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Others in My Aging (Confronting de Beauvoir, Malabou, and Heidegger to Make Sense of Aging)

Abstract: After a critical analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s and Catherine Malabou’s accounts of aging, the paper offers an alternative to them. In contrast to de Beauvoir and Malabou, it explores the actual share of other beings, both human and non-human, in one’s aging. The paper employs the Heideggerian ontological framework and his concepts of “bodying” and gesture to argue that changes induced by others do not damage or contaminate one’s being but allow the disclosure of someone’s particularity in its undefinable character.

Keywords: aging, body, other, Heidegger, de Beauvoir, Malabou

Introduction

As Chris Gilleard aptly observes, while academic philosophers have talked much about death, they have had much less to say about aging.¹ Aging has attracted less philosophical attention despite our dealing with it at least as much as we deal with death. As a matter of fact, in our direct everyday experience, we seem occupied with aging—both of ourselves and others—even more often than with death (again, both of ourselves and others). By bringing attention to this fact, I do not mean to challenge the significance of our mortality but merely to point to the negligence of aging by philosophy.

¹ See C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness: Revisiting Simone de Beauvoir’s Old Age,” *Gerontologist* 62 [2] (2022), doi: 10.1093/geront/gnab034, p. 286; M. Bavidge, “Feeling One’s Age: A Phenomenology of Aging,” [in:] *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Aging*, G. Scarre (ed.), London 2016, p. 207.

Even more neglected is the role of other beings (both human and non-human) in someone's aging. This neglect can be seen in two rare cases of philosophical engagements with aging, that is in Simone de Beauvoir's and Catherine Malabou's investigations. They both offer insightful and valid, to some extent provocative, observations regarding aging, which, interestingly, tilt in two different directions. De Beauvoir focuses on the semblance of the significance of changes classified as aging, while Malabou points to the radicality of transformation they bring to the given being. Juxtaposing their position, however, will reveal that they both diminish, quite unexpectedly and similarly, the importance of participation of other beings in changes, including those of physical nature that we refer to as "aging."

My paper aims not only to indicate this lacuna concerning the role of others in our aging but also to explore it and shed new light on the role of others in this process. To properly approach this omission, it would be advisable to address four inextricably linked questions: What is aging? What is the source of it? Can someone be ever known? Can someone's being be defined?

To answer them, I will use phenomenology, drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger. I will do so, although Heidegger does not have much to say about aging or, more broadly, about any changes in the individual human being. On the contrary, he remains strikingly silent about the transformation of *Dasein* (being there) as a particular human being. Yet, his remarks on the phenomenon of "boding" and how the meaning of bodily gestures emerges to us when combined with the complex structure of disclosing our being (being ourselves) open a way to explore the share which others have in our aging as an alternative to those of both de Beauvoir and Malabou, who differently use phenomenology in their investigations.

My main argument will be then that, first, in considering aging, we need to consider that at least some of the observable changes we identify with this phenomenon result from the impact of other beings (e.g., stress caused by them, pregnancy, environmental factors), and, second, that through these changes the ownmost, the being of the given person, can be disclosed. The paradoxical nature of this disclosure, rooted in the tension between otherness and mineness, reveals the uncanny, to speak in Heideggerian terms, character of the being.

I will develop this argument in the following order. In the first and second parts of the paper, I reconstruct de Beauvoir's and Malabou's views on aging. In the third part, I critically review their positions. In the last part, I offer an alternative account of aging with a focus on the participation of other beings in the (sense of) changes that we identify with aging, taking advantage of the categories laid out by Heidegger's ontology.

De Beauvoir and the Other's Gaze

Simone de Beauvoir's work on aging, *La vieillesse* (1970; transl. to English as *Old Age* in the UK and as *The Coming of Age* in the US, 1972), suffered scholarly

neglect, especially when compared to *The Second Sex*.² This rather lengthy book (585 pages in the English version) is divided into two parts. The first reviews the biological, anthropological, historical, and sociological factors that decide whether someone appears old. The philosophical core of the book is then presented at the beginning of its second half, which explores the “subjective” or (“interior”) point of view on aging and contrasts it with the “objective” (or “exterior”) perspective discussed in part one. That is to say, the critical thing is the tension between these two. Martha C. Nussbaum summarizes this clash: “At one level one may feel young within, but seeing the sudden scorn of society, one experiences a dramatic subjective shift, since that being-seen is also a part of who one subjectively is.”³

A good illustration of this tension is the situation described by de Beauvoir. She was in the company of Sartre when one of his friends came into the hotel dining room and said he had just met another of their friends sitting with an old lady. That “old lady” appeared to be a friend of de Beauvoir and Sartre. However, they had never considered her an “old lady.” De Beauvoir and Sartre “were utterly taken aback” by such a comment. On the one hand, they had to accept it, but on the other, as de Beauvoir claims, “an alien eye had transformed [de Beauvoir’s friend] into another being.”⁴

It is worth highlighting this comment because it aptly catches de Beauvoir’s views on aging and can be directly juxtaposed with Malabou’s ideas on this subject. The latter will literally think of an old person as becoming another being, while in de Beauvoir’s account, this another being is a kind of shadow that starts to accompany us, concealing our authentic being.

Hence, de Beauvoir offers two accounts of aging and its source. On the one hand, old age is identified as a disadvantageous and sudden change related to biological mechanisms. It is negative because it refers to the deterioration or decrease of capacities. For instance, while getting older, athletes cannot perform as they used to when they were younger. Similarly, women at a certain age are not as fertile as they were in their twenties.⁵ This unfavorable alteration, de Beauvoir suggests, appears always suddenly—it comes out of the blue to us. Although it does not happen momentarily in our body-in-itself, it is abrupt and rapid for our being-for-itself.

De Beauvoir observes that it is common to scarcely recognize the people you have known for years but have not seen in a long while. You are puzzled about how they have changed, and you become momentarily aware that they are probably equally

² With certain notable exceptions: C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness”; M. McLennan, “Beauvoir’s Concept of ‘Decline,’” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 6 [3] (2020), pp. 1–17, doi: 10.5206/fpq/2020.3.7929; or texts gathered in the volume edited by Silvia Stoller: *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Age Gender, Ethics, and Time*, S. Stoller (ed.), Berlin 2014.

³ M. Nussbaum, S. Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations about Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, and Regret*, New York 2017, p. 27.

⁴ S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, transl. P. O’Brain, New York 1972, p. 289 (emphasis mine—M.H.-L.).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 17–18; M. McLennan, “Beauvoir’s Concept of ‘Decline,’” pp. 5–6.

surprised to see how you have changed too.⁶ De Beauvoir claims that this astonishment is the very matter of the famous passage from Marcel's Proust *Time Regained* when the main protagonist becomes aware, on the one hand, of how much time has changed all the people he used to know, but on the other hand, he can hardly overcome the impression that all of these changes constitute merely costumes the people are wearing for a fancy dress party. Or, maybe, he finds it extremely hard to accept that those people did have change—they have aged.⁷

This dissent lies at the heart of the second account of aging proposed by de Beauvoir. In accordance with it, our old age is revealed to us when we become aware that others perceive us as old even though we can still feel young or ageless.⁸ This second perspective on aging could be actually labeled “internalized” instead of “interior.”⁹ It is so because it results from the reluctant acceptance that we got old because other people perceive us this way. In other words, other people see me as old; consequently, I start to see and understand myself as old.

This two-stage nature of becoming self-aware of our old age is rooted in de Beauvoir's reading of “being-in-the-world” (which is the title of the second part of her book) as inspired by Sartre (and not Heidegger). According to it, being-in-the-world consists in that we are always related, or exposed, to other people or to how they look at us. The way other people see me co-constitutes my being-for-itself.¹⁰ In this sense, the Sartrean concept of the “look” (or gaze) (*le regard*) underlies de Beauvoir's account of aging—it is reflective self-consciousness of entering a particular stage as mediated by the assessment made by others, which is hard for us to accept.

The above thesis is the single thought (in the Heideggerian sense) that reverberates throughout the second half of *The Coming of Age*, which is saturated with a great number of examples, social anecdotes, passages from literary works, or statements from well-known figures that are supposed to illustrate it. They all indicate that, at some point, we start to be seen by others as old due to the “objective” factors—e.g., gray hair, wrinkles, our age and as a result, we start to see ourselves in this way, which, however, arouses strong opposition from us.

The crux of de Beauvoir's ontological perspective on aging is the intrinsic “otherness and unrealizability of age” in our self-understanding.¹¹ De Beauvoir repeatedly claims that, first, if others had not drawn my atten-

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, pp. 293–294.

⁹ The complex nature of it is revealed already in the fact that de Beauvoir did not name the second part of her book simply “Old Age Seen from Within,” as one might expect on the basis of the title of the first half (“Old Age Seen from Without”) but “Being-in-the-World.”

¹⁰ C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness,” p. 287; L. Dolezal, “Reconsidering the Look in Sartre's, ‘Being and Nothingness,’” *Sartre Studies International* 18 [1] (2012), pp. 10–11.

¹¹ C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness,” p. 287.

tion to the fact that I aged, I would (probably) not have noticed it, and second, that even when others are convinced that I am old, I usually do not feel this way.

Such a view may be alien to many people who often feel old because their body can no longer do what it used to do, for instance, as in the case of athletes mentioned by de Beauvoir. The philosopher, however, does not seem to challenge the significance of such a feeling. Instead, she focuses on the alternative experience when one can still feel young (probably when changes in their body do not impact their everyday living) or even ageless as long as other people do not challenge such a view. Moreover, even when they reluctantly acknowledge that they have “objectively” aged (as persuaded by other people), they do not believe this is not the actual them, but some others within them.

De Beauvoir unpacks this experience, saying: “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.”¹² This other appears then to be a kind of *doppelgänger* (born out of the look of other people) that coexists with me, from whom I still can discern the real me. It may also be claimed that the first is a kind of “mask,” which, on the one hand, hides our flesh and, on the other hand, can never be thrown off (like a shadow).¹³ Such a fundamental rupture (or doubling) is unavoidable on the ground of Sartrean-de Beauvoiran existential ontology since “being-for-others” is a necessary condition for our “being-for ourselves.” Being seen is not optional or secondary to consciousness but is an inherent part of the structure of reflective awareness.¹⁴

A good way to capture de Beauvoir’s view is that with aging, we deal with what we might call double otherness. On the one hand, other people (may try to) make me realize that I have (objectively) aged, while on the other hand, my aging as such (subjectively) is unrealizable for me; it is only my strange twin—that is the other (originating from these others)—that starts (unawares and unwantedly) to inhabit (with) me, which can be found to be old.

It seems that de Beauvoir’s account of aging is full of otherness. And yet, I shall argue, there is another kind of others’ share in my aging that she undermines—a different one from the primarily epistemic. Before I elaborate on what type of otherness appears to be missing in de Beauvoir, I would like to outline Malabou’s concept of aging to indicate similarities between these two French philosophers. This should facilitate capturing the backdrop against which I shall present an alternative way of thinking about otherness in my aging.

Malabou and Becoming the Real Other

While Simone de Beauvoir belongs to the existentialist tradition, Catherine Malabou’s works are rooted in deconstruction, neuroscience, and psychoanalysis.

¹² S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 284.

¹³ S. Heinämaa, “Transformations of Old Age Selfhood, Normativity, and Time,” [in:] *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Age Gender, Ethics, and Time*, p. 173.

¹⁴ C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness,” p. 288; L. Dolezal, “Reconsidering the Look in Sartre’s, ‘Being and Nothingness,’” p. 10.

Yet Malabou, like de Beauvoir, claims to adopt a phenomenological orientation in her exploration of aging as an instance of what she calls “destructive plasticity” and develops it in her book *Ontology of Accident*.¹⁵

The opposition between changes following “the usual order of things” and “accidents” such as traumas, catastrophes, and injuries is at the heart of her theory. According to Malabou, these changes fall under two contradictory schemas: the continuity schema and the event schema.¹⁶ In the first, “lives run their course like rivers,” and all changes that appear belong to the “almost logical process of fulfillment.” Malabou does not explain the fulfillment of what exactly this would be. We may assume that, somewhat against her emphasis on the need to revisit beings as absolutely dynamic structures, she implies here that there is some essence that each being is implementing in the span of its existence, but we will return to this inconsistency later in the paper.

So, while Malabou acknowledges that a “regular” course of life also includes “vagaries and difficulties,” she claims that they are absolutely different from detrimental accidents. The latter are entirely unexpected, and their negative magnitude is incomparable to the typical troubles that human beings face. Consequently, transformations understood according to the two schemes are entirely unlike: the first are mild and gradual, and the second are rapid and abrupt.

Malabou claims that it is plausible to distinguish between “usual” changes which reinforce one’s identity and severe “accidental” changes which “swipe away” the previous identity in lieu of a completely new identity appearing in its place. However, she does not unpack the sense in which “regular” changes “reinforce” one’s identity, except for saying that they can “caricature” or “fix it.”¹⁷ She is interested in “the ruptures of existence” or “deep cuts to biographies.” These breaks are so radical that there are no links to the rest of the preceding identity, and thus it can be claimed that some new being occurs.¹⁸

The possibility of undergoing such changes is the ground of destructive plasticity. That latter consists in that annihilation, loss, and disintegration may be recognized as the beginning of the formation of the new being within the boundaries of the antecedent one. In this sense, destruction can be formative, but this sculpting is not necessarily positive.¹⁹

According to Malabou, old age can be understood as a kind of destructive plasticity. Malabou argues that “even in the most peaceful aging, there will always be an accidental, catastrophic dimension.”²⁰ She argues that we usually do not really notice those around us becoming old—“we notice a few wrinkles, a few sags, a few lapses. But even so, there’s always one fine day when we no longer say ‘he or she

¹⁵ C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, transl. C. Shread, Malden 2013, p. 6.

¹⁶ J. Palmer, “Catherine Malabou, ‘The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity’ [review],” *Oxford Literary Review* 36 [1] (2014), doi: 10.3366/olr.2014.0092, p. 142.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident*, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 3–4.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

is aging' but rather 'he's old, she's old,' he or she has metamorphosized into an old person like in some tragic version of a childhood fairy tale."²¹

To confirm the validity of her insight that all of us, sooner or later, will be turned into old people, and that this transformation will turn out to be quite unexpected and puzzling—Malabou, just like de Beauvoir, refers to the already mentioned famous scene of the ball from the Proust's novel. However, she reads it differently than de Beauvoir, shifting the burden from becoming aware of being old to just becoming old. More precisely, Malabou finds in Proust reaffirmation that we may experience older people being transformed into entirely different people from the ones we used to know.²² In this sense aging (or becoming an older person) is the most common event of destructive plasticity that happens to everyone.

Summing up, Malabou points out changes (among which she locates aging) pertaining so deeply that due to them, some person is not only "modified" but "becomes someone else."²³ It is then not the eye of the viewer that is the source of otherness in aging, nor is it limited to the strange twin that starts to coexist with the original subject (as it was in de Beauvoir), but this otherness finds its embodiment in the utterly new being that eliminates the former one and takes its place.

In holding so, Malabou encourages us to recognize changes that beings undergo in the course of our life to be real (not only apparent as de Beauvoir holds) and serious, or literally substantial—that is pertaining to the changes in our substance. According to Malabou, there is no substance prone to far-reaching mutation.²⁴ This claim starkly contrasts with the traditional account in which the substance warrants the identity of the given being. Malabou, in turn, points to the capacity to be completely transformed as to the primordial feature of the substance. By this token, the source of aging is definitely inherent to the given being, even though the mechanism underlying it is not clearly identified by science (medicine, neuropsychology, etc.).

From a philosophical point of view, however, what seems to be the most ambiguous and vague in Malabou's stance is the lack of clarity in explaining what allows us to connect the "previous" and the "transformed" being. Is it their physical continuity? Malabou does not offer an answer to that.

She neither explains how we can tell nor know what qualifies as a mild change and what constitutes a cut in someone's being. The very possibility to assess these changes assumes that we know entirely, to the core, someone, and we are able to define their essence—somewhat against Malabou's call to cease recognizing the substance as the ground for identity.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 42.

²² Ibidem, pp. 52–53.

²³ See C. Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, transl. S. Miller, New York 2012, p. xi; 15; M. McLennan, "Beauvoir's Concept of 'Decline,'" pp. 11–12.

²⁴ Malabou also underscores her departure from the traditional metaphysical stance by referring to her views as to the "ontology of accident." In so doing, she plays with the ambiguity of the word "accident," which, on the one hand, is a synonym for the unexpected event, on the other, names the features of the substance that are the subject of change. Malabou merges these two meanings to revisit the notion of the substance.

This claim probably will become better justified when juxtaposed with de Beauvoir's views, which will not be that different from Malabou's. Bringing them together will also facilitate sketching an alternative way of thinking about aging: the one which will both embrace the sense of still being oneself and the significance of changes that one may undergo and, moreover, will be less hermetic in conceptualizing these changes by acknowledging the share that other beings have in them.

Otherness and Mineness in Aging

Although de Beauvoir's and Malabou's concepts of aging might appear to be quite opposite at first glance—one is focused on the other's look, making us aware that we got old, the second on turning into the other being when one arrives at old age—they are both concerned with being old rather than getting older or coming of age. De Beauvoir's and Malabou's attention is focused on the point when someone is (already) old (even if this assessment is as arbitrary as de Beauvoir's) and not on the process which leads to such a moment. For both philosophers, the occurrence of old age is found to be sudden. It is not gradual but precipitous.²⁵

Yet de Beauvoir holds that modifications observable for others in me need not have anything to do with me being still me. They are only important because they interfere with others making sense of me. We need not genuinely embrace them. "Can I have become a different being while still remain myself?"²⁶ No, she claims.²⁷

In doing so, however, she seems to conflate the transcendental (ontological) sense of being yourself with the empirical (ontic) bundle of psychological structures or properties that form personality.²⁸ Moreover, de Beauvoir appears to identify the younger (personality) with the "default myself"; that is when we have grown up but are still young.²⁹

Malabou, quite surprisingly, adopts a similar line of reasoning. She also believes that there is a kind of "default myself" when all our capacities gain their most complete degree.³⁰ Malabou builds on the metaphor of flight³¹ to talk about people reaching "cruising altitude" in their lives. This is the peak point of ourselves—our fullness. Its loss results in our no longer being who we used to be. As a result of changes, she argues, a new being occurs.

²⁵ C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident*, p. 42 on the finality of the stage of old age regardless of how long one has yet to live.

²⁶ S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 283.

²⁷ See S. Heinämaa, "Transformations of Old Age: Selfhood, Normativity, and Time," p. 174.

²⁸ M. McLennan, "Beauvoir's Concept of 'Decline'," p. 8.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 8, 10–11; see L. Fisher, "The Other Without and the Other Within: The Alterity of Aging and the Aged in Beauvoir's 'The Coming of Age,'" [in:] *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age Gender, Ethics, and Time*, pp. 111, 118.

³⁰ A relatively uncritical idealization of this period is probably why Nussbaum is so critical of de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse*. She writes that the book is "among the most preposterous famous works of philosophy" that Nussbaum has ever encountered. It is even "worse than preposterous." M. Nussbaum, S. Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully*, pp. 27–28; see M. McLennan, "Beauvoir's Concept of 'Decline,'" p. 1.

³¹ C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident*, p. 41.

Malabou also denies that a being can become different yet still be itself. This, however, calls for identical criticism as in the case of de Beauvoir, namely to point out that she, in an unjustified and misleading way, identifies the sense of being ourselves with the certain stage or configuration of our psychological and physical properties.³²

I find such a way of discussing aging unhelpful as an aging person. Here I am, a healthy woman in her mid-thirties, mother of two. I feel different compared to how I felt ten years ago. I am not as engaged and passionate as I used to be. Instead, I have become more and more aloof. But I am not sure if this is necessarily a negative change. If I were to choose, I am not entirely convinced that I would like to regain the former capacity to be excited at the expense of being distant. But maybe I would? Either way, this change is significant to me, like the fact that I get tired more easily.

And yet, I feel that I am myself to the same extent as I have always felt. I would not say that I used to be more myself. Because when would it be? When I was a child, a teenager, or in my twenties? No, the sense of mineness of my being comprises all this time and all these far-reaching changes. The latter also includes those physical—my skin, my posture, my organs, my physical fitness. I know that I look different, and those changes cannot be seen as growth. But are they necessarily a decline or loss of mineness—the sense of being me, no one else? No.

Importantly, I can see that my friends have changed too; they are different now, and these are not mere appearances. At the same time, I have a strong sense that they are still themselves, these particular people, and no one else. This ambiguity is unsettling. I have to navigate, or switch, between these two equally important sides of my experience—acknowledging the changes my friends underwent and recognizing their undeniable particularity.

But what is even more wonderous is that I have an unyielding impression that all these changes, which catch my attention, run to other beings that changed, or affected, the people I know, or at least I think I know. It is an unshakable feeling that behind all those changes there are some other beings that impacted my friends.

To illustrate it, I can contrast the already recalled scene of the party from Proust's *Time Regained* with my own experience of my high school reunion. Over a dozen years after graduation, we can meet all together. With some of the people I see each other quite frequently as they are my close friends; with some, it is the first time in years that I have had a chance to talk to. Despite this difference, I can see that they (or actually we) all have aged. No, it is not that we have turned gray and become elderly people. The changes are mild, as Malabou would probably assess it. If I were staring at all the faces, I could spot small wrinkles on the foreheads and around the lips, maybe dark circles under the eyes, and later, I would notice slightly drooping shoulders. But this is not what I see. What I see are

³² This becomes especially visible when she omits the fact that despite Marguerite Duras describes herself in *The Lover* precisely as an “aged girl,” a woman aged by accident, too soon, between 18 and 25, she still finds her to be herself, somewhat against all the visible changes (see C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident*, p. 56).

their life struggles. I cannot resist the impression that all their personal and professional failures and successes are embodied in how they have changed—and the latter are not less weighty than the first. Those changes, more importantly, did not happen in a vacuum. They are effects of dealings with other beings.

In Proust, the narrator could not fight the feeling that he came to the dress, not a regular party. I, in turn, cannot help but see in my high school friends and colleagues their difficult divorces, relatively early death of their parents, breakdowns in the course of their professional or romantic relationships, as well as raising children and holding prestigious positions, which while giving incredible satisfaction, also leave traces due to involvement, stress, anxiety, excitement, and effort related to them.

Of some people, I know what (both negative and positive) they went through; of some, I do not, and I start to wonder—what happened to them? Who or what affected them that they were changed this way? But maybe I am wrong. Perhaps this is simply the natural order of things that certain qualities of our bodies and faces change. But, downplaying the factors that could affect the process of aging seems to oversimplify this phenomenon. For instance, one of my colleagues became a professional sailor, traveling around the globe. What is so conspicuous about his look is that sun and wind exposure changed (or aged) his face in a different way than in the case of the rest of us, staying inside buildings daily. This example, I believe, proves illustrative of how posthuman factors impacted his aging.

My point is that other beings contribute to our aging, *not* only epistemologically, making us aware that we aged as de Beauvoir claimed, but they actually contribute to our aging. It is not just anonymous and undefined “life that has happened” to us that we aged, as she cites Louis Aragon.³³ This life consisted of interactions with other beings that affected us. These are our husbands, wives, bosses, siblings, children, parents, customers, friends, students, and many others who were a source of my stress, disappointments, sorrows, happiness, anxiety, comfort, and pride that “sedimented” in me.³⁴

It is not then just the gaze of other people (the way they see me) that makes us old. They actually make us old by changing us. In particular, the participation of other beings in our traumas, which impact us so heavily and contribute to our aging, should be underlined. Except for autoimmune illnesses, the etiology of which

³³ S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 283.

³⁴ This phrase clearly alludes to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theory of sedimentation, but the actual resemblance between it and my proposal is rather low. Merleau-Ponty places great emphasis on the past, claiming that everything we have ever perceived, thought or done remains an implicit dimension in our present life. Even if we cannot remember our past perceptions, our previous thoughts, or actions we once undertook at some point in time, there is no doubt about the fact that these perceptions, thoughts and actions belonged individually to us and still influence our present life (S. Stoller, *We in the Other, and the Child in Us: The Intersection of Time in Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty*, p. 200).

My account, in turn, points shifts the burden on the chiasm of the otherness and mineness, indicating that these are *others* that affected *us*, and that spotting the changes inflicted by them is the moment of (someone’s) being’s disclosure. Furthermore, “me” is not identified here as the set of features, but understood as mineness in accordance with the Heideggerian framework.

is still largely unknown, all tragedies in our lives are somehow related to or caused by other beings, intentionally or not. Malabou highlights that they may occur without reason, even if that would be a small number of cases. But maybe even in the latter, we are just incapable of identifying the cause of the transformation. Still, most traumas are induced by significant villains in our lives: abusive spouses, toxic supervisors, hit-and-run drivers, and illnesses attacking our dearest and nearest.

The critical difference between Malabou's stance and mine, however, lies not in that she distinguishes between changes resulting from the "vagaries of life" and traumas, undermining the others' share in both kinds of changes. Most of all, unlike Malabou, I argue that changes do not transform a being into another being but can reveal its uncanny particularity (which cannot be, however, conflated with any kind of "personality"). That is to say, changes (even those radical) induced by other beings can disclose the "proximally and for the most part" withdrawn being of a given being because they draw attention to them as those who underwent changes (or simply aged).

To elaborate on the paradoxical nature of this disclosure—revealing oneness through modifications caused by others—I shall turn to Heidegger. Quite unexpectedly, his ontology might help make sense of such changes. His account of the phenomenon of gesture will be of great importance.

Making Sense of Others' Impact With Heidegger

Before I look at Heidegger's remarks on gestures, it is worth mentioning that his ontology played some role for both de Beauvoir and Malabou. In the case of the first, Heidegger's philosophy sets the very framework for exploring the being of human beings. While mediated by Sartre's rereading of it, such categories as "being-in-the-world" evidently point to being inspired by Heidegger.

In Malabou, the situation is slightly more complicated. In *Ontology of Accident*, we find no references to the author of *Being and Time* despite her being a Heidegger scholar. Malabou has written a book on thinking change by Heidegger (*The Heidegger Change: On the Fantastic in Philosophy*). The explanation why Heidegger is absent in her book on destructive plasticity lies probably in the fact that he was focused on the shifts in the understanding of the metaphysical status of human beings throughout the various epochs of history, in the sense of being a historical construct (as a rational animal, subject, etc.) and not as individual beings (persons). As a matter of fact, as I tried to clarify elsewhere,³⁵ he was surprisingly silent about changes in individual human beings.

Yet, as I shall argue, Heidegger's account of gestures might be stretched to reexamine the sense of changes we refer to as aging, acknowledging their bodily

³⁵ M. Hoły-Luczaj, "Shapeability—Aristotle on Poiein-Paschein and the Other Dimension of Being in Heidegger," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 41 [1] (2022), pp. 37–48, doi: 10.1080/02580136.2021.2025326.

nature.³⁶ Importantly, Heidegger's understanding of gestures is grounded in the core of his philosophy, namely the "ontological difference" between being and beings. For Heidegger, being, when emerging from behind a being (as different in kind from it), discloses what belongs uniquely to a given being. Heidegger's conceptualization of being is inherently linked with the semantics of the adjective *eigen*, which refers to "own," "proper," and "particular." From *eigen* derives also *eigenste* ("own-most") and *Eigentlichkeit* ("authenticity" or "ownness"), as well *er-eignen* ("to appropriate," "to make one's own") and *Er-eignis* ("the event," or "the event of appropriation"). Seeing how these words interrelate allows us to say that being in Heidegger involves disclosing the own-most of beings. Such an account of being is also confirmed by his claim that being consists in disclosing "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit*) of me as an individuum,³⁷ or, as he holds later, in revealing particularity (being-this-one) (*Jediesheit*), which is characteristic of a "thing as a thing."³⁸

Significantly, the being thought of in terms of ownness is marked by the fundamental paradox: what is the most *own* turns out to be the most uncanny (*unheimlich*).³⁹ The very meaning of *eigen* conveys such ambiguity as it can be translated not only as "own" or "particular," but also "peculiar" and "strange." Heidegger takes advantage of this variety to stress that being is unexplorable, groundless, and never fully to be scrutinized. Being, unlike beings, is beyond control and definition.

The distinction between beings and their being is followed by the opposition of the ontic and ontological aspects of beings. We cannot, however, think of them as two separate domains but rather as intertwined. For instance, we can specify such features of a pencil as being wooden, measuring four inches, or having graphite. This is an ontic description focusing on the substance of the thing. We arrive at the ontological level when we point out how the aforementioned features are related to the way the pencil reveals its being as something assigned or involved in writing and, as such, connected to other things indispensable for this activity (paper, desk, human hand). That is not to say that writing is the only way the pencil can disclose its peculiarity. It can happen in many other kinds of involvements (serving as pot flower support or a tool for creating a puppet).

Moreover, Heidegger's concept of the referential context ("world") should not be read merely as the claim that things need some background to be understood. The idea of world-hood, also expressed by the notion of the "equipmental whole" or network of significations, emphasizes that beings only jointly can unfold their being:

³⁶ Kevin Aho also makes use of Heidegger to ponder the question of aging. He refers to the Heideggerian account of temporality to explain how midlife crisis closes the horizon of future, making us believe that there is nothing that is still (good) awaiting us over there (K. Aho, "The Contraction of Time and Existential Awakening: A Phenomenology of Authentic Aging," [in:] *The Evening of Life: The Challenges of Aging and Dying Well*, P. Scherz, J.E. Davis (eds.), Notre Dame, pp. 83–84).

³⁷ See M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie, E. Robinson, New York 1962, p. 68.

³⁸ M. Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, transl. W.B. Barton, V. Deutsch, South Bend 1967, p. 14–16.

³⁹ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 233; see K. Witty, "Uncanniness," [in:] *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, M. Wrathall (ed.), Cambridge 2021, pp. 789–791.

they are incomprehensible as separate items.⁴⁰ Their relationality—“hanging together”—is a crucial moment of the disclosure of being.⁴¹

Heidegger’s account of the body, let alone of gestures, also falls under the scheme of ontological difference. While it may appear that he neglected the problem of the body,⁴² he consequently stressed that he does not want to make it a starting point in (re)thinking the fundamental status of human beings as it gravitates towards understanding them as consisting of different parts (i.e. body and soul) or of different kinds of matter (i.e. physical and spiritual).⁴³

Only later, foremost in *Nietzsche*, did Heidegger start to outline some positive ways of approaching the problem of a body ontologically. He suggested that we focus on the phenomenon of bodying or bodyingforth (*leiben*) being the essence of, or revealing the sense of the body. It was grounded in the difference between the body, understood as a “corporeal thing,” and “the lived body,” expressed in German by the words *Körper* and *Leib*. Heidegger coined the neologism *leiben* to name the event of disclosure of the meaning of the body as lived by me or some other concrete person.⁴⁴

One of the clearest examples of employing this perspective can be found in Zollikon Seminars, which Heidegger (invited by Medard Boss) offered to psychiatrists and medical students between 1959 and 1971. Heidegger refers here again to the difference between the boundaries of the corporeal thing and the body, which consists in the fact that the bodily limit is extended beyond the corporeal limit.⁴⁵ He explains that arguing that bodyingforth of the body is determined by the way of someone’s being.⁴⁶ According to Heidegger, the bodyingforth has a peculiar relationship to the self.⁴⁷ He refines this by saying:

I just saw how Dr. K. was “passing” his hand over his forehead. And yet, I did not observe a change of location and position of one of his hands, but I immediately noticed that he was thinking of something difficult. How should we characterize this movement of the hand? As a movement of expression?⁴⁸

In this passage, Heidegger tells us that in dealings with others, trying to make sense of them, we are not usually focused on strictly anatomic or physiological descriptions (unless we are doctors or scientists interested in these particular domains).

⁴⁰ See S. Clark, “Strange Strangers and Uncanny Hammers: Morton’s ‘The Ecological Thought’ and the Phenomenological Tradition,” *Green Letters* 17 [2] (2013), doi: 10.1080/14688417.2013.800339, p. 105.

⁴¹ M. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, transl. A. Hofstadter, Bloomington 1988, p. 163; see V. Blok, “Heidegger’s Ontology of Work,” *Heidegger Studies* 31 (2015), pp. 109–128; M. Holy-Luczaj, “Shapeability—Aristotle on Poiein-Paschein and the Other Dimension of Being in Heidegger,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 41 [1] (2022), pp. 37–48, doi: 10.1080/02580136.2021.2025326.

⁴² See K. Aho, *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*, New York 2009; D.F. Krell, *Daimon Life. Heidegger and Life Philosophy*, Bloomington 1992.

⁴³ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 73–74; K. Aho, *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. I, transl. D.F. Krell, San Francisco, pp. 565–566; K. Aho, *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*, p. 37.

⁴⁵ M. Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, transl. F. Mayr, R. Askay, Evanston, IL 2001, p. 86; K. Aho, *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*, pp. 36–37; D.F. Krell, *Daimon Life*, p. 343.

⁴⁶ M. Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, p. 86.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

When approaching other beings, we are rather occupied with what they express and how they do it.⁴⁹ Yet, as Heidegger underlines, we must remember that what is expressed is the particularity of the given being, its being. It is not that some issue is generally difficult, but it is difficult for a particular person. And this person reveals that through this precise movement observed by us.

This movement, which, on the one hand, expresses someone's particularity and, on the other, catches other people's attention, is specified by Heidegger as a "gesture" (*Gebärde*). This notion plays quite a significant role in Heidegger's philosophy. He usually links it with the human ability to think and speak and, in doing so, to open (the sense) of being.⁵⁰ In *Zollikon Seminars*, he, quite uniquely, points to the bodily dimension of the gesture, exposing at the same time its inherent relationship with the mineness (oneness).

I move within a gesture. And the hand? How does it belong to me? The hand belongs to my arm. It is not only a movement of the hand, but also of the arm, the shoulder. It is my movement. I moved myself.⁵¹

The above passage also specifies that gestures have worldly character. That is to say, they can never be isolated from the network of beings. They always occur and can be understood as located within a specific arrangement of beings (placing a watch on a table is another example of gesture in *Zollikon Seminars*).⁵² However, this is not at odds with the fact that gestures reveal the mineness of the being we are focused on.

Summing up, a gesture seems to be the form of the clearing of being. I believe that this Heideggerian concept and the idea of bodying can be stretched or reread in the context of aging. Such a reinterpretation would embrace the following points.

First, we need to distinguish between the ontic and the ontological sides of the changes which we classify as signs of getting older. The first refers to objective and measurable issues such as the appearance of wrinkles, a different condition of the skin, a reshaped contour of the face, and a slight back hunch. Investigation of the ontological aspect of those changes would go beyond the binarism of physical and mental facets and start with naming what I actually can observe or what kind of irresistible impression I get by looking at them. So, in the modifications in the faces, hands, and the way my friends and colleagues speak, I readily observe growing reflectiveness, fatigue, confidence, bitterness, easing, disillusionment, aloofness... They replaced the former spontaneity, enthusiasm, imprudence, bashfulness, shyness... The list could go on as I would look at each person I encountered at the reunion.

But as I mentioned earlier, in understanding these transformations, I do not stop at recognizing the new condition of each of these people, but I wonder why the above changes occurred. Probably, these two steps cannot be separated.

⁴⁹ See K. Aho, *Heidegger's Neglect of the Body*, p. 41.

⁵⁰ D. Kleinberg-Levin, *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Hölderlin's Question of Measure after Heidegger*, Stanford 2005, p. 220–221; D.F. Krell, *Daimon Life*, p. 282.

⁵¹ M. Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, p. 89.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

Noticing that someone's cheerfulness gave way to being toned down, I immediately start thinking about what could bring that. Sometimes, I know, more or less, the likely cause, and sometimes, I may only assume the possible ground for such a change, depending on how well I know the person. But in both cases, as described earlier, I orient my understanding toward their personal and professional failures and successes embodied in the considered changes.

All these events—job search, hard work, promotions, pregnancies, parenthood, betrayals, divorces, or having too much fun lifestyle—and following from that stress, anxiety, excitement, fatigue, and disappointment, etc. altered the people I (used) to know in a way we usually label as aging. Significantly, in all those events, other people and non-human beings participated (environmental factors, sometimes various substances, such as alcohol or drugs). Or, more precisely, other human and non-human beings affected my friends and colleagues, causing or contributing to a variety of situations that emotionally and physically reshaped them.

However, the key thing within the reread Heideggerian framework is that those affections cannot be identified as any kind of “contamination.” It is not that these other entities interfered with the being of my friends and colleagues. On the contrary, the changes caused by those other beings reveal the being of my friends and colleagues—in its ambiguous character, as at once pointing to the ownmost and uncanniness of each of my friends and colleagues.

These changes draw my attention to the given person, to their being—being this one and no one else. Importantly, I try to resist the belief that “They” (*Das Mann*) aged or that it is a normal thing that, with a flow of time, “Everyone” comes of age. On the contrary, I focus individually on each person I encounter—thanks to the spotted changes.

Simultaneously, observing these changes makes me realize that individuality or being-this-one is not restricted to the set of features but is essentially never to be fully known and explored. I cannot say that someone (me included) was more themselves years ago. This ontological particularity, being-this-one, takes many shades throughout life. And the fact that others play such a vital role in it makes it even stranger.

Conclusions

Unlike death, aging is not among the most popular themes in philosophy. Thus, works by Simone de Beauvoir and Catherine Malabou on that subject deserve much appreciation. Their investigations complicate and enrich our understanding of the phenomenon in question. De Beauvoir points out that our (old) age is never fully realizable for us, as we always tend to feel ourselves. Yet, other people may succeed in making us aware that we become old because they see us this way. This phenomenon results in the occurrence of my strange twin, “the other” in me, about whom I know that others see him or her as old, but I cannot identify myself with him or her. Malabou, in turn, focuses on the fact that, with coming of age, people (sometimes) transform into other beings wholly different and separate from the ones they used to be.

Instead, my proposal wishes to shed more light on how others (both human and non-human) actually contribute to us becoming different in the process we refer to as aging, which, however, paradoxically reveals our being. In other words, I argued that in making sense of the symptoms of someone's aging, including ourselves, we should acknowledge the participation of other beings which affected (causing stress, excitement, fatigue, etc.) this particular person. Detecting this influence, however, does not mean that someone's being has been damaged or contaminated by others. On the contrary, such changes induced by others allow the disclosure of someone's particularity in its undefinable character, having no "peak point" or optimal stage.

To elaborate on that claim, I reexamined Martin Heidegger's idea of bodying, let alone his account of gestures. Rereading them, I argued that we have to switch between its ontic and ontological aspects in understanding aging. We need to go beyond the objective and observable (ontic) indicators of aging and make (ontological) sense of them. To that end, it is worth taking into account that beings are always individual (their "own") but never isolated (they are always in-the-world). This means that, on the one hand, it is the particularity (ownness) of some being that is revealed in the attempts to understand changes that someone has undergone; on the other hand, they are always related to some other beings that induced those changes. In doing so, investing the aging discloses what is our own, which at the same time is never to be fully known—our being in its uncanny character.

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