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From the Selected Works of Helen A Fielding

2014

The Poetry of Habit: Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Aging Embodiment

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Introduction

As people age their actions often become entrenched—we might say they are not open to the new; they are less able to adapt; they are stuck in a rut. Indeed, in *The Coming of Age (La Vieillesse)* Simone de Beauvoir writes that to be old is to be condemned neither to freedom nor to meaning, but rather to boredom (Beauvoir 1996, 461; 486). While in many ways a very pessimistic account of aging, the text does provide promising moments where her descriptions do capture other possibilities for aged existence. In particular, I turn to Beauvoir's suggestion that habit can take on a "kind of poetry" since it merges past, present and future in a sense of eternity that the present moment now lacks with its limited futural horizon (468; 492). In this paper, I draw out, delineate, and further explore this phenomenological reconfiguration of the present that she gestures towards through a consideration of the intensification and modification of the present through habit. Drawing as well upon Merleau-Ponty's insights into the phenomenal body, I argue that poetical habit is an active passivity that allows for the spontaneity of the new out of the sedimentation of corporeal memory, and for the attentive perception of what appears in the present. To disrupt someone's habitual life is to unanchor that life from the world, from an identity shaped by repetition, by the constancy of a shared reality of things, that is, from the spatial-temporal process of inhabitation, and thus from her ability to engage with others and to disclose the world.

In her observations, Beauvoir for the most part provides bleak accounts of aging. Attempting to draw out its phenomenological essences, she relies primarily upon descriptions drawn from literature, history, correspondence, diaries and ethnography. In agreeing with Aristotle's insight that "[l]ife resides in movement," she concludes that life for the aged is too often curtailed; while actions that are geared towards accomplishment are those that can infuse our lives with purpose, curiosity, and delight, a life devoid of claims and specific aims is at risk of provoking indifference (459–60; 483); the temporal, and hence freedom, are collapsed since the aged confront "[A] limited future and a frozen past" (378; 400). They have either accomplished what they set out to do, or they have abandoned their projects. Nor do they feel in a position to take up new ventures; they know that time is against them. To learn new skills is difficult if not impossible,

and the initiation of new projects is always threatened by the likely possibility that they will never be brought to completion; there is rarely enough time. Thus, the elderly are not as open to the new as are those whose lives extend before them. Yet, without the movement of accomplishment that our projects provide, existence becomes reduced to the cyclical rhythms of biological necessity. It is indeed aging, and not death, that contrasts with life (539; 565). The elderly are thus too often defined by being, an *exis*, rather than by doing, or *praxis* (217; 231).

Habit, however, can potentially allow for the continuation of a life's projects and passions precisely because it is the body's way of carrying the past along with it in the present in anticipation of the future. While habit can too easily become caught up in rigid stereotypical movements that are tied solely to the past and the known, as opposed to a future that is to come and must be awaited without expectation, what distinguishes habit as a "kind of poetry" is its continued attentiveness to new possibilities of disclosure, to an openness to creative encounters that cannot be determined in advance. It is this cultivated attentiveness that permits one to remain engaged in the world; withdrawal from the world is a refusal of the "passion" which belongs to the "human condition" (Beauvoir 1948, 42), but such engagement is only practicable for the aged if they are not beset by anxiety over daily survival and control of their environment. The question of habit is hence a social and ethical problem that should be addressed as such. Aging is, as Beauvoir points out, a biological fact, but as a biological fact it is open to the cultural meanings accorded to it and according to which it is shaped: it also persists as characteristically "*antiphysis*" (1996, 40; 47).

Habit as the Continued Movement of Existence

The habitual allows for the possibilities of the continued movement of existence because habit is a kind of doing rather than being (459; 483). Referring to bodily actions, social rituals and even attitudes, the habitual is not just any kind of doing. Habit comes from the Latin *habere* which means to have or to hold suggesting both possession and belonging. (Carlisle 2006, 22) It also comes from the ancient Greek *hexis* which, from Aristotle, we understand as more suggestive of the characteristic actions and emotional reactions that a person cultivates over time rather than an emphasis on the actions themselves. (Kent2006, 224) Although inactivity leads to boredom, activity allows life to transcend itself, "moving towards given ends"; inactivity, by contrast, "falls back, dull and motionless, upon itself" (Beauvoir 1996, 459; 484). Sartre describes the experience of pure presence as one of nausea. While nausea and boredom are often also experi-

enced by the young who do not yet have a hold upon the world, for them it is not a lack of desire or the absence of plans, however vague, that prevents them from pursuing certain aims, but rather parental or societal control (460; 484). For the aged, however, with no more claims being made upon them, either through circumstance or their own indifference, the hold the world has upon them is relinquished; detached from their projects, devoid of curiosity, they risk being reduced to mere presence (461; 486).

Ascribing sensor-motor memory, “in which recognition is a matter of action and not of thought” (362; 385), to automatic forms of behavior, Beauvoir takes habit as action to encompass what we understand as a form of “automatic reaction and routine” (467; 491). Henri Bergson distinguishes between habit as action corporeally learned and linked to usefulness, and memory-images which belong to thought. (Bergson 1991, 80–88) But for Merleau-Ponty, the habitual is also more than this. The body is not an automaton; it has its own way of taking up, interpreting and engaging with the world. For example, I learn to play the violin. The process takes place over a number of years and, in fact, if I keep playing, does not really end. Although the origin of the learning of each new musical skill generally becomes lost, if I put the instrument aside for a number of years, my fingers still know, if at first a little clumsily, how to find the notes. Or, I hear a piece and know I have at one time played it simply because I find myself counting out the rhythm of the time signature. Learning how to play the instrument is a progressive sedimentation of new possibilities, new ways of sensing out harmonies with my fingers, new rhythms that belong to the dash of the bow. If I begin to play an unfamiliar piece of music, I focus on new arrangements, but my fingers generally know the notes, and where they must be placed. My hands seem to have their own way of interpreting a new situation and taking it up. As I age and my technical proficiency diminishes, my playing seems to gain in a layer of feeling and understanding of which perhaps my youthful self was incapable, and the pleasure derived is more likely to come from simply being caught up in the music rather than from any anticipation of a future proficiency. But there is another possibility for delight, which comes in playing *with* others, which is not the same as playing *for* others as such. Playing a duet, or a quartet, for example, can have moments of a musical conversation amongst the players where the phrases unite in a kind of coherence that discloses the interactive space between the players. This coherence in the present can only be achieved through a habitually incorporated understanding of instrument and music that is directed towards completion of the piece. Of course, even for accomplished musicians, a precise completion is never guaranteed which is one of the charms of live performance, and one of the characteristics of habit; it is never an exact repetition.

In short, our body gives “to our life, [in Merleau-Ponty’s words], the form of generality, and develops our personal acts into stable dispositional tendencies” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 169; 171). These tendencies can become habits that Aristotle suggests are ones we can cultivate; thus, even if they become actions that seem automatic, they have still at one time been freely chosen and further developed. Moreover, such habits are not ones that once learnt are subsequently turned over to routine automation; rather, they are further deepened and cultivated. As the cognitive aspects of taking on a new habit move to the background, the affective, perceptual and motile regions, that is, the bodily, can be allowed to intensify. Nevertheless, though these aspects of the corporeal have interpretive possibilities other than those of cognitive reasoning, they still overlap and intertwine. Habits are not instincts; nor are they simply passive. Although actions are not linked to representations—we do not represent to ourselves the movements we shall make—still, “the body is our general medium for having a world” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 169; 171). To possess the world is to inhabit it—to have a grip or a hold upon the world through the power of our corporeal being. Thus the acquisition of habit is not simply cognitive. It is rather the body’s way of understanding the world that is not merely passive, but is also active, and it allows the body to find “anchorage in [as well as] perpetual movement towards a world”. In fact, habit “has been cultivated when [the body] has absorbed a new meaning, and assimilated a fresh core of significance” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 169; 171). Ascribing meaning, then, belongs not only to consciousness, but also to a body engaged with the world.

If this is so, then the aged have the potential of dwelling in a world that is steeped in meaning. Rather than being condemned to boredom, which is of course always a risk, aging also holds the potential of allowing for deepened understandings and more complex corporeal intuitions. If habit can be understood in terms of dispositional tendencies, then clearly at stake are the habits we develop over the course of our lives. Beauvoir concludes that it is unlikely we will develop new ways of being when we age, and further, our habits of being that manifest over the span of our lives will determine how we live when we are old. Thus, corporeal memory can hold someone in the world even as her cognitive capacities begin to diminish. She recounts the story of a woman whose memory was failing yet who was able to adapt herself to her surroundings by relying upon her habitual memory:

She did not recognize people, but she was aware of the social category to which they belonged, and she treated the nurses, doctors, ward-maids and other patients in different ways. She knew she had lost her memory and it vexed her if there was any attempt to make her recall past events; but her judgment was sound, she was capable of discrimina-

tion, and she joked readily. She lived with neither past nor future, in a perpetual present. (Beauvoir 1996, 467; 491–2)

Clearly, then, a kind of corporeal memory allows habit to bestow “a certain quality upon the world and a certain charm to the passage of time” (469; 493). For this reason the elderly can experience deep loss when they forsake a habit—smoking, drinking coffee or wine, meeting with certain friends. For the young, for whom the future stretches before them, this loss is not so keenly felt; the elderly, however, suffer, for something of their lives has been torn away; they do not anticipate in the same way the formation of new habits and new rituals that hold them in and connect them to the world.

Habits, it would then seem, provide the elderly with a kind of ontological security. Since life is movement, then identity is not something we have but is rather secured through repetition providing the impression of a core stable being and a knowledge of who we are (Carlisle 2006, 29); accordingly, the loss of habit can be experienced as a loss of a sense of self (Beauvoir 1996, 469; 493). Often dependent upon others for the arrangement of their existence, the elderly can become anxious about losing a part of themselves. Moreover, even our possessions, Beauvoir explains, are solidified habits: a garden in which one walks each day, or a chair in which one sits every evening. These objects provide continuity through time. Against any grounding in a metaphysics of presence, we might phenomenologically understand objects as presencing into a finite appearance, of providing a sense of an ongoing shared reality that provides a kind of stability. Since existence for the aged is often curtailed in terms of doing, having can sometimes contribute to being. An attachment to money or objects is demonstrative of this tendency. Possessions help to secure for the elderly a sense of identity and a connection with the world which seems threatened by others “who claim to see [the elderly person] as nothing but an object” (470; 494). In short, habit is a kind of active inhabiting of space and time (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 161; 162). Thus to have familiar objects around one, as well as a familiar environment, allows for corporeal memory, the sedimentation of embodied identity; for having an active grip on the world can only come out of a passive generality that is through and through temporal (497; 489).

Habit has a Kind of Poetry

Although Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of habit as disposition, as our general grip upon the world, seems to lie for Beauvoir on the side of the body as immanence rather than on that of the possibilities for transcendence, this is not nec-

essarily the case. On the one hand, habit is always in danger of being or becoming a rigid and repetitive form of behavioral response that excludes any new possibilities for creative encounter. As Beauvoir describes:

Playing cards every afternoon in a certain café with certain friends is a habit that in the first place was freely elected and its daily repetition has a meaning. But if the card-player is angry or upset because *his* table is occupied, it means a lifeless requirement has come into existence, one that prevents him from adapting himself to the situation. (468; 492)

In this description the habit has become inflexible, and the meaning of the game seems to exclude any other possibility other than its own repetition; it is tied to immanence, the fact that it has always taken place just so and must continue to do so. On the other hand, Beauvoir writes, a habit that is “thoroughly integrated” into someone’s life “makes it richer, for habit has a kind of poetry” (468; 492). It would seem, then, that habit that is poetical entails an element of transcendence. Heidegger, in his phenomenological account of poetry provided in his lectures on thinking, describes it as one of the nine muses, as the child of *Mnemosyne*, of Memory (Heidegger 1968, 11; 7–8). Memory is mindful, he writes, and thus bears in mind that which needs to be thought and said; poetry allows for this disclosure, for this bringing forth of being, of that which is; it is a thinking back “toward the source,” toward that which endures (11; 7–8). In other words, it discloses enduring essences or ways of being.

But the poetry of habit is a kind of corporeal mindfulness. Irigaray indeed reminds us that we do not in fact need words to remember—our bodies remember: “Your body says yesterday in what it wants today. If you think: yesterday I was, tomorrow I shall be, you think: I have died a little” (Irigaray 1985, 214; 213, translation modified). For Irigaray, then, the body has a capacity to remember and to bear its desires, its passions with it; hence, to rely on a cognitive account is “to store, count and capitalize” what is past. It is to anticipate death, whereas to focus on corporeality is to say, “here and now how we are moved” (214; 213). Though clearly Heidegger’s account of poetry is itself a critique of Cartesian certitude since being, as that which is disclosed, can never be defined or counted upon, it still focuses on the disclosure of being rather than on that of individual beings. Alternatively, Irigaray emphasizes the corporeal and lived aspect of memory and existence that can be forgotten in Heidegger’s phenomenological account of revealing through saying.

Undoubtedly there are habits, or ways of corporeally remembering to which people have become attached which no longer have any meaning or revelatory power—that do not disclose any aspect of existence. But there are also poetic habits that seem to provide for transcendence, for a hold upon the world that

is not only disclosive but also an essential aspect of someone's identity, of who they are, and not what they are, and this identity is essentially corporeal, expressed in actions, gestures, emotions and desires.¹ Beauvoir refers to Sartre's distress when he decided to give up smoking because smoking belonged to his sense of self (1996, 468; 493). Habit can thus bring about a "crystallization," a "power of revealing the whole world to us" (468; 492–93).

Beauvoir offers the English habit of drinking tea every afternoon as example of the poetry of habit, or, as I would propose, of corporeal mindfulness. She suggests that the habitual participation in certain rituals can also allow for the repetition of a meaningful event whereby "the present moment is the past brought to life again, the future anticipated; [she] experience[s] both together in the for-itself mode" (468; 492). The habitual aspect of drinking tea each day at the same time, perhaps with others, allows then for an ekstatic connection to the past that is not cognitively remembered, yet allows one to remain connected to one's passions and commitments. Similarly, it opens up a future that is not defined by projects or goals but simply by the continued possibility of a joy and delight in existence. Moreover, perhaps the ritual of drinking tea might provide for moments of disclosure, of perhaps partaking in the company of friends or family, opening up a temporal space or boundary within which people can relate with one another and disclose who they are in perhaps even the small yet unpredictable ways that belong to everyday existence.

Alternatively, when I consciously throw myself back to an event in the past I am presented with a mere "skeleton" of the event since the moment remembered was lived as a present moment that was "rich in the future towards which it was hurrying" (366; 388). The for-itself does not coincide with being. Thus, the fullness of the present at which we aim can never be fulfilled, for a life is not something we can actually possess other than by living it (368; 390). In our conscious memories, then, this ekstatic non-coincidence of the present with what is cannot be recreated. Even to return to a certain place "I shall not find myself" since "my plans [...], my hopes and fears" escape me. Some event that took place is "fixed against that background like a butterfly pinned in a glass case ... relationships are numbed, paralysed. And I myself no longer expect anything at all" (366; 388).

For Beauvoir, then, habits that are stultifying, that prevent spontaneity and the embracing of new possibilities are, despite their link to activity, nevertheless, more on the side of being. There is always the risk of settling into patterns of behavior that protect the aged from the world, and in so doing reduce their ability

¹ See Arendt 1958, 178.

to engage rather than enhance it. For habitual life not to become one that petrifies our existence, that “polishes time—you slip as you do on an over-waxed floor”²—habits must not only, for Beauvoir, be freely chosen, they must also be kept alive, integrated into our passionate engagement with the world, and remain open to rearticulation.

I would like to suggest that Merleau-Ponty’s insights into the prereflective body actually allow us to take Beauvoir’s understanding of habit as poetry further. For habit relies upon corporeal memory which is unreflective experience and which amounts to, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 282; 280). Corporeal memory is evoked through action, through the intentional movement of the body. As Edward Casey points out, “the issue is not that of reopening the past but of carrying it forward into the future of eventual accomplishment.” The past is carried forward in concrete action. (Casey 1984, 294) Habit thus unites the past, present and future without fixing the past as a memory and without looking forward to a foreshortened future. In fact, habit can be a kind of self-affirmation of life rather than an awaiting for the unknown of death to approach (Carlisle 2006, 32). For this reason the diminishing of capacities that require us to give up certain habits provokes an even deeper loss than merely that of something that provided pleasure; for what is also lost is a little part of the self.

But here, even Casey’s understanding of the body being carried forward into concrete action overlooks another aspect of corporeal memory that is not so much about the movement of doing but is rather expressed by being moved. For example, friendships too can share in this “poetry of habit” that the aged perhaps especially cherish since they in particular are habits that merge past, present and future, providing an eternity which is otherwise no longer to be found in the present (Beauvoir 1996, 468; 492). Thus, when a close friend dies, there is a sudden break with a shared past that perhaps did not need to be uttered and yet somehow provided a depth to ongoing relations and to one’s very being. Indeed, our sense of self is reflected to us in our relations with others. Moreover, past events lose their reality when there is no one else to confirm their having taken place. Beauvoir describes her losses: “wiped out too my arguments with Merleau-Ponty in the gardens of the Luxembourg, at his home, at mine, at Saint-Tropez; gone those long talks with Giacometti and my visits to his studio.” While her friends lived she did not need to reflect upon their shared past for it to remain alive. Yet, she writes: “In the ‘monuments to the dead’ that stud my history, it is I who am buried” (367; 389).

² This quote is from Eugène Ionesco’s *Journal en miettes* quoted in Beauvoir 1996, 376.

Engaging with the World

It is a biological and unavoidable fact that in aging our bodies deteriorate, and our capacities diminish. Though of course, as Beauvoir notes, the rate of diminishment can be countered and modified by the quality of the life lived. In her much earlier book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she asserts that it is still the body through which we express our relationship to the world (1948, 41). This relationship, which is conveyed through both the ways we speak and our bodily comportment, is one of intelligence and sensitivity only if one remains corporeally attentive to other beings as well as to one's own bodily capacities; for this attentiveness, that can only be described as our engagement with the world, is exactly what allows us to "discover reasons for existing" (1948, 41). Thus, in old age, a withdrawal that can come with diminishing capacities leads invariably to indifference—it can be socially proscribed, or individually intended. To withdraw is to cease engaging with the world, turning the present into pure immanence, and the past into a weight that must be borne. The future is anticipated with dread, and one is condemned to inaction (1996, 496; 521). Habit can allow the aged to escape petrification but still ensconce them in a rigidity of stereotypical movements endlessly repeated (497; 522).

It would seem, then, that the danger of aging could be likened to becoming what Beauvoir, in her earlier work called the "sub-man" (1948, 42). The sub-man refuses engagement with the world. He rejects the "'passion' which is his human condition" and instead finds around him only an "insignificant and dull world" for which he feels no desire "to feel, to understand, to live." As his existence further diminishes he finds no reason to exist since reasons are generated through the engagement of existence itself. Bored, and fearful in a world with which he has no bonds, he feels powerless in face of present events and the future seems dark; his uncertainty only "reinforces his terror" (1948, 42–45).

Beauvoir's insights allow me to conclude that habit plays a subtle but crucial role in the lives of the elderly since it potentially holds them in the world. Thus, the ways that we socially provide for and allow for the habitual reflect upon the quality of life the elderly are allowed to experience, for this habitual life that emerges from corporeal sedimentations relies upon the smooth operation of the outside world. There is a necessity to keep things in place, and events require a kind of regularity. Yet Beauvoir suggests that the extreme reactions the elderly can have to the upset of their habitual lives emerges from an insecurity they experience, as the powerlessness to have any effect on others, to be unable to impose their will. Thus an entrenched habitual life protects them from this feeling of powerlessness that is ultimately the same as withdrawal since it implies the inability to effect change or engage with the world. What I am suggesting here

is that the rigidity that seems to emerge in the habitual life of the elderly reflects upon the society in which they are embedded—a society that may fail to acknowledge and respect aging as a stage of life that is the destiny of all, though of course some may not live to fulfill it.

Beauvoir's concern is that the elderly not be reduced to their facticity whereby the world is for them silent. She questions how we are to allow for transcendence when the future with its goals and projects begins to close down. There are, for Beauvoir, as Debra Bergoffen explains, two moments of intentionality: "a moment that discloses being, and a moment that identifies the disclosing I with the being it discloses" (Bergoffen 1997, 76). In the first, there is an experience of the self as participating in the revelation of an intersubjective world and in the second there is an appropriation of the meanings disclosed, perhaps in an identification with a project or goal (76–77). As Bergoffen points out there is no clear way to negotiate between disclosure, letting be, and the will to mastery in the establishment of projects. There is a joy or delight to be found in the desire to reveal but not control being, and to "introduce the desire for control undermines this desire's delight" (95). So when Beauvoir writes that it is "by the light of our projects that the world reveals itself" she gestures towards how the two moments of intentionality might work together (Beauvoir 1996, 451; 475). Our lives are directed by certain projects and goals, ones we cannot perhaps master; at the same time, these ways of approaching the world will also imbue the ways in which it becomes revealed to us through our engagement with it and with others. Thus, for Beauvoir, to preserve passion in living it is important to have projects and goals, but not necessarily ones that can be definitively controlled since joy can be achieved through letting be and allowing being to unfold.

Indeed, precisely because a future can no longer be anticipated as coming towards one, if permitted, the present moment, experienced as being moved, has the potential to be "a joy in still being", "in the very act of living" [*le seul fait de vivre*] in survival whereby you "are no longer attached to anything and yet you are more sensitive to all" (448; 472). Beauvoir quotes Claudel: "[y]ou must reach old age before you can understand the meaning—the splendid, absolute unchallengeable irreplaceable meaning of the word 'today!'" (448; 472) Thus, an engagement with the world does not have to be directly with things or with projects; this emphasis in "a joy in still being," in being more sensitive to the world suggests not so much a project as rather the fruition of the cultivation of perception and affection, of our corporeal ability to engage with and disclose the world, to let it be.

Nevertheless, since aging is something that we inevitably must endure—it belongs to our appearing and disappearing, our birth and our death which marks the boundaries of life that allow us to presence, to engage with the

world and with others—it is not in itself an activity; this means, then, that only in the continued pursuit of those aims that provide meaning to our existence, “devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual, or creative work,” do our lives not become mere parodies of themselves (540; 567). And even if this devotion need not require individual will to mastery and control, which could, in some cases, be relinquished to the care of others, the devotion itself seems necessary. For this reason, we cannot suddenly acquire new projects, but rather must continue with those that have given our lives meaning in the past. Thus the continuation of these projects takes on the texture of habit, habit that belongs to the unique existence of each individual, and that is hence open to being shaped in new ways, yet resists a sudden break or unexpected reconfiguration; habit implies both a past and an ongoing future even if it is not necessarily the elderly person herself who will be there to see the project fulfilled. For this reason, hobbies are not sufficient for keeping the elderly engaged in the world. Hobbies neither disclose being nor are they projects with which the elderly person could herself identify. They do not involve actions or speech that reveal the agent (Arendt 1958, 118, 176).

Thus there is a problem when the elderly suddenly realize that they have been caught up in pursuits they did not themselves choose; they were too busy to realize this since they were, for example, taken up in a labor market that required from them a participation in a system whose meaning comes from the efficiency of the system itself. In other words, mere utility is not sufficient. It might give one a sense of purpose, of feeling needed, but it cannot be equated with the goals one sets for oneself. When utility is over, there might be left only rigid habits, or not even these. Alternatively, poetical habits evolve out of our projects and pursuits freely chosen and allow for the disclosure of meaning that is brought forth in our engagement with the world and with others. Only in the idleness of old age does this discrepancy between the two kinds of habit become apparent, and by then it is too late to seek out new projects. For this reason, she concludes, humans must always be treated as humans, and not “as so much material” (542; 568–69). Taking on the problem of old age cannot be isolated from rethinking the relationships among humans of all ages.

Conclusion

Accordingly, what might shift for the elderly is the emphasis on projects to that of disclosure, to the internal contemplation that overlaps with the world through the cultivation of attunement, and an attentiveness which is another kind of movement or being moved more subtly evoked. If life is to be understood as

“perpetual change” rather than a “gradual death,” as an “unstable system,” one in which balance is both lost and restored, then it is lack of movement that equates with death: “[c]hange is the law of life” and aging is simply another kind of movement or change, if at that, an irreversible decline (11; 17). At the same time, even as corporeal capacities to adapt might have diminished, the body’s own interpretive capacities to sense out the new in light of the old, to layer meaning against depth, have the possibility of becoming more complex. Though motility becomes reduced, and the active pursuit of projects might be laid aside, this does not mean that the aged are incapable of the cultivation of a joy of being that is supported by the habitual, inhabiting and habituated self.

Beauvoir’s insights on ageing thus lead me to conclude that supporting the habitual lives of the elderly in a way that maintains the potential for their ongoing poetical possibilities is ethically significant. Beauvoir shows us how a life cannot be carved up into stages but is rather the emergence of a whole and that old age is as much about the particularities of that whole as any other stage. For this reason, her phenomenological descriptions of ageing have ethical implications for all stages of life. The ways we live from the beginning also determine the ways in which we will age. Moreover, the elderly cannot be expected to suddenly develop new lives, new habits, and new projects more fitting to their diminished capacities. Though habits can become rigid repetitions that tie the elderly to immanence, they can also draw upon a poetical corporeal potential that allows the elderly to remain engaged in a world that has not only a past but also a kind of future.

In elaborating upon what remains in Beauvoir a mere sketch of the possibilities of habit, I conclude that the habitual holds the poetical possibility of allowing one to be open to the unexpected and to creative encounters with the unknown, to the unpredictable that belongs to disclosure, but only if the person in question is not beset by anxiety over daily survival. The question of habit is thus a social and ethical problem that should be addressed as such. For Beauvoir, habits are less likely to be rigid and systematized, as well as lacking in meaning if they are freely chosen and not imposed by the utilitarian exigencies of an economic system to which they have been usefully adapted. What we could hope to achieve is a stage of life that possesses “its own balance” and provides “a wide range of possibilities open to the individual” (543; 569). Yet, I would add, that even habits that are part of the lived cultural texture of particular lives—customs and rituals, the tastes of particular foods, for example, that might sustain and support the identity of immigrants and those in exile—while not necessarily freely chosen, are indispensable to a sense of self. Thus the support of the elderly in their enduring projects, passions and daily lives has profound social implica-

tions—for this means we are responsible not only for supporting the aging but also for helping to provide a life worth habituating.

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