Silvia Stoller, editor
Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, Time
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"Let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. It must be done if we are to take upon ourselves the entirety of our human state." —Simone de Beauvoir

Led by the conviction that Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (1970) has been overshadowed by *The Second Sex* for too long, this book sets out to redress that neglect and to bring Beauvoir's reflections on old age into dialogue with different perspectives and approaches in feminist philosophy. It does so superbly. Several secondary works on Beauvoir discuss *The Coming of Age*, including *The Cambridge Companion to Beauvoir*, Stella Stanford's *How to Read Beauvoir*, and (from a literary perspective) Oliver Davis's *Age Rage and Going Gently*, but there is no similarly comprehensive treatment of Beauvoir's philosophy of age. Uniqueness is not the only virtue of Stoller's volume, however; each chapter is immediately followed by a response, with critical comments from another point of view. The quality of the chapters and of the dialogue between them, therefore, offer readers of Beauvoir both thoughtful analysis and an invitation into several conversations—spanning questions in philosophy, gerontology, ethics, literature, and studies of sex and gender.

As its subtitle suggests, the book is divided into three parts: age and gender, age and ethics, and age and time—although the themes of these sections intersect. Among the objectives stated in the introduction, Stoller is interested in exploring the phenomenological implications of Beauvoir's essay on old age, which, she argues, makes the work "an enquiry in feminist phenomenology." We see this exploration in several chapters of the book, but it presents a particularly interesting point of contention in the chapter by (and response to) Sara Heinämaa, "Transformations of Old Age: Selfhood, Normativity, and Time," where Heinämaa discusses Beauvoir's approach to old age within the methodological parameters of classical Husserlian phenomenology. Heinämaa argues that aging is a matter of personal transformation: "a change in one's relation to oneself, to others and the world which is not accountable by mere biological or social factors" (167). She writes that *The Coming of Age* is "a methodological twin sister" of *The Second Sex* (168) because Beauvoir again employs her approach of double illumination, giving an empirical and then philosophical account of her subject, and that the second part of *The Coming of Age* "takes a different approach and proposes a different task" (168) than the first. Although there is not space here to sketch the full shape of Heinämaa's argument, her article raises interesting questions about the nature and compatibility of "pure" phenomenology and feminism. As Bonnie Mann writes in her

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response, "the effort to recuperate the philosophical depth of Beauvoir's work seems here to require a careful surgical operation which separates the conjoined projects, thus freeing the philosophical project from its symbiotic socio-historical partner" (191). If, as Seyla Benhabib writes, the task of feminist thinking is to articulate "the emancipatory aspirations of women" (Benhabib 1995, 29), then, as Mann writes, an investigation cannot be called feminist unless it "is linked to and has repercussions for those emancipatory aspirations" (192). Arguing that Beauvoir "makes phenomenology feminist by making it capable of addressing the phenomenon of oppression" (192), Mann suggests that any phenomenology that follows Beauvoir's approach "will not find pure experience even in pure experience" because "at the heart of lived experience . . . we find the footprints of injustice" (193).

On the ethical plane, another of the book's stated objectives is to support and further Beauvoir's entreaty that we need to "break the silence" surrounding old age. Many of Beauvoir's claims about inhumane treatment and expectations of the elderly seem as applicable today as they were in 1970, but changing demographics suggest that the objections she met—that the question of aging and the aged were of limited public importance—are no longer sustainable. As Debra Bergoffen highlights in her chapter "The Dignity of Finitude," the recent UN report "World Populations Ageing 1950–2050" called aging "an unparalleled historical process." It predicted that people over sixty would outnumber those under fifteen for the first time in 2047. It is already the case in some nations that more than a quarter of their population is over sixty (Japan, Italy, Germany, Poland, and Russia). Bergoffen writes that seeing the ways that the old are marginalized today should compel us to "interrogate the exclusionary effects of current descriptions of the human" (129)—for over half of the world's population will soon be marginalized in this way. The ethical question—what must we do for the aged to be treated humanely, as fully human?—runs throughout the book, as does Beauvoir's reminder that "I myself am the future dwelling-place of old age."

Indeed, as Helen Fielding writes in her chapter "The Poetry of Habit," Beauvoir's phenomenological descriptions of aging "have ethical implications for all stages of life" (80). In particular, Fielding is concerned with the role of habit in human life and in Beauvoir's account—and the way habit changes over time. The elderly, on her reading, derive ontological security from habit. Drawing on Clare Carlisle's work, Fielding writes that "Since life is movement, . . . identity is not something we have but is rather secured through repetition providing the impression of a core stable being and a knowledge of who we are . . . ; accordingly, the loss of habit can be experienced as a loss of sense of self" (73). If familiar actions and objects allow for corporeal memory and a sense of identity in a time of life when significant parts of one's identity are no longer accessible in the present—that is, the parts that were constituted by being with others who are no longer on earth—then the poetry of habit should not be underestimated. It can open up "the continued possibility of a joy and delight in existence" (75). Habit, Fielding argues, is thus a social and ethical question, for though "habits can become rigid repetitions that tie the elderly to immanence, they can also draw upon a poetical corporeal potential that allows the elderly to remain engaged in a world that has not only a past but also a kind of future" (80).

Literary readers of Beauvoir will find thoughtful considerations of the intersection of theory and literature in the chapters by Bergoffen, which include an illuminating analysis of Fosca from *All Men are Mortal*, and in Dorothea Olkowski's "Letting Go the Weight of the Past," which considers the role that age plays in the relationship between Anne and Xavière in *She Came to Stay*. Both of these literary texts are explored alongside the role that age plays in the

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constitution of selfhood more generally, weaving the book's three themes—gender, ethics, and time—into situated illustrations.

The chapters by Sonia Kruks and Silvia Stoller both bring Beauvoir into dialogue with her phenomenological contemporaries, the former with Sartre and the latter with Merleau-Ponty. Kruks's chapter, "Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* and Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*," explores "the material mediations of age as lived experience" (89). Drawing on autobiographical comments Beauvoir made concerning *The Second Sex* later in life, Kruks explores Beauvoir's turn from "the antagonism of consciousnesses" to "the economic basis of scarcity" as the source of the rejection and oppression of the other (89). Kruks argues that the conceptual apparatus of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* significantly informed *The Coming of Age*, but that Beauvoir was selective in her appropriation, creatively reworking Sartre's ideas. Stoller brings Beauvoir into discussion with Merleau-Ponty to argue that Beauvoir's notion of selfhood has lacunae that Merleau-Ponty's does not and that Beauvoir's notion of the past is unduly negatively valenced. Beauvoir's emphasis on aging as a biological and cultural fact overlooks a significant dimension: "For the ethics of age and aging to be comprehensive, it must be complemented with the dimension of a relation to oneself" (209).

Although it has not been possible to do justice to each of the contributions here, it is worth making a final point before closing, namely that for all its praise of Beauvoir's insights the volume does not indulge in hagiography. In addition to Beauvoir's notion of selfhood we find criticisms voiced on account of her neglect of the experience of "very aged women" (Penelope Deutscher, 29) and for ignoring the intersection of aging and questions of sex and gender—to the extent that Anja Weiberg concludes that Beauvoir, in *The Coming of Age*, "is not primarily a feminist but an advocate for the aged" (67).

Whether Beauvoir's later work deserves the title "feminist" is left to individual readers to decide. But *The Coming of Age* clearly and passionately asks us to face marginalized humanity and to do something on the basis of what we see. The negativity in Beauvoir's account of aging is not intrinsic to the experience of aging itself. And reflection of the kind that Stoller's volume provokes may help us cultivate a vision of old age that, as Beata Stawarska writes, is worth "looking forward to" (232).

Reference

Benhabib, Seyla. 1995. Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance. In *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 17–34.

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