

## On age, authenticity and the ageing subject

BY CHRIS GILLEARD\*

### Abstract

This paper is concerned with the relationship between selves as subject positions and the experience of aging. The existing psychological literature on “subjective” and “objective” age, it argues, has failed fully to engage with the idea of subjectivity, focusing instead upon what are ascribed and attributed identities. In contrast to treating age and ageing as some object-like characteristic potentially applicable to both things and persons, this inquiry explores the internal experience of ageing and whether such experience can realise an authentic subject position. It begins with an outline of De Beauvoir’s views of the “unrealisability” of such a subject position and proceeds to consider whether her views are the necessary consequence of the phenomenological existentialism of Sartre and Heidegger that frames her thesis. Such foreclosure on De Beauvoir’s part, I conclude, is not inevitable, and, ultimately, there is a choice between what may be termed a Sartrean or a De Beauvoir position on the possibility of realising an authentic subjectivity of age.

Keywords: ageing, authenticity, De Beauvoir, existential phenomenology.

\*Chris Gilleard, Division of Psychiatry, Faculty of Brain Sciences, University College London, London, UK

## Introduction

Although most older people these days are aware of their chronological age, in the sense of knowing both when they were born and how old they now are, it can be argued that such knowledge does not constitute an aged subjectivity. Equally the well observed fact that most older people neither “feel” nor “think” of themselves of “being” their chronological age does not prove any distinct subjectivity of age exists, despite the use of the term “subjective age” (Kastenbaum et al., 1972; Logan et al., 1992; Montepare, 2009; Rubin & Bernstein, 2006). Indices of “felt age” or “thought age” constitute more an assumed identity than proof of an experienced subjectivity of age. Since any numerical age that one reports that one “feels” is likely based upon some socialised concept of what age and ageing represent, such “subjective” ageing seems less a lived experience than an assumed social judgement – a “me-self” rather than an “I-self.” Why this might be so, why the concept of subjectivity seems so difficult to align with age and whether age can ever be authentically realised is the focus of this paper.

Whether it is possible to align one’s subjectivity, one’s experience of being with one’s understanding of ageing involves something more than empirically studying the correlation between people’s official and “felt” age. In the two realms of human reality proposed by Gabriel Marcel, human beings are presented with either problems, calling for solutions, or mysteries that serve as sources of introspection and contemplation (Barnard, 2017, p. 465). Ageing, as Barnard observes, presents both as problem and as mystery, the former falling into the domain of the bio-psycho-social sciences, the latter the domain of the humanities and human sciences (Barnard, 2017). The question of ageing as a subject position, I suggest, requires engaging with ageing as a mystery, which can be most usefully considered and interpreted through recourse to literature, philosophy and the arts. The present paper addresses the mystery of ageing, not as a problem but as a problematic experience. At the heart of this mystery, I suggest, is its potential to appear most often as a form of “alienation,” an otherness arising from both within and without. In treating age so, I draw upon the existentialist phenomenology that was first applied to the problem of ageing as inner experience by Simone De Beauvoir in her book, *Old Age* (De Beauvoir, 1977). As one of the first and perhaps the best

example of a phenomenological approach to the subjectivity of age, her account of “the discovery and assumption of age” provides the starting point of this paper.<sup>1</sup>

But first comes the matter of terminology and what is to be understood by the term “subjectivity.” Aside from the field of linguistics, where subjectivity refers more or less straightforwardly to a self-expressed in language through first person discourse, within philosophy, and particularly within phenomenology, the term subjectivity is rather more complex and contested. It is a key part of the Cartesian tradition where the distinction is made between the individual as self-consciousness and the individual as the object of his, her or another’s consciousness, between the (*I*) as thinker and the (*Me*) as thing thought. This split between one’s subjective consciousness and one’s consciousness of being a subject (to oneself and to others) has been a central theme in much continental philosophy since Descartes wrote his *Meditations*, some four centuries ago (Descartes, 1998; Van der Heiden et al., 2012).

Among the many approaches addressing this problem, very few philosophers have shown any interest in the potential role played by ageing in problematising this mix of constancy and change, inner-ness and outer-ness through which human selves are realised. Whilst the experience itself is common, of people not feeling “their age,” as are reports of the “uncanniness” experienced when unexpectedly confronted by an image of oneself as an old man or woman, De Beauvoir was exceptional in taking such experiences as her starting point, before going on to explore what might account for this frequent non-alignment between one’s observed ageing and one’s observing and seemingly “ageless” self. Her central premise was age’s fundamental “unrealisability,” its inability to be realised other than as an “alterity,” an other even to one’s self.

To understand what De Beauvoir meant by otherness and unrealisability, one must go further back, to her and Sartre’s elaboration of an existentialist phenomenology, with its roots in the works of Husserl and

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<sup>1</sup> In her book, *The Long Life*, Helen Small calls De Beauvoir’s work “exemplary” in illustrating “how interested people have thought about age and ageing” (Small, 2007, p. 1). It has taken some time, but increasing attention is being paid both by philosophers and students of ageing to the philosophy underlying her book on Old Age (e.g. Deutscher, 2017; Stoller, 2014).

Heidegger (see, e.g. Clayton, 2009). Consequently, after summarising De Beauvoir's view of ageing and the impossibility of there being an *authentic* subjectivity of age, I will turn to this background in existential phenomenology that provided much of the context for her own interpretation. In doing so, it is important to recognise that Sartre's philosophical writings that De Beauvoir cited were very much the product of their earlier mutual intellectual interchange, including their common reading of both Husserl and Heidegger (Clayton, 2009; Simons, 1981, 2000). Unsurprising then that she shared a common interpretation of the concept of age's unrealisability with Sartre who, toward the end of his life, reportedly told her:

There's one thing I've always thought -I spoke about it to some extent in *Nausea*- and that is the idea that you don't have experience of, that you don't grow older. The slow accumulation of events and experience that gradually create a character is one of the myths of the late nineteenth century and of empiricism. I don't think it really exists.

Sartre, cited in *Adieux* (De Beauvoir, 1984, p. 324)

This was the position that De Beauvoir articulated more fully, when she wrote that age "does not dwell in [our] consciousness and ... can only be viewed from a distance ... through the vision that others have of us" (De Beauvoir, 1977, p. 324). Although De Beauvoir considered her writing on old age – or at least the second and central part of the book, translated as "the discovery and assumption of old age" – as "an entirely personal piece of work" drawing upon "my own experience and my own reflections" (De Beauvoir, 1979, p. 148), her approach was both shared and shaped by her and Sartre's long immersion in phenomenology. So, after outlining De Beauvoir's position regarding the unrealisability of age, I will turn, in the next section, to address the more general question of subjectivity and its antithesis, otherness and the processes of subjectification.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term "subjectification" in this paper to mean "the objectivizing of the subject" or "making someone subject to" an objectified identity. In this sense, it is intended to align with Foucault's use of the term (Foucault, 2002, p. 327) and is employed here in contrast to a similar term used by Rancière to refer to quite the opposite, namely, the achievement of a new sense of collective consciousness by an otherwise oppressed group, freeing itself from the structures of an oppressive objectivisation conferred by its previous oppressed and objectivised identity (see Rancière, 1995, pp. 35–42).

## De Beauvoir and the Unrealisability of Age

Though De Beauvoir begins her account of old age with a focus upon old age as “seen from without,” she is most notable for her attempt, in the second half of her book, to turn from its exteriority in society to the perspective of the aged/ageing subject. Unlike the first section, this section of the book was not based on her readings of the gerontological literature, but on her own lived experience and her reflections on that (De Beauvoir, 1977, p. 21, 1979, p. 148). From the outset, ageing – old age – presented her with a dilemma, one that she addresses in detail, though without claiming any resolution, in the second section “*On Being in the World*” (De Beauvoir, 1977, pp. 315–597). Old age, she states, is not an activity, a quest or a journey, not something framed or realised through conscious intent, but, like events and accidents, “just something that happens” (De Beauvoir, 1977, p. 313). The absence of intent, of self-directedness, is for her crucial in denying old age its agency, its subjectivity – its incapacity to exist as a “for-itself.”

In highlighting this problem, she draws attention to old age’s incapacity to serve as a subject position, confirming its status as one of life’s “unrealisables” (De Beauvoir, 1977, p. 323). This term she attributes to Sartre, though it seems likely that it was one co-constructed, like so much of their thought, within the conversations and correspondence that passed between them both before and during the war (Clayton, 2009; Simons, 2000). The unrealisability of age, its failure to become part of one’s “for-itself” being, she argued, lies in old age’s inherent otherness, emerging as an event, an exterior happening, that remains always and only as an “in-itself-ness,” a something come upon and realised first and foremost through the gaze of the Other. De Beauvoir does not leave it at that. She recognises that our body – in its “in-itself-ness” – changes and acquires the “look” of age, not as part of our intentions, our agency but as a phenomenon realised in and through the “Look” of the other.<sup>3</sup> This look, this confrontation with the other, eventually weighs down up the existing, “for-itself” self. The consequence is that look after look, the self’s “for-itself” is forced to acknowledge the ageing of its “self-for-others” and bit by bit, merges as “the Other within her .... the Other that existed for the

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<sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of the concept of the Look, as deployed by both Sartre and De Beauvoir, see Dolezal (2012).

rest but of whom she herself had no immediate knowledge" (De Beauvoir, 1977, p. 327). Age is not so much an achieved identity or status, not so much a realised part of one's becoming, but a phenomenon inscribed from without, but realised within one's body-for-others, one's body that exists not as the agent of one's becoming, but as realised through the look, firstly of others, and later, of oneself as such an Other.

Before old age happens upon us, De Beauvoir says that the person we are to the outside world "is as many sided as the rest of the world itself." No one viewpoint of oneself "for others" prevails. Our self-as-other can be challenged, contested, one facet turned to, just as one facet is turned against (De Beauvoir, 1977, p. 316). But with the onset of age, there are fewer facets to turn to, and more to turn against, each bearing the multiple signs of ageing. Whilst denial or rejection continues, our being for others gradually overwhelms our being-for-ourselves; our body becomes more a body for others and our subjectivity subsumed beneath our embodiment in and through the look.

Whilst De Beauvoir continues to employ the distinction between an embodied consciousness that exists – a for-itself body – and an embodied consciousness that exists "in itself" as an object of consciousness recognised outside of consciousness, – a myself as old – her focus is very much on the struggle between the subjective and objective poles of such conscious ageing. In many accounts, anecdotes and autobiographical sketches that she draws upon when charting how ageing and old age are talked about as experiences in the first person, her constant theme is that of a struggle between accepting or rejecting, owning or disowning an old age for oneself. The various subject accounts she draws upon, in diaries, letters and autobiographical accounts, reflect this commonly experienced struggle between the necessity for, and the inability to realise "ageing"; not simply "owning" it, as an identity, but authentically realising it, being it. The nearest she seems to come is what she calls the "assumption" of age. This seems, to this reader at least, to mean something like an acceptance of (or submission to) the other within; like acknowledging the body for others, if not fully as a "for-itself," a kind of "step-self" at least.

As Kathleen Woodward has observed, on reading De Beauvoir again after a space of nearly half a century, although much of the book can seem dated, the second part, that particularly concerns the "inner" aspect of ageing retains its significance, even as it resonates differently with one's

own experiences of ageing (Woodward, 2016). The paradoxes ageing presents, personally and socially, remain paradoxes; despite the many influences of time, culture and social position, the centrality of the division between the “me” and the “I” of ageing seems inescapable. Whether it is as unresolvable as De Beauvoir seemed to believe, of course, is more debatable. Such considerations form the key for this paper.

### **Subjectivity and Subjectification**

Although this is not a term that she employs, the subjectification of one’s subjectivity by the otherness of age is arguably De Beauvoir’s central theme, at least in the second half of *“Old Age.”* She spends much time in her book – and is perhaps most interested in – illustrating this process through the numerous first-person accounts, diaries and letters of men and women confronting their ageing. To move beyond such a purely literary focus, it is useful to pursue what exactly is understood in the phenomenological tradition, by “subjectivity” and particularly the relationship between these two related terms – “subject” and “subjectification.” As already noted, subjectivity is commonly used as a term standing in for the unity of consciousness, the “I” that thinks rather than the things that the “I” thinks about. Although it is possible to trace this term further back, most contemporary writing treats the problem of subjectivity – i.e. of consciousness – through (or against) Descartes’ well-known distinction between *“res cogitans”* – inner experience – and *“res existans”* – the world outside, experienced as the “object” or “predicate” of consciousness.

The difference between what we see, hear, feel and think about and our seeing, thinking, feeling and hearing constitutes a seemingly inseparable divide between an observed “objective” position and an observing “subjective position.” Subsequent interrogation of this division, however, reveals further divisions, first between our own and others’ subjectivity, and second within our own subjectivity, between our self as a locus of agency, experience and intention and our self as the reflected object of our consciousness. In both cases, we are confronted by our self as agent and subject, forming intentions, planning and carrying out actions to realise those plans, which seems distinct from our self-accounting for and reflecting upon both plans and performances – our narrative ability to “account for” and “explain” ourself and at times re-frame our agency, in

contrast to our agency itself. When we as subjects act not in accordance with our plans and intentions but in reaction to forces external to those plans – we experience our subjectification – the limits of our agency and the power the external world exercises upon us. Included within that external world, however, are the constraints of our own embodiment. Being a subject, thus, encompasses both our subjectivity (conscious intent and automatic agency) and our subjectification (that is consciously or automatically submitting to forces other than such subjectivity).

Nowhere is this duality more acutely experienced than in our own embodiment – in our both being and having a body. In being a body, we experience both agency and authority; in having a body, we experience our otherness and observe constraints on our own limited agency, governed in no small measure both by external forces and internal limits. Philosophers like Edmund Husserl sought to reconcile this seeming division, by arguing first that consciousness could not exist without an object – that a subject abstracted as a pure consciousness was inconceivable. Furthermore, he argued, “before one can have one’s body as an object, one must already be a body” (Wehrle, 2020, p. 504). In short, without there being a subject pole, there can be no object pole. This does not mean that objects cannot be said to exist without human observers, but objects can exist as *beings-in-the-world* only if their being so is realised through their being experienced. The nexus between subject and object, at its closest in relation to self and body, extends beyond what is understood as mine, to all other beings-in-the-world to whom I can be subject, in ways that reflect the sense of control we have over them as experienced both within our subjectivity and through our subjectification.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre developed his own interpretation of Husserl and his own existentialist philosophy (Sartre, 2003). Whilst he sought to retain Husserl’s concept of the unity between subjective experience and experienced objects, he did so by distinguishing between what he called two ways of “being” (that is, two ways of existing), that he termed the “*For Itself*” and the “*In Itself*” (Sartre, 2003, p. 650). This distinction De Beauvoir would draw heavily upon in her account of ageing. The “for itself” is in a sense Husserl’s “subject pole,” reliant for its existence upon the existence of the “in itself” – the objects of consciousness, without which there would be no consciousness. Sartre writes: “consciousness is a slippery slope on which one cannot take one’s stand without immediately

finding oneself tipped outside onto being-in-itself" (Sartre, 2003, p. 638). The "other," as he puts it, is both the guarantor of the world – its objectivity – and equally the guarantor of the self, which is "as necessary to the very constitution of the self" (Sartre, 2003, p. 257). In short, like Husserl, Sartre's existentialism sees a necessary unity between consciousness and the objects of which one (the ego) is conscious, namely, phenomena. Only within this synthetic totality (p. 194), Sartre sees there to be knowledge of the world. Although no ego is realisable without there being an "In Itself" against which to realise itself, the "in-itself" nature of this inevitable exteriority is annihilated once it becomes a conscious object.

How does Sartre approach the question of the body as both subject and object of consciousness? To begin with, he separates two ways of bodily being, one as determined by others' bodies – the body whose composition and construction can be understood as an externality, in the same way that any other body can be constructed and construed, a body revealed in its "being-for-others" (Sartre, 2003, p. 329). The other he terms the body-for-itself, a body that is wholly body and wholly consciousness, "the instrument which I am ... my facticity of being-in-the-midst-of-the-world" (Sartre, 2003, p. 382). This for-itself-body, this cantering instrument, which "nihilates the in-itself which it is and alone transcends the world", is nevertheless "re-apprehended" through the presence of the Other and cast back upon its "in-itselfness" (Sartre, 2003, p. 451). In other words, our bodily being, in its "for-itselfness," its subjectivity, is in Sartre's terms always capable of being de-centred – of being re-apprehended as an externality, by the look. Whilst the look does not transform us into objects, in the sense of becoming non-persons, it imposes the representation of our personhood as an embodied, if not a corporealised one that emphasises our existence as an externality and makes us "self-conscious."

In the final section of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre turns to the third component of human reality, from having and being to doing. Here, Sartre seeks to address what he calls that part of absolute subjectivity whereby the individual is above all else "defined by his [sic] desires," by wanting and by willing freedom (Sartre, 2003, p. 578). Freedom plays a key role in realising Sartre's conception of subjectivity – of being-for-itself. Without freedom human reality has no substance – "we are," Sartre says, "a freedom which chooses, though we do not choose to be free" (Sartre, 2003, p. 506). Even as this freedom does not extend to determining the outcome

of our actions, nor does it offer us any guarantee that by exercising freedom we can overcome the situations we are faced with, the realisation of our facticity, the way of our being-in-the-world is what Sartre calls our freedom (Sartre, 2003, p. 515). But even that realisation that freedom to realise one's being-in-the-world is not unconstrained, our being-for-others puts a constraint upon our freedom. Once apprehended as an Other, Sartre argues that two forms of constraint apply to our subjectivity – our being-for-itself. In the first place, it destabilises our definition of our situation in its for-itselfness becoming, if not instead at least also “an objective form in which I exist as an objective structure”; second, in “being apprehended as the Other-as-object” (Sartre, 2003, p. 546) by others, our being is subjected to our being-with-others in the world.

Sartre goes on to point out that our being apprehended as Other is made possible by attributing freedom to others, freedom to appraise me as Other and thereby free to be othered in turn. Since it is scarcely imaginable that we cannot attribute similar freedoms to others as to ourselves, however, we cannot escape our being-for-others, what we cannot be for-ourselves. This dilemma of freedoms, Sartre frames as the “infinity of unrealisables” that surround us, real existences which, however, cannot be realised by the one who is realised by them. But still a freedom exists – to “reassume it with my freedom, to make of it a structure of my free projects ... [an] unrealisable to be realised” (Sartre, 2003, p. 550). “I do not choose,” he writes, “to be for the Other what I am, but I can try to be for myself what I am for the Other, by choosing myself such as I appear to the Other – i.e. by an elective assumption ... whether in fury, hate, pride, shame, disheartened refusal or joyous demand” (Sartre, 2003, p. 550). Whether by strategies of resistance, reframing or adoption, our freedom to intend in one way or another the attributions of our being-for-others, we remain always free, free to frame our limits and our finitude, living beings always “compelled to decide the meaning of being” (Sartre, 2003, p. 577).

### **Authenticity and Human Reality**

For De Beauvoir and for Sartre, freedom plays a central part in constituting human reality, fleeing that responsibility and the anguish it causes represent “bad faith.” Both Heidegger and Sartre shared a common concern with what

might be called the quality of human reality – of realising our being-for-itself as our being-in-the-world and owning this choice. Failure to accept responsibility for the manner of our being in the world and the individuality or subjectivity that this involves creates the ever-present possibility of instead becoming (or remaining) “inauthentic” subjects – beings-for-others, beings as others, and hence unrealised subjects.<sup>4</sup> Heidegger’s original term for “authentic” was “*eigentlich*” whose roots mean “own”, “inauthentic” echoes its antithesis, “unowned” (Guignon, 2005, p. 86). What Heidegger is referring to as inauthenticity is the extent to which individuals choose as their “reality” ways of being that are practiced by most “others,” by what he terms “*das Mann*” the already existing modes of acting, speaking and thinking into which each individual, from birth, is thrown into.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, authenticity implies acting in ways that are somehow “truer” to one’s own self, acting in accordance with one’s being-for-itself.<sup>6</sup>

Considered in relation to age and agedness, the question of authenticity becomes a central aspect of age’s realisability. But whether it implies being true to one’s “for-itself-ness” irrespective of age, or whether it implies being true to one’s age, irrespective of one’s own self, one’s own interests is debatable. The saying “mutton dressed as lamb”, for example, implies that wearing the clothes of young adults when one is no longer young exemplifies “ageing inauthentically.” But such inauthenticity reflects only a contrast in identity – not between a “true” and a “false” self but between forms of externality (“how I look” versus “how I appear”). Though he accepts the fundamentally social nature of the self – our essential “we-self-ness” – Heidegger insists that a distinctly individual authenticity is nevertheless possible. By confronting one’s “finitude” and by facing and owning one’s individual mortality, he argues that individuals thereby can come to “owning up to what one is becoming” and take responsibility for one’s becoming (Guignon, 2004, p. 134).

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Sartre was quite critical of Heidegger’s terminology, claiming that “the expressions ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ are dubious and insincere ... because of their implicit moral content” (Sartre, 2003, p. 552).

<sup>5</sup> “*Das man*” refers to a generalised human reality, not realised through individual singularity but as part of the collectively construed mode of everyday being, not so much “the man” as the “they.”

<sup>6</sup> For a review of the different ways, “authenticity” has been interpreted, see Guignon (2004).

Although Sartre chides him for introducing a “moral” tone to his analysis, Heidegger is merely acknowledging what might be called the social origins shaping individual human reality alongside the individual agency that equally resides within that reality. Inauthenticity, in everyday life, is the default position that being thrown into the world of others necessitates; it shares in a life shaped by the already existing society. Ageing much like everybody else, therefore, might be deemed to ordinarily lead to ageing inauthentically, ageing as a “they-self” and ageing “normally.” Seeking out and owning an individualised existence for one’s self at any age is a difficult and onerous task, but, so Heidegger claims, a necessary one if the individual is to confront the singularity implied by his or her finitude – and the necessary termination of the possibilities that always surround one’s “own-most and extreme potentiality-of-being” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 252). Without this recognition of finitude, Heidegger argues that there can be no confrontation with the singularity of one’s one and only self, no deliberative agency. Whether age brings about, or somehow facilitates such recognition, or whether, as Heidegger implies, it is an omnipresent potential realised in many ways depends upon one’s views of the contingencies affecting the experience of subjective finitude. At most, one might say that confronting age helps facilitate such recognition.

But, Heidegger asks, is this existential possibility of living authentically in the world merely “a chimerical undertaking,” a “poetising arbitrary construction” of what we wish to be possible (Heidegger, 2010, p. 249). The mere expression of “I statements,” Heidegger points out, is neither indication of a singular, individual human reality nor evidence of an authentic subjectivity. Indeed, what expresses itself most often in such “I statements” is “that self which ... I am not authentically” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 307), the everyday “they-self” that “keeps on saying ‘I most loudly and most frequently because at bottom it is not authentically itself” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 308). To become authentic, says Heidegger, requires a constant “resoluteness” in caring about one’s becoming – by which he means a determined focus upon living ahead, of leading a planned and deliberate life. Still, the question remains of how such resoluteness might be defined, how might it be realised and how might it be tempered (or sharpened) with age?

Moving from past to future, the individual’s “*Dasein*” must sustain itself as a deliberate choice, a becoming that is inevitably anchored in both

its past and its present. Only towards the latter chapters of his book, *Being and Time*, does Heidegger begin to address this “classic” problem of “self-identity” and its bearing upon the authenticity of human reality (*Dasein*).<sup>7</sup> Dreyfus has described this process as one of developing “practical wisdom,” the transformation of a shared intelligibility achieved “by facing the anxiety of death [with] an anticipatory resoluteness and so seeing that his [sic] identity and that of his [sic] culture is ungrounded and could be radically changed” to realise “a fully authentic *Dasein*” (Dreyfus, 2005, p. 151). Another commentator, William Blattner, has put it somewhat differently, focusing upon Heidegger’s framing of authenticity through the being of temporality. It is as if, Blattner suggests, authenticity can be achieved only by confrontation with finiteness, and thus with temporality. Then, it becomes possible to acknowledge “being unable to go forward as who you have been” (Blattner, 2006, p. 161). Rejecting the over-determined self as my-life-that-has-passed, Heidegger calls on the importance of seeing who I have been in terms of who I find myself becoming “in so far as I press forward into my life” (Blattner, 2006, p. 165). Like Sartre’s emphasis upon the realisation of a fundamental freedom, Heidegger’s framing of authenticity is not a matter of being “true” to one’s self, in the sense of being bound to what one was and is, but almost exactly the opposite, of becoming existentially free to “press ahead into who one is to-be” (Blattner, 2006, 165).

This focus on moving forward in the face of finitude reflects Heidegger’s insistence that the persistence of the self, the self-sameness of the subject, arises less from our present being and its ties to our past self but rather through the persistence of “the authentic potentiality-of-being-a-self” into the future (Heidegger, 2010, p. 308). Neither in Sartre nor least of all in Heidegger is there any notion that authenticity is to be found in the saying, “to thine own self be true.” Constancy is not to be found in either hanging on to the past or clinging to the present, but with a constant engagement directing one’s care forward, as an always ever “being-in-the-world.” Does this then mean that the authentic subject is one who

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<sup>7</sup> Heidegger’s term *Dasein* is literally translated into English as “being-there” but is often rendered as “human reality”; it implies a self-aware being – a “being concerned about its very being,” as Heidegger puts it, early on in his book, *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 2010, p. 11).

sticks to what Sartre calls the always “for itself” subject, the existential individual choosing his or her way of becoming – realising his or her potential self against the constant threats of bad faith, by succumbing to the expectations and influences of others (recall Sartre’s notorious comment in that “hell is other people”) Sartre, to? Is there no inter-subjectivity grounding “being-in-the-world,” but rather a necessary shedding of the “we-self” to attain an individual, singular authentic *Dasein*? No shared authenticity, in later life or indeed at any other stage of adult life?

Although the term intersubjective was never used by Heidegger, his concept of the “they-self” approximates it. As Stapleton notes, Heidegger does not see authentic *Dasein* as shedding our “they-ness,” in order to realise at last “some deep inner ‘real’ me” – so much as owning the totality of our “potentiality” for being in the world (Stapleton, 2014, p. 55). This totality is both the world that we have been and are a part of, as well as the unique concern for becoming existentially free to “press ahead into who one is to-be” in the face of one’s finitude. The inter-subjective, social world is part of being in the world, and it is not inauthentic to recognise that. The same might be said of age; it is not inauthentic to identify ourselves as “aged.” At the same time, the inter-subjectivity of *Dasein*’s becoming is a grounding that has, at some point, to be recognised as “without ground”; one cannot simply be held in an already existing world, and whilst our choices may reference the inter-subjectivity of the world, they cannot be its choosing. It is not enough to say, “I am old.”

Sartre, as already noted, does seem to see inter-subjectivity as a shackle from which the subject must free him or herself, in order, in good faith, to realise one’s for-itself being in its wholeness, its freedom to become itself. Although he acknowledges the possibility of the experience of sharing in others’ subjectivities – of seeming to realise a sense of “we-ness,” of being and acting as a “We-subject” – such experiences he concludes are “purely subjective impressions which engage only me” (Sartre, 2003, p. 448). Otherwise, we can become at most realised as “us-objects,” beings for others, but any such collective subjectivities are transitory, impressionistic and fundamentally “unreal.” “It is useless” he concludes, “to seek to get out of this dilemma: one must either transcend the Other or allow oneself to be transcended by him [sic]” (Sartre, 2003, p. 451). Whilst we cannot exist as monads, without our also being for others and with others, at the point of action, he claims, we are alone, subjects who must act and must act

alone. Attempts have been made to reconstrue Heidegger's *Dasein* as "an inherent form of intersubjectivity" whose authenticity is "always formed within a pre-existing community" (Stroh, 2015, p. 243). Sartre's own existentialist writings seem to exclude this possibility. Bad faith, inauthenticity is presaged upon the denial of such unrealisability – or the feeling from the fact that this is so. Does this mean that one can live an authentic life in later life, but that one cannot age authentically?

### Ageing Authentically: A Chimerical Undertaking?

Where does this debate take us? Faced with the prospect of our ageing being only ever internalised as an object position, of age being always an inescapable externality, does an existential phenomenology offer any way of ageing authentically, of becoming old "for myself," not for, with and through others? For this to be possible, it is necessary first to refute both De Beauvoir and Sartre's individualistic positions and, second, to reinterpret Heidegger – or otherwise abandon the phenomenological perspective altogether and seek instead another route – whether through "they-concepts" like active, healthy, normal or productive ageing.<sup>8</sup> Realised more by our being for others than through whatever plans and projects with which we direct our lives, can there be any authenticity to our own ageing that is more than acquiescing to becoming an external "they-self" and becoming subjectified as being-old-for-others?

Whilst De Beauvoir's position is to exclude the possibility of any "realisable" subject position in later life, both Sartre and Heidegger's writings suggest that one's life in later life can be owned as a subject position, can, in short, be an authentic way of being ourselves through the potential inter-subjectivity that constitutes our being, that lays the foundation for our being-in-the-world, as embodied persons, and of our becoming, in Sartre's terms, a self "for-itself." That people interiorise the externality of their aging is not in doubt, nor that such interiorisation can, to a greater

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<sup>8</sup> In referring to these terms as "they" concepts, I mean that any collective exhortations or representations of how to age would, within the existentialist tradition, never be examples of resolute deliberate caring – that is of being authentic in one's ageing – but rather be inauthentic, in the sense of becoming other than one's own person – following *Das Man*, as Heidegger might put it.

or lesser degree, be both an acquiescence to and resistance to age's "othering." This somewhat reflects Foucault's position, albeit made in another context, on the coexistence of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles over subjectivity, over who we are (Foucault, 2002, p. 331). But whether such struggles can be defined as struggles for authenticity, tasks undertaken "in good faith" seems to Beauvoir, misconceived. So what in the writings of Heidegger or Sartre might suggest such a possibility?

Heidegger's use of the term "authenticity" is a vexed and still contested issue (Henschen, 2012). On the one side are those who view achieving authenticity through the confrontation with one's singular finitude and finally owning the trajectory of one's own life, in distinction from living always within the layers of "they-selves" from which and in which our being-in-the-world emerged (cf. Crowell, 2005). Adopting this position might see ageing as the subjective realisation of one's singularity, akin perhaps to Erikson's view of *integrity*, owning not just one's being but one's having-been, one's life story, both in its being with others, its being for others and, uniquely, its being-for-itself (Erikson, 1985).

Another perspective, however, stresses that "authenticity does not require any deviations from public standards" but rather reflects an exemplary, resolute "we-self" (akin perhaps to Erikson's concept of *generativity*), possessing "the understanding of a competent performer or cultural master" (Henschen, 2012, p. 96). This interpretation has been emphasised by Stroh in his account of Heidegger's conception of authenticity as "a return to community" (Stroh, 2015, p. 243). Stroh claims that the authentic *Dasein* (understood as "human reality") is intrinsically inter-subjective, and each individual life, rather than being apart from others in its interiority, becomes owned, authentic, in acknowledging his or her own humanity. In this case, ageing authentically is owning up to the commonality of human ageing and the inescapable bond between the interiority and exteriority both of our own and of others' being.

Whilst both interpretations acknowledge the inter-subjectivity with and from which *Dasein* constitutes itself, the former emphasises the need to move beyond, whilst the other need to fully realise *Dasein's* "being-with-others." Realising age as part of one's subjectivity, and so ageing "authentically," would seem, *pace* De Beauvoir, at least potentially achievable within the framework of Heidegger's notion of self-ownership and authenticity. How that might be judged – or understood – however

implies an uncertain set of criteria. To age as an authentic subject would seem to valorise the individual's uniqueness in living his or her later life – his or her “factual particularity” (Carman, 2000, p. 21) – or his or her expertise to live well acquired within the intersubjectivities that constitute our being in the world. Acknowledging a long life lived, of course, does not imply acknowledging one's agedness, which may be no more than a shared characteristic, capable of being acknowledged but without any implication for authenticity.

Compared with Heidegger, Sartre's writing offers rather less scope to construct a subject position of ageing-ness that can be achieved in good faith. The inter-subjectivity of human life is, for him, more often seen as limiting the possibilities of existence, of risking one's “for-itself” being submerged by being only for others. What matters to Sartre in his advocacy of avoiding bad faith is the realisation of one's fundamental freedom, no matter what the conditions of one's being-in-the-world, a freedom of being and doing that makes “an outside come [...] to the Other ... historicising itself in the world ... [and] thus historicising the world itself” (Sartre, 2003, p. 542). This does not mean an untrammelled freedom to become anything imaginable; there are limits to freedom which arise as “my situation ceases for the Other to be a situation and becomes an objective form in which I exist as an objective structure .... just as the making an object of my being-for-itself in being-for-others is the limit of my being” (Sartre, 2003, p. 546). In the present context, if part of becoming old is becoming increasingly a “being-for-others,” such becoming would seem to exclude the possibility of aging as “for-itself” subject, that is of ageing authentically, in good faith. Simply denying the objective situation of one's ageing is bad faith but avoiding or refusing to be characterised by age – to be objectified by one's oldness, might represent to Sartre, a kind of freedom, enabling against the odds for a person to live long in good faith. Being-old-for-others can, in this sense, be transformed, by giving it, in Sartre's words, “a meaning which my freedom confers” and thus “choosing myself such as I appear to the Other” (Sartre, 2003, p. 550). The inter-subjectivity of our lives is a given; we cannot not be both a body and a self “for others.” But, we do not need to be subjectified by such externalities. For both Heidegger and Sartre, living amongst others poses an ever-present risk of acquiescing to becoming and remaining an other-for-others. In the present context, this means another old person, a subject of age, and of

ageing/existing in bad faith. As Mitova has noted, the limitations of the “for-itself” ageing body and the limitations posed – by the kindness and cruelty of others toward it – make acting on one’s ownership a task that can only grow more challenging with age (Mitova, 2012).

### Conclusions: The Possibility of Owning Age

For De Beauvoir, the matter seemed quite simple. Ageing and agedness can only be realised as aspects of our being for others. Our ageing is enmeshed within the processes of our being and becoming even more, our exterior. Ageing happens, not as an internal process of the subject, but through the outside of our being. Ageing for her can only ever be the object pole framed, first by others and, increasingly, by the Other within us, within our own consciousness of being-for-others. We cannot own our age: it cannot be central to our subjectivity, our “for-itself” ness. In short, we do not “do” age and we cannot age authentically. The task, and for De Beauvoir, there was (and arguably still is) an important task to challenge the detrimental othering of society, to make the position of later life (the they-selves of ageing) less limited and less onerous. This can be achieved, not by acting and ageing authentically and deliberately, as if that were some realisable project, but by challenging and resisting as far as possible the imposition upon our being (our we-selves) of a “they-self” of social agedness. Such strategies, however, do not thereby realise age as an authentic subjectivity; they do work on the “they-self” – our own and/or society’s. For our “I self,” however, there can be only an acceptance of age’s fundamental unrealisability.

For Sartre and Heidegger, matters were a little less one-sided. For Heidegger, particularly, his writings on authenticity and human being – and certainly several interpretations of them – would seem to include the possibility of our owning our own ageing (or put otherwise, our long-livedness). Different interpretations can be given of how this might be, either as potential exemplary ways of ageing well and wisely or as demonstrating continuing personal resolve to overcome the “thrown-ness” of being aged in the world. The difficulty presented by ageing for Sartre, as for De Beauvoir, is the value placed on freedom, the recognition of choice and the sense of direction that was so important in both their lives and the extent to which the “externality” of ageing limits those opportunities.

Despite Sartre's acknowledgement of the social origins of the self, the otherness of society remains ever-present as a threat, a threat posed by the Look, of becoming an object of the Other. Age is not a part of one's becoming having and doing, of realising the subjectivity of one's "for-itself"ness of being, but remains "something that happens," the accumulation of unintended experiences that risk our becoming more a body "for others," and less able to realise the projects of our "for-itself" (Mitova, 2012).

Heidegger's greater focus upon temporality brings different considerations into play, particularly the experience of finitude and the "authentic being-toward-death" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 292). The conscious existence of death is not strictly speaking an "I experience" but rather a consciousness of its potential, or as Heidegger puts it "the possibility of the impossibility of existence ... as the absolute nothingness of *Dasein*" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 293). Lost in the they-ness of the everyday, this understanding of "being-toward-death" "brings *Dasein* back to its ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self ... to one's ownmost potentiality" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 293). Heidegger wrote this when he was in his late thirties – well ahead of a life that would continue for another half-century – and it is a moot point whether he saw age or ageing play any role in furthering this awareness of the possibility of the impossibility of existence or whether such awareness is merely a part of being from the start "thrown and abandoned to the world" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 387). The awareness of time, of before and now and when, he refers to as "datability," which he sees forming a necessary part of being in the world, a datability that has as its reference our always existing in and through time.

This can be interpreted as a marker toward the authenticity of age, or perhaps more accurately, a marker of living authentically as much in later as in earlier adult life. The failure, as Heidegger puts it, to "own" time, to never have enough time, to externalise time as events and accidents, is characteristic of the irresolute, inauthentic person at any age. By contrast, having time, owning time and sharing the time that there is, characterise the authentic person, the person whose awareness of time is also awareness of his or her own time existing also and always within public time. Whether one can say that the failure to own time to locate one's being in the world with the public time of the world is reflected in denying one's agedness, denying one's finitude and failing to acknowledge one's having been – one's past – is itself a mark of inauthentic ageing is perhaps stretching Heidegger too far. Still, it is difficult to ignore its resonance with what Erikson would

later confer on old age, the sense of wholeness or integrity – the sense of ownership of a life long lived, where “all human integrity stands or falls with the one style of integrity of which one partakes” (Erikson, 1985, p. 66).

Here lies the paradox between the externality of age, marked by the object-likeness of the ageing/aged self and its interiority, both its shared understanding of public time and the extent to which human potentiality, human possibility coexists with its impossibility, its nihilation not by and through the Other, but as part of a common, temporally bound way of being in the world. Whether one chooses the existentialism of Heidegger or Sartre may be as much as anything a function of temperament and the world into which our own *Dasein* has been thrown. Sartre may well have been right in arguing that, within the exterior constraints of the world in which we are formed, still we are free to make of that exterior an exterior of our own choosing. Exactly how free we are and how far age limits that freedom remain perhaps less a problem than part of the mystery that lies buried in the heart of our own singular ageing. How far one pursues a “De Beauvoir” strategy of mitigating the othering effects of society whilst accepting the unrealisability of an ageing subjectivity and how far one adopts a “Sartrean” approach of personal resolution not to be aged but to acknowledge one’s age may be a matter of personal choice, which cannot be decided by any empirical inquiry. Unlike the moral imperatives implicit in Erikson’s lifelong “developmentalist” or in Tornstam’s “gero-transcendence” approaches to ageing, that there are authentic (correct) ways of developing in and through later life (Tornstam, 2005), Sartre and De Beauvoir would see such models as offering only exterior approaches to age owned essentially by others and adopted at best through a “they-self” compliance. But they do, in their different ways, provide a means of engaging with the mystery of age, in ways that are reflected perhaps as much in their lives as in their writings. As Heidegger might put it, our finitude may tell us we always have choices but it does not – and cannot – tell us how to choose.

### **Corresponding Author**

*Chris Gilleard*, Division of Psychiatry, Faculty of Brain Sciences, University College London. 6th Floor, Maple House, 149 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 7NF, UK. Email: c.gilleard@ucl.ac.uk

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