European philosophers have thought long and hard about the nature of subjectivity.

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G. W. F. Hegel described what he envisioned as the complex process subjectivity undergoes in coming to know itself. Martin Heidegger wrote about how consciousness is so intermingled with the world it is conscious of as to form a unitary whole, Being-in-the-world. Edmund Husserl emphasized the endless reflexivity involved in our awareness of our own thoughts. For instance, the I that thinks 'I think, therefore I am,' is a different I than the one that is observed thinking, and the I that grasps this difference is another I as well. This insight led him to his concept of the transcendental ego.

But who is that person in the mirror? Philosophers have had many ideas about subjectivity, the I looking in the mirror. But what is its relation to the face shown there? That person is myself too, and that person is old. That means that *I* am old. What does it mean to be old like this? How does being old affect my life?

It was an existentialist philosopher well-schooled in the thought of Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl who faced these questions head-on: Simone de Beauvoir. In her book *The Coming of Age*, she examined the phenomenon of old age from a multitude of angles, drawing extensively from the work of her fellow existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Beauvoir (1996, p. 283), who was 62 when the book was published, pinpoints the source of the strangeness of this encounter with the mirror: 'Can I have become a different being while still remaining myself?'

Beauvoir knows what it is like to feel this strangeness. In the volume of her memoirs written when she was only 54, she gives a detailed description of such an encounter: 'I often stop, flabbergasted at this incredible thing that serves as my face. I understand Las Castiglione who had every mirror smashed.' It is not because she is vain, she protests, then proves it by harshly judging every feature of her aging face. She even has a recurring dream that plays with multiple levels of reality, as befitting a philosopher: 'Often in my sleep I dream that in a dream I'm fifty-four, I wake and find I am only thirty. 'What a terrible nightmare I had,' says the young woman who thinks she is awake' (Beauvoir 1964, p. 656).

The Old Person as Other

Before writing *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir wrote a book similar in scope and methodology about what it means to be, as she was, a woman. Its central claim was that starting in prehistory, women have been pushed by men into the role of the Other. Men conceived of themselves as the norm and constructed their identity by defining women to be everything the

prototypical man was not. As in the story in Genesis, the male gender is the starting point and women's identity is derived from it. Women are, as Beauvoir's title proclaims, *The Second Sex*.

For Beauvoir, the Other is a 'primordial category' found in myth, as well as the way that casual social groupings forge an identity (Beauvoir 1989, p. xvi). (She mentions the solidarity that springs up among passengers in old-time railway compartments. Nowadays everyone sits anonymously in long rows.) Often the group that is labeled the Other does not accept this identity, and labels the group doing the labeling the Other in turn: Californians think New Yorkers are rude and impatient, and New Yorkers think Californians are vapid and superficial, to give one example. Beauvoir's fundamental contention is that no similar reciprocity exists between women and men. Up until 1949 at least, the year *The Second Sex* was published, there was no way for women to escape their subjugation by male culture as the Other.

In a few places in *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir suggests that old people are also pushed into this category of the Other. In the first part of the book, she surveys the ways that old people have been depicted in myth, literature, and popular culture. In Classical Greek mythology, the hateful tyrant Kronus devours his own children. The Judeo-Christian God with his long white beard, by contrast, is stern but beneficent. The lecherous, leering old man is a stock figure in comedy throughout the ages. But starting in Victorian times, the old have been sentimentalized as twinkly-eyed grandpas and soft-bosomed grandmas. Beauvoir found the same wide range of conflicting images when she documented the way women have been portrayed throughout history. To take just one example, the Virgin Mary and the Whore of Babylon both make appearances in the Bible.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir vividly describes the moment the young girl first experiences the way men perceive her body: 'She becomes an object, and she sees herself as object; she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist outside' (Beauvoir 1989, p. 337). In *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir describes her realization that she is growing old in similar terms: 'Within me it is the Other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider – who is old; and that Other is myself' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 284). When we were young, we developed a firmly established but vague sense of what an old person is like. That state of being seemed as distant from us as the life of a native in the Amazonian jungle. What a shock to realize that we now fall into this category ourselves.

Beauvoir does not make too much of this idea of the aged as the Other. In *The Second Sex*, the idea that women are placed in this category is central

to her argument. Yet there are ways that the old are treated that fit this model. Take, for instance, how tickets and fares are sold: adults pay the normal price and children and 'seniors' get a discount. At least up until recently, older people have not defined their own place in society. Still, becoming old and being a woman are quite different. Aging is a more universal phenomenon. One half of the world's population is female, but everyone who is lucky enough to live past a certain age will experience old age. It is alarming to realize we are getting older because it brings us closer to death. Facing death and getting older are not the same thing, Beauvoir reminds us, but both are intertwined in how they affect our experience of time, a subject I will address later.

Old Age as Unrealizable

Beauvoir introduces another philosophical concept into her analysis of old age that may work better: Sartre's concept of unrealizables. To explain what Sartre means by an unrealizable requires a brief look at the ontological framework he lays out in *Being and Nothingness*. For Sartre, there are two categories of existence: the for-itself or subjectivity and the in-itself or material reality. The in-itself impinges on consciousness, but the for-itself remains infinitely free because it always chooses, indeed must choose, how to interpret and react to these limits. However, the existence of other consciousnesses presents a more decisive limit to our freedom: I cannot control how the other apprehends me. I can choose to interpret and react to how the other treats me in different ways, but what the other consciousness thinks is out of my reach. Owing to what Sartre calls being-for-others, I have 'one face which freedom will not have chosen' (Sartre 1956, p. 526).

The examples that Sartre gives of unrealizables are being a Jew, being ugly, being a civil servant, etc. He does not mention old age. Sartre was not Jewish, but he wrote a well-received book *Anti-Semite and Jew* shortly after he wrote *Being and Nothingness*. He was perceived as ugly by many people, and his inclusion of this label here might indicate that he was aware of that. Sartre calls these socially applied labels unrealizables, because although he, for instance, has no control over others seeing him to be ugly, he cannot fully realize himself to be such. According to Sartre's ontology the for-itself cannot *be* anything: consciousness is a constant nihilation of the in-itself. Hence the word 'nothingness' in the title. Only the in-itself has the status of Being.

Beauvoir's insight is that being old falls into this category of unrealizables. Like the social identities that Sartre discusses, 'Old age is something beyond my life, outside of it –something of which I cannot have any full experience' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 291). Many of the writers she quotes express incredulity, even outrage when someone singles out their age for comment. Others describe being old to be like assuming a disguise or putting on a mask. W. B. Yeats uses harsher terms: 'an enemy has bound and twisted me.' He is infuriated by people's casual attitude to this injustice. Beauvoir concludes, 'Among the unrealizables that surround us, this is the one that we are most urgently required to realize, and it is the one that consciously and unconsciously we are the most reluctant to assume' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 292).

Turning back to Sartre's analysis of unrealizables in *Being and Nothingness* and looking at old age in these terms yields some surprising insights. First, there is Sartre's explanation of how these unrealizables are a facet of our being-for-others. Although we cannot escape the impact others have on our freedom in our lives today, the existence of other consciousnesses for Sartre is 'an entirely contingent fact' (Sartre 1956, p. 526). So if, in a thought experiment, we imagine a girl placed on a deserted island as a child, who grows up all alone, she would never grow old. Of course, her body would undergo the same changes as all human bodies do as they age, but it would not mean she was growing old. Perhaps this sort of insight is what permitted Beauvoir in the conclusion of her book to dream of an ideal society where 'old age would be practically non-existent' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 543).

The reason that Sartre calls categories like Jew, ugly, etc. unrealizables is that no one can realize what it means to be such things in inward experience. Another way that he puts it is that they do not appear in the course of 'temporalization' (Sartre 1956, p. 525). This wording suggests that recognizing that these categories apply to us is not a gradual process, but more like a sudden event. It may seem peculiar to describe old age in these terms. A person is old only because he or she has grown old over a long span of years. Yet my initial anecdote about the mirror suggests otherwise. We get used to gradual changes to our physical appearance and don't look closely at our reflection. Then one day we focus on what has happened to our face. I once felt a similar shock seeing the faces of my colleagues back from their long summer vacation. It was especially jarring to see the marks of age on people younger than me, people I had helped hire. Beauvoir quotes a long passage from Proust about encountering friends from long ago who now seem to be walking in lead-filled shoes. He calls them 'puppets.'

Death and Old Age

Sartre also classifies death as an unrealizable. He argues against Heidegger, saying that death, or our relation to death, is not a structure of human existence. Death is a contingent fact: 'There is no place for death in being-for-itself; it can neither wait for death, nor realize it, nor project itself toward it' (Sartre 1956, p. 547). In order to understand what death is, a child must have it explained to her and be able to grasp what it means (a shocking moment in a young life). Our understanding does not come from experiencing it ourselves. Death is an unrealizable in this obvious way. But being mortal is also an unrealizable for Sartre. It is certainly something we are aware of, yet it has no concrete reality for us.

In the end, Beauvoir echoes Sartre's treatment of death as an unrealizable. At first, she seems to recognize that the old have a different relation to death than those younger: 'For the aged person, death is no longer a general abstract fate; it is a personal event, an event that is near at hand. . . . Every old man knows that he will die soon' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 440). Later on she waffles, saying, 'death is neither old nor near: it is not. . . . the word 'soon' remains as vague at seventy as at eighty' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 442). Being mortal, like being old, is an unrealizable, no matter what your age is.

Beauvoir personally witnessed three deaths (Beauvoir 1973, p. 122). One was her father's death. She described his last moments in her second volume of memoirs, *The Prime of Life* – how she stood there 'vainly trying to grasp the mystery of this departure to no destination' (Beauvoir 1962, p. 389). As an onlooker, she found herself unable to realize fully what death is. Beauvoir explored the subject of death most fully in her account of her mother's death, *A Very Easy Death*, first published in 1964. That time she was not present at the exact moment of death but spent many days with her mother in the hospital, so became familiar with the process of dying. At the end of this book, she states that one does not die of old age. Death is contingent fact and always somehow surprising: 'all men must die: but for every man his death is an accident' (Beauvoir 1973, p. 123).

In the conclusion of *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir makes an interesting observation. Once people have died, a memory or photo of them from the distant past represents them just as fully as a memory of them on their deathbed. Old age, on the other hand, holds a person captive in time. Everything that has gone before is surveyed from a set vantage point, and childhood seems very far away. Of course, as Heidegger emphasizes, a person can die at any moment, a fact we are all vaguely aware of. But young people

usually do not spend much time thinking about death, whereas in old age many people find themselves going to one funeral after another. From my perspective, a person reaching old age cannot escape the nagging sense that time is running out.

Time in Relation to Old Age

Beauvoir devotes a lot of attention in her book to how old age changes a person's relation to time. Time has always presented a puzzle for philosophers. Philosophers in the phenomenological tradition, which existentialism is rooted in, concentrate on what they call temporality or the lived experience of time passing, not the time that the clock measures and physicists speculate about.

The past becomes more important in old age, for one thing. For all philosophers, it is difficult to pin down the ontological status of the past. Beauvoir, adopting Sartre's position, writes that the past is the for-itself in the mode of the in-itself. It is the past of a consciousness, and it lives on in our consciousness in the form of memories. But we cannot change the past: past events display the same stubborn contingency that objects do. I did not have to make the choices I did in my youth, yet I cannot now change the fact that I made them, and I still bear responsibility for them.

For Sartre, with his dualistic ontology, a union of the for-itself with the in-itself is impossible. Maybe that is why the past, which comes close to realizing this impossible feat, can seem to be a realm of wonders. 'There is a kind of magic in recollection,' Beauvoir (1996, p. 361) writes. Intense memories sometimes rise up like a mirage. Some old people spend hours thinking about and telling stories from their past. Memories from childhood are cherished because they allow us to feel again the wonder we felt when the world was new.

To borrow a phrase from the French title of Proust's masterwork, *A la recherche de temps perdu*, older people are in search of lost time. They will never find it, however, in its original form. Our memories are always overlaid with our present consciousness, a layer that was missing in the past. Just as, according to Sartre, the for-itself can never encounter material reality directly, but instead chooses how to interpret it, the way the past appears to us is shaped by our current point of view. Beauvoir points out how the present and the past form a circle this way. Yes, the past is in an important sense the creation of our present self, but our present self is the product of our past choices and experiences.

One of the ways people in modern Western society hold on to the past is through viewing old photographs. Beauvoir writes about how hard it is when viewing photos from the past to believe that the world ever looked like that. Everything looks so strange, because styles have changed over time. She explains the reason for our disbelief: it is a trick our mind plays. We are accustomed to the way things look now in the present, and we know that the world and we ourselves have a past. That is a natural part of existence. So we unconsciously assume things were the same in the past as they are now. Thus seeing old photos of ourselves or our families can come as a shock. What could we ever have in common with the people depicted there? we ask. Even when we are staring at documentary evidence of it, the past eludes us.

Beauvoir details some of the different attitudes people can take toward the past. The ambitious person plays down the past by trying to achieve a new status that departs from the past one. Older people, on the other hand, feel 'an intimate solidarity with the past' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 362). By focusing on memories of their youth, they assert their identity with their younger selves in order to ignore the changes old age brings: 'each in his heart preserves the conviction of having remained unalterable' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 362).

However, old people's memories of the past can be a source of frustration as well as pleasure. Beauvoir, for instance, confesses that there are important moments in her past that she has absolutely no memory of. Forgetting is necessary to memory, she notes: our memories would overload if we remembered everything. But memory loss seems to accelerate in old age. 'Great sections of memory crumble and vanish in forgetfulness,' is the way the art historian Bernard Berenson puts it (Beauvoir 1996, p. 363). What older people do remember is watered down, lacking in vividness. For this remembered past lacks its previous connection to the future. When we were living through that moment long ago, we didn't know what would happen next. Every moment was flavored by anticipation. That tingle of expectation is gone when we remember these events later. When we return to a place that has in fact not changed at all, it can seem so different than we remembered it. Responding to a friend's remark about the old having a long past behind them, Beauvoir writes: 'Unfortunately this is just what I don't have. The past is not a peaceful landscape lying there behind me, a country in which I can stroll whenever I please' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 365).

Beauvoir borrows another Sartrean term, this one dating to Sartre's later Marxist phase, to explore how old people's connection to the past shapes their lives: the practico-inert. A good example of the practico-inert is our present legal system. It was entirely created by human beings but serves as a

constraint on our actions the same way that features of the natural world do: a traffic ticket, like a dollar bill, is not just a scrap of paper. And many people would rather live through a thunderstorm than a traffic jam.

Beauvoir envisions the practico-inert in more personal terms. Through our past decisions we have made commitments and taken on responsibilities that we feel we cannot ignore. People rely heavily on expectations they have formed based on our past behavior. As we live ever longer, these commitments and expectations pile up and become firmly established. Our past becomes a burden that weighs us down. Sometimes the limits the practico-inert places on older people are external: in the USA, financial arrangements made in their working years have a big impact on the way people live in old age. But our personalities, our social identity, and our relations to family and friends also were formed in the past. Nowadays, people use the term 'emotional baggage' to capture this aspect of the practico-inert.

Whether it is embodied in laws, customs, or other people's expectations, the practico-inert is experienced as a force acting from the outside. But the practico-inert also can be internalized in the form of habit. Old people are known for forming rigid habits. An old person 'acquires the habit of having habits,' Beauvoir (1996, p. 469) writes. These habits keep them from having to make new choices, which they can find stressful. They are a way to exert control over the world and provide 'ontological security' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 469). Following set routines ensures that each new day will resemble the previous one, which helps to combat anxiety about the future – anxiety old people feel about their finances holding out, their health getting worse, their death coming too soon, or not soon enough. Older people call up the past in their memories but live the past again every day in the form of their habits.

Experience of the Present in Old Age

We all, both young and old, live our lives in the present. The phenomenological tradition that existentialism springs from emphasizes that the present is not a single moment that clicks past as if on a string. Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, as well as Beauvoir, write about the way that the past and the future are connected with the present in our lived experience of time. Old age involves a different relation to the past, as I have just discussed, and to the future, which I will soon explore, so it is not surprising that the present is experienced differently as well.

In Beauvoir's account, the predominant feature of the present in old age is disappointment. There is something intrinsically disappointing about our experience of the present, she says, due to the way the future always evades our grasp. She quotes from what Sartre wrote in *Being and Nothingness*: 'The future does not allow itself to be overtaken, but slips into the past, . . . This is the origin of the ontological disappointment that waits for the for-itself at every outlet into the future' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 368). The future events that we longed for seemed as though they would be more enjoyable than they actually are. However, for older people there are other concrete reasons for dissatisfaction that Beauvoir describes.

Older people feel disappointment, she says, even if they have achieved great success. Beauvoir's main source of information about the experience of old age is the writings of famous intellectuals, artists, and political figures (the vast majority of whom are male, due to the marginalized position of women she describes in *The Second Sex*). She records the discontent that the aged Tolstoy and Hans Christian Andersen felt after big celebrations held in their honor and how Verdi took no pleasure in writing his last operas, plagued as he was by that 'scent of sadness which all accomplishment, all realization leaves in one's heart' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 461). Beauvoir confesses to having similar feeling in her third volume of memoirs, *The Force of Circumstance*. In its dramatic final sentence, she proclaims she has been swindled. The implication is that she paid too dearly for her success, and it did not live up to her expectations. So, in *The Coming of Age*, she undoubtedly is drawing from her own experience when she announces: 'fame, in fact, is nothing, except perhaps a fleeting illusion in the eyes of the world' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 368).

Beauvoir's account suggests that success falls into Sartre's concept of unrealizables too, though she doesn't say so. Some successful people attribute their success to luck, or they even fear, deep down, that they are frauds. Others are confused by fame: I am the same person I always was, they protest. Instead of enjoying success 'all at once a man discovers that he is not going anywhere, that his path leads only to the grave' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 491).

Of course, some people reach old age realizing few, if any of the plans they made or dreams they dreamed when they were young. Being old may be an even crueler punishment then. These people can live their last years consumed in bitterness, feeling a great injustice at having been a victim of fate. They inflict revenge on their family and others who care for them. Beauvoir writes about one woman's fury at getting old driving her to madness. Sometimes it is even worse if older people have achieved some success and then been driven from a position of authority due to age or other reasons.

They become domestic tyrants. Others hearken back to the days of their youth and wallow in nostalgia. By identifying themselves with their younger selves, they escape the passing of time. A few take on an entirely new role – become distance runners, join the Peace Corp. People like this are celebrated in the USA, where initiative and daring are highly admired. But taking on new goals at an advanced age leaves them racing against time.

Relation to the Future in Old Age

One observation about old age that seems nearly universal is that time goes by so much more quickly when we are old. Time seems to rush past, with whole years disappearing in the blink of an eye. Why is that? One way to answer is to appeal to arithmetic: to a 9-year-old, the next year of life will represent one-tenth of her life; to the 69-year-old, the next year is a much smaller fraction of the total number of years lived. This answer is not very convincing. It is how the experience of time that is altered in old age that is important. To compare, Beauvoir reminds us of how differently life is experienced in childhood, when it is a series of constantly new experiences, and the prospect of what might happen in the future excites strong emotions. Most older people, once their living arrangements have been decided, can expect the future to be pretty much the same as the past. For one thing, the settled habits they develop make it so. Travel is one of few things that can bring novelty back into their lives. Beauvoir quotes the Italian playwright Eugene Ionseco, who set up his own system of arithmetic to gauge this effect: 'Two days in a new country are worth thirty lived in familiar circumstances' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 376).

Even though, due to medical advances, an old person today can expect to live, say, 20 years longer, that time seems 'tragically short' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 373). Why? The 20 years that passed between birth and adulthood seemed to cover an immense period of time. Again, it is because an old person's relation to the future is different. What Beauvoir, following Sartre, calls the realm of the practico-inert imprisons the old person in a life that was freely decided on in the past: 'the future that he has freely chosen for himself appears to him as the necessity that awaits him' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 373).

This aspect of old age, the person's attitude toward the future, is much different today than it was in traditional societies. In these societies, not only does an old person expect the future to be much like the past, the whole community does, because nothing *will* change in any major way. Older people

may retain a high status in such societies: the skills that they have developed over a lifetime remain useful and they can call on their years of experience in order to give valuable advice. (That does not mean that the old are always treated well in these societies, as the overview of old age in these societies Beauvoir provides in *The Coming of Age* demonstrate.) In agricultural societies and in the earlier stages of capitalism, an aging man could be reassured that his life's work would not have all been for nothing, because he could hand down his farm or business to his sons, who would continue to run it the same way.

The position of old people in contemporary times is very different. Even today, a son (or daughter) will take over the family business and steer it successfully into the future. But historical change is accelerating so quickly that individual firms are run out of business or swallowed up by global corporations, and whole segments of the economy disappear almost overnight. (Take the recording industry – not only are vinyl records now obsolete, but soon compact discs will be too.) Due to this rapid pace of change, the business experience an old person has gained over a lifetime usually has little value. Constant technological innovation means that skills learned only a few years ago in some fields are now out of date, and old people find themselves unable to compete in the job market. The only thing anyone can count on to continue to have value in the future is money, and the vast majority of old people in the world have little of that. A very few older people, on the other hand, have vast quantities and seem obsessed with getting more. Lists of the wealthiest billionaires contain many people of advanced age. In the USA, older people who want to retain a middle-class lifestyle must develop good financial skills.

Conclusion

I opened this chapter describing an encounter many people who are getting older, including Simone de Beauvoir, have had with their reflection in the mirror. The face they see in the mirror is old, but they find it hard to accept that the person looking into the mirror, the person they really are, is also old. That led to a discussion of what it means to be old, both to society at large and to older people themselves.

There are many social and economic factors, as I have just pointed out, that influence how older people live out the rest of their lives. But the existentialism of Sartre and Beauvoir focuses mainly on inward experience. Inwardly, the person looking in the mirror feels that he or she has not changed significantly since youth, only the face in the mirror has. What my survey of Beauvoir's existentialist

analysis of old age has shown is that that is not true. An older person's relation to the past, experience of the present, and attitude toward the future are different than those of a younger person. At the end of *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir admits as much, writing that in old age a person undergoes 'an alteration in his attitude towards the world' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 539). In her conclusion, Beauvoir is quite critical of Western society's treatment of old people. Of course, she was writing about the Europe of 1970. Are the lives of old people in the USA any different from that today, and, if so, how? That would be an interesting debate.

But Beauvoir does offer some recommendations for how an individual (presumably a fairly privileged individual) can overcome the challenges old age brings and live a fulfilling life. It is better not to think about entering old age too much, she says, which is ironic, coming from someone who has written a 567-page book on the subject.

However, the main thing we can do to make old age fulfilling is to 'go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning – devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 540). This is essentially the same advice that she gave to her readers in her very first philosophical essay, 'Pyrrhus and Cineas,' published in 1944, when she was 36. She may have grown older by the time she wrote *The Coming of Age*, but Beauvoir's commitment to the central principles of her existentialism was steadfast. Young or old, apparently, we confront a similar task: to call on our inner resources to bring meaning to our lives and make honest connections with others.

Beauvoir goes so far as to suggest the disillusionment that old age effects has its benefits. Illusions – about fame, success, true love – that we cling to in youth and middle age keep us from attaining authenticity. Age can bring a certain sort of freedom, even help nurture 'a questioning and challenging state of mind' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 492). She refers to artists who, during the times they doubted the value of their work the most, came closest to perfecting their unique style. She even shares an insight that she herself might have taken to heart: 'We may go on hoping to communicate with others by writing even when childish images of fame have vanished' (Beauvoir 1996, p. 492).

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