

OLD AGE

by Simone de Beauvoir (translated by Patrick O'Brian). London, UK: Andre Deutsch, Weidenfeld and Nicholson and G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972. 592 pp.

Although Simone de Beauvoir died in 1986, a quick glance at Amazon reveals that at least ten of her books are still in print. *The Second Sex* (1953/1997) is probably the most well-known; *Old Age*, however, is no longer available and some sleuthing was required to obtain a second-hand copy. Before reading the book I had already gained the impression that the topic was not particularly popular. "Old age" is an accurate translation of "La Vieillesse", the title under which the book was originally published in Paris in 1970, but in the USA it came out under the rather misleading title "*The Coming of Age*".

The book is in two parts. In Part One, "Old Age Seen from Without", old age is seen through the lenses of biology, ethnology, history, and the present day (at the time of writing in 1970). In Part Two, "The Being-in-the-World", de Beauvoir takes a phenomenological approach and looks through the eyes of a dozen or so elderly people themselves. Most of these are fairly well-known politicians, artists, authors, or philosophers, such as Victor Hugo, Voltaire, Trotsky, Michelangelo, Freud, etc.

Our current society values those who are young and active. The beauty industry earns millions from creams and potions that promise to delay or even reverse the signs of ageing, and within the entertainment industry Botox or cosmetic surgery are widely used. My assumption had always been that this negative attitude towards ageing is specific to our culture and that in more traditional societies older people were valued for their wisdom and experience, but de Beauvoir shows me I was wrong. Although in Part One she does discuss some societies where the old are valued, there are rather more where the opposite is the case, which leads her to the conclusion that attitudes mostly depend on the social and economic context. If times are hard and resources scarce, the aged will suffer, and may even be killed. The opposite may be the case in economically flourishing societies, where aged men may cling on to power, and actively keep those younger than themselves away from decision-making positions.

Although the aim of a phenomenological method, as used in Part Two, is to describe, understand, and interpret people's experience, the book does not tell us much about the average old person. The people quoted were all well-known and leading comparatively privileged lives. It is also rather male-focused; out of the dozen or so older people discussed there are only two women. This second part is less engaging than the first, not only because many of the first-hand accounts are rather negative, but also because its structure is rather confusing and contains a certain amount of contradiction and duplication. Most people cited complain about their aches and pains, and lament their inability to function as before, although many of them would not be regarded as that old today. Turgenev, for example, is reported as saying, "Do you know the worst of all vices? It is being over fifty-five" (p. 284).

Madame de Sévigné, one of the few women mentioned, is more positive however; "Today we are as we were yesterday and tomorrow we shall be like ourselves today. So we go on without being aware of it, and this is one of the miracles of that Providence which I so love" (p. 287). It is a common phenomenon that many of us may be unaware of how our ageing selves appear to others and would concur with de Beauvoir when she writes, "my ego is a transcendent object that does not dwell in my consciousness and that can only be viewed from a distance" (p.

291). Perhaps somewhat contradictorily, she also claims to have “never come across one single woman, either in life or in books, who has looked upon her own old age cheerfully” (p. 297), only to state a few pages on that women may cope better with old age because their inferior social position to men gives them less to lose! Rather curiously, an appendix includes details of a group of people whose experience of old age appears more positive than many of those quoted in the book itself. They are centenarians, the majority of them women living in Brittany and enjoying active, independent lives.

How relevant is this book today? De Beauvoir claims that “It is common knowledge that the condition of old people today is scandalous” (p. 216), but during the five decades since it was written there have been many changes that affect our attitudes to older people. As we are living longer, and the economy is declining, the age at which one is expected to retire has increased and is likely to do so again. At the same time, we still fear getting old, as exemplified by the “Anti-Ageing and Postponement of Death Industry” (Holloway, 2018) that uses cryogenics to offer the opportunity to be deep-frozen and resurrected at some future time.

In her conclusion de Beauvoir advises, “to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning” (p. 542) and suggests “one's life has value as long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion” (p. 542). Wise words that remind me of meeting a friend's ninety-two-year-old father at a party: although hardly able to move and almost totally blind he exuded vitality and genuine interest in everyone he met. Other examples of positive ageing include Leonard Cohen, who a few years before his death at 82 went on a world tour, performing to sell-out crowds; and the author Diane Athill, who at the age of 100 is still writing. Also Hendrik Groen's first book, a poignant and humorous account of life in a retirement home, became a bestseller in the Netherlands and has been translated into over thirty languages (Groen, 2016). Attitudes towards older women have changed too. Helen Mirren was chosen to be “the face” of L'Oreal at 70; older models feature regularly in the fashion pages of *The Guardian* and *the Observer*; and some older women occasionally appear on television, although they are still outnumbered by older men.

Overall I am glad that I have read this classic book as it has been on my to-do list for many years. However, a thorough edit would not have gone amiss.

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