

Touching The Boundary Mark: Aging, Habit, And Temporality In Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse*

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This paper explores the unique phenomenology of habit and temporality put forth in Beauvoir's La Vieillesse. I situate her understanding of temporality in relation to her early work Pyrrhus and Cinéas. I extract her notion of a boundary marked future that decreases anticipation for the future and thus rigidifies habits (through an increased reliance on the past). In the final section I appropriate the notion of a boundary mark for a cultural phenomenology where we understand boundary marks as constituted by our understandings of ourselves in time and not through aging alone. This cultural boundary mark can be used to understand how societal prejudice operates at the level of lived temporality.

Thus the very quality of the future changes between middle age and the end of one's life. At sixty-five one is not merely twenty years older than one was at forty-five. One has exchanged an indefinite future – and one had a tendency to look upon it as infinite – for a finite future. In earlier days we could see no boundary mark upon the horizon: now we do see one 'When I used to dream in former times,' says Chateaubriand, harking back to his remote past, 'my youth lay before me; I could advance towards the unknown that I was looking for. Now I can no longer take a single step without coming up against the boundary-stone.' (Beauvoir 1970, 378)

It may seem counterintuitive to look to an existentialist phenomenologist such as Simone de Beauvoir for insight into habitual experience. Beauvoir gives us patterns of flight from freedom in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948), but rather than habits, she argues that styles of being such as nihilism or passion are ways of approaching our freedom. A nihilistic style of being, for example, is one where in the face of no universal values the person makes action itself her end—conquest, adventure, speculation, and so on spur the nihilist on towards action without fixed content (58). In *La Vieillesse* (1970), Beauvoir moves her phenomenological expertise beyond styles of being and she explores a phenomenology of habit in relation to temporality, the rigidity of habits, and the negotiation of openness to the new. In order to explain Beauvoir's understanding of habit

as posited in *La Vieillesse*, it is necessary to frame her discussion of the role of temporality in transcendence through her larger corpus, especially her early work in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (1944). I will then explain Beauvoir's account of habit and temporality, especially how habit can function as a "lifeless requirement" in experience. I will explore the insight that death can act as a "boundary mark" in lived experience. In *La Vieillesse*, Beauvoir shows that habits carry their own flexibility or rigidity in relation to the temporal meaning we endow them with. I argue with Beauvoir that we should pay careful attention to the temporal meaning of our lived habits in order to understand the kinds of resistance we experience when trying to change them. In the final section, I look for wider applications of the phenomenology of *La Vieillesse*, specifically I gesture towards a cultural phenomenology of boundary marks useful for feminism.

In working through Beauvoir's phenomenology, I am engaged in a similar project as that of Johanna Oksala (2006) who is trying to recuperate a philosophical understanding of experience useful for feminist theorizing. I am mindful of Oksala's two criticisms of phenomenology: first that phenomenology posits rather than establishes universal essences of experience, which can only be accomplished by denying the context in which that experience is undergone. Second, that phenomenology is insensitive to the ways in which the phenomenological structures of experience are due to cultural patterns in our ontology that produce subjectivities in stable and predictable ways (230). Interestingly, Oksala argues that we should usher in an era of post-phenomenology where "it is more helpful to start by reading anthropological and sociological investigations, medical reports...and psychological studies...than by analyzing one's own normatively limited experiences" (238). Oksala's insight is instructive for phenomenology as it furthers its project to accommodate the ways in which our methods of reflection are historically informed, and that we need to look to the social mechanisms that produce social meaning as we do phenomenological experience.

Beauvoir's project is amenable to Oksala's project of recuperating the phenomenological method for feminism because Beauvoir continually underscored the importance of what the knowledge-producing disciplines have had to say about our social world and how it affects the ways in which we do philosophy.¹ Beauvoir intricately compiles understandings from anthropology, sociology, medicine, and psychology in the first half of her two major studies: in part one of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, "Facts and

Myths”, and in *La Vieillesse*’s part one, “Old Age as Seen from Without.” The second halves of these two works entitled, “Lived experience” and “Being-in-the-World,” respectively, give a variety (though not a globally representative) study of first-person perspectives; the sheer length of her studies show her dedication to investigations beyond her normatively limited experience. In explicating Beauvoir’s phenomenology of aging I hope to bring fresh perspective to feminist theories of experience by showing how a phenomenological approach to aging can garner insights valuable for understanding prejudice against the old in much the same way a phenomenological understanding of gender can be useful for feminist theory.

I.

The first half of *La Vieillesse* compiles cultural meanings of aging in different societies ranging from Ancient Egypt to the present day. Just like *Le Deuxième Sexe*, *La Vieillesse* begins with a chapter on biology. The biology chapter in *Le Deuxième Sexe* focuses on the development of biological designations and the development of biology as a science, sexual difference, reproduction, the gametes, and sexual selection. Similarly, *La Vieillesse* focuses on the development of the science of aging and its competing theories. She begins with Galen’s theory of the humors that described old age as an illness in which the humors lost the heat and moisture they needed to stay healthy. Also considered are the theories of mechanism wherein the body is seen as aging just as the parts of a machine get worn and break down, and vitalism where age weakens the vital principle along with late 18th century theories that attributed physiological changes associated with old age to the deterioration of the sex glands (20-25). Unlike in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, where Beauvoir argues against the theories of biology that she explains by showing their internal inconsistencies and blatant masculine biases, here in *La Vieillesse* she is rather neutral in her presentation. She details physiological changes associated with aging and hormonal changes. She laments the non-phenomenological research style of psychology, noting the empiricist methods of inquiry are too impoverished in their understandings the situations of the old (32).

In *La Vieillesse*, as in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir reveals at the end of each chapter of the first section a glimpse of the philosophical conclusions to come later in the work. In *Le Deuxième Sexe*, to conclude

on biology, Beauvoir reminds us that it is not the givens of biology that determine experience, but the ways in which they are taken up in a particular society.² In speaking of the ethnographical data Beauvoir argues that the “decline” of old age is related to the ends that society proposes in light of its economic, spiritual, and political frameworks (86). The reverse also applies: “by the way in which a society behaves towards its old people it uncovers the naked, and often carefully hidden, truth about its real principles and aims” (87). Old age is a dense transfer point where society’s values are revealed, embodied and proliferated. Moving from the view from without to the being-in-the-world, Beauvoir writes:

Hitherto we have looked at the aged man as an object, an object from the scientific, historic and social point of view...But he is a subject, one who has an intimate inward knowledge of his state and who reacts to it...[Becoming old] is just something that happens [and the] plurality of experiences cannot possibly be confined in a concept or even a notion. But at least we can compare them with one another; we can try to isolate the constants and to find the reasons for the differences...To be sure, the state of the aged has not been the same in all places and at all times; but rising through this diversity there are constants that make it possible for me to compare various pieces of evidence (279).

The constants that Beauvoir isolates do not describe essential phenomenological experiences that hold true for all lived bodies, but rather that we all have a common situation—that we age; however, common situation carries with it no guaranteed experiences of temporality, the body, the social meanings of aging, or the self/other encounters made possible by aging.

The first chapter of the second half, “The Discovery and Assumption of Old Age; The Body’s Experience,” details different ways in which we can assume the “general fate” of old age (283). Cast in terms of a crisis akin to finding out there is no God, the discovery of one’s old age is “particularly difficult to assume because we have always regarded it as an alien or foreign species: ‘Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?’” (283) The general fate of old age is one that we confront in relation to others, but we must assume and live it individually. Beauvoir writes: “Since it is the Other within us who is old, it is natural that the revelation of our age should come to us from outside – from others. We do not accept it willingly”

(288). The general fate of age is experienced as an Other within us, made apparent to us by the reactions of others to our aging and how we make meaning out of it through social narratives of aging. Beauvoir demonstrates how different understandings of aging shape our lived experience, specifically our self-reflective understanding of ourselves in relation to our gender, profession, relationships, and cultural context more generally.

In *La Vieillesse* Beauvoir argues that the experience of aging is of a shrinking future and a weighty past and that this temporal change alters habitual experience (361). Experiencing ourselves as aging alters our habitual lives because as the future appears less sizeable and thus less accommodating to both new, short-term and demanding projects, and long-term, stable projects our habitual involvement with the world becomes more sedimented and predictable. One of Beauvoir's most inventive theses in *La Vieillesse* is that in aging, when anticipation of the future diminishes, we are more likely to rely on the weight of the past to determine habitual existence. As the past becomes a vast temporal distance trailing behind present transcendence, a growing practico-inert escapes us and marks our past activities in the world.³ Because of the relatively stable predictions of life span that can be produced by combining age and social conditions, the aged have an acute awareness of the approximate age at which they will die. The future that was youthfully experienced as indefinite and ambiguous shrinks as the end of life becomes a nearer and more vivid reality. Instead of intellectually acknowledging death, or experiencing a present fear of an abstract death, or even retrieving our ownmost possibility⁴ for being as in Heidegger's being-towards-death, aging changes the horizon of our future because we experience it as containing a boundary mark.

This notion of a "boundary mark," the idea that as our dying approaches us we experience a future marked with limitations (or non-possibilities), is a productive site for inquiry into the unique phenomenology of *La Vieillesse*. Beauvoir aligns the boundary mark that we experience with certain biological processes of degeneration as the body ages, which implies that our experience of temporality roughly corresponds to a time of the body's life cycle. This may be due to Beauvoir's privileged life in that she sees the temporality of life as corresponding to natural age. Despite this, Beauvoir's view has space for taking into account the biological body and its intimate influence on our situation. This is the positive ambiguity of Beauvoir's philosophy in that she understands the body as a limitation on our possibilities without implying that those limitations have any specific

meaning outside of our social situation. In her view, we cannot separate the biological situation from the living perspective that experiences it.

When we experience bodily changes associated with aging, the aged person, in coming to make meaning of his situation, may feel like his life is accomplished, “and that he will never re-fashion it. The future is no longer big with promise: both this future and the being who must live it contract together” (377). The future is no longer big with promise for a being who has been made redundant by our cultural conceptions of aging, the change of material conditions over a lifespan, and the decline of the body. This view is promising for thinking through habit because it suggests that habits—as a defining part of our situation—must be understood in relation to the meaning that those habits have in society. Beauvoir argues that as we age we experience time differently because of the presence of boundary marks in the horizon of our experiences. As we age, our limitations (both real and unreal) change in quality, which alters anticipation and habitual life.

II.

Beauvoir thinks through the temporality of the aged which sheds light more generally on a phenomenology of anticipating future lived experiences. Her early criticisms of infinity and the eternal reveal an emphasis on the lived time of experience. In *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* Beauvoir asks the preliminary existential question: “Why act at all?”—that is, “What ends can we genuinely set for ourselves?” Beauvoir begins with two stories that act as frames for the project. First, she recounts the story of Pyrrhus and Cinéas:

Plutarch tells us that one day Pyrrhus was devising projects of conquest. “We are going to subjugate Greece first,” he was saying. “And after that?” said Cinéas. “We will vanquish Africa.” – “After Africa?” – “We will go on to Asia, we will conquer Asia Minor, Arabia.” – “And after that?” – “We will go on as far as India.” – “After India?” – “After India?” said Pyrrhus, “I will rest” – “Why not rest right away?” said Cinéas (90).

This story teaches us that there is no rest, our being is always transcendence—there is always an “and after that?” Since each end achieved

is also a point of departure, we must continuously be setting new ends.

The second story is of a young boy who cries when he learns that his concierge's son has died. His parents scold him for crying: "After all, that little boy was not your brother" (92). Beauvoir cautions that this teaches a dangerous lesson to the boy. This teaches that the bond between the boy and the concierge's son could possibly not-be. It throws into doubt *why we care about our brothers at all*. Surprisingly, Beauvoir agrees with the boy's parents and praises Albert Camus's character Meursault in *L'Étranger*, because he denies the imposition of pre-given ties between people. What makes this ontological lesson dangerous is that the child is unprepared for this information. We want to see ourselves in the world, in our actions and in others, but in order to do that we must engage ourselves—it is not pre-given. Beauvoir writes:

[Man] would like to spread out his place on earth, to expand his being beyond the limits of his body and his memory, yet without running the risk of any action. But the object facing him remains, indifferent, foreign. Social, organic, economic relationships are only external relationships and cannot be the foundation of any true possession (92-3).

Consciousness, as a nothing, cannot give us ends; we must actively take up our transcendence and engage with others and the world.

Beauvoir sets up a separation between the being of a person and all that is external from her, including "objective" ends. Here Beauvoir defines our being as freedom; she relies upon a dichotomized ontology of humans as pure interiorized freedom versus the external world. The story of Pyrrhus and Cinéas teaches us that there are no pre-given ends—it is Pyrrhus who is right to go out and conquer and explore the world rather than Cinéas who would prefer to rest ashore. We find our ends and ourselves only in the concrete ties we go out and make:

Only that in which I recognize my being is mine, and I can only recognize it where it is engaged. In order for an object to belong to me, it must have been founded by me. It is totally mine only if I founded it in its totality. The only reality that belongs entirely to me is, therefore,

my act; even a work fashioned out of materials that are not mine escapes me in certain ways. What is mine is first the accomplishment of my project; a victory is mine if I fought for it (92-3).

Cinéas cannot remain ashore as a bystander and congratulate himself for the victories of Athens. On this system he can take credit for neither the accomplishments of humanity nor his place in a religious master plan. We cannot genuinely engage our projects in either of these ends because they are infinite abysses in which we would lose ourselves (which is the opposite of a project) or because they are inauthentic absolutes.

In characteristic style Beauvoir begins by considering (and subsequently rejecting) many different ends that humans have given themselves as necessary. She considers God, Humanity, Pleasure, and Creativity; she argues, for example, that we cannot genuinely destine ourselves towards Humanity as a pre-given end. She argues this not only because humanity cannot furnish a collective noun with real content, but because: “[Humanity] is never completed; it unceasingly projects itself toward the future. It is a perpetual surpassing of itself; an appeal in need of a response constantly emanates from it; a void in need of fulfillment is constantly being hollowed out in it” (106). Beauvoir concludes that Pyrrhus was right from the beginning:

The paradox of the human condition is that every end can be surpassed, and yet, the project defines the end as an end. In order to surpass an end, it must first have been projected as something that is not to be surpassed. Man has no other way of existing. It is Pyrrhus, and not Cinéas, who is right. Pyrrhus leaves in order to conquer; let him conquer, then. “After that?” After that, he’ll see (113).

In this work, Beauvoir concludes that we act because our transcendence is continually compelling us into the future; inaction is impossible, there is no rest in the heart of our being—we are beings of “far away places,” as she quotes Heidegger. How, then, should we set ends for ourselves that are true expansions of our beings, as opposed to projects that limit our being? We can only have a project when we expand our being via throwing ourselves

into a future that is alive with possibility.

If it were possible to experience the world as without future meaning and possibility then:

flowers are no longer made to be plucked and smelled, paths no longer to be followed. The flowers seem made of painted metal; the countryside is no longer anything but a façade. There is no longer any future, no longer any surpassing, no longer any enjoyment. The world has lost all of its depth (97).

We need to experience the future as embodied with meaning—we need to see practical engagements as open to us in our lived space and time. Her view here is ambitious in holding that we cannot fail to see the world this way—a foreshadowing of her development of other possibilities in *La Vieillesse*. The child who tries to reduce himself to the instant—to take the future out of his lived experience—withdraws into a corner and says; ‘I don’t care about anything.’ But soon he looks around, he fidgets, he gets bored” (1944, 97). The fidgeting that we experience is disquietude in being, the pull of transcendence that is experienced as the future coaxes us into it. We experience being in the future, as always being *somewhere else* (97). Attempting to reduce ourselves to the instant is a failed attempt at taking away tendency to the future, which we can never deliberately diminish.

III.

The discussion of temporality in *La Vieillesse* will reveal *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*’s author to have been optimistic and perhaps naïve about our experience remaining saturated with the future in the same way. In *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, Beauvoir universalizes this experience of the future-directedness of our projects when she writes:

Since man is project, his happiness, like his pleasures, can only be projects. The man who has made a fortune immediately dreams of making another... The goal is a goal only at the end of the path. As soon as it is attained, it becomes a new starting point (99).

All goals are equalized here; when achieved they all equally begin new paths. The aged individual, however, experiences her transcendence towards the future and growing practico-inert behind her differently than the youth of *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*; thus each goal is unequally experienced as a new starting point—as life advances, the experience of time changes. Beauvoir writes in *La Vieillesse* that when we are in our youths, small amounts of time feel like a lifetime, a ten-month school year like an eternity, which she attributes to the exhausting detail contained within the memories of youth. When we age, however, whole years can be remembered by merely recalling a few important dates. For the aged, the memory that spans years—stretched out in the past, only recalling a few important dates—changes the ways in which we experience the future. The future becomes a place that will make little impression on us; there will be little for us to dwell on (375). She writes:

Young people's memories give them back the past year with a wealth of detail that spreads over an enormous extent: they therefore suppose that the year to come will have the same dimensions. When we are old, on the other hand, few things make much impression on us; the passing moment brings little new, and upon that little we do not dwell for long. As far as I am concerned, 1968 may be summed up in a few dates, a few patterns, a few facts (375).

Assuming Beauvoir is right about memory and expectation differing with age, the result of aging will be a change in phenomenological anticipation. As we age we may see less hope and less possibility because of how much the present makes an impression on us.

When we age the lifeless future quashes youthful anticipation. The future slips into the present and joins the large and fuzzy past. This further entrenches the habit of decreased anticipation for the future, thereby increasing the individual's reliance on habits in—and also in the service of—the present. This phenomenological change rigidifies habits and solidifies resistance to changing our actions. A decrease in anticipation causes an increased reliance on habit. When we are young, we expect the future to bring important changes or upheavals of who we are with new “experiences, intoxicatingly delightful, or hideous, and one emerges transformed, with the feeling that the near future will bring about a similar upheaval” (375).

For the aged, however, “the weight of the past slows [the elderly man] down or even brings him to a halt, whereas the young generations break free from the practico-inert and move forward” (390). The weight of the practico-inert solidifies the grip that habit can have on the aged, which makes transcending the weight of the past even more difficult.⁵ The time and investment it takes to change when movements are dependent on experiences that are “out of date” can result in the calcification of habits.

Perhaps Beauvoir intends to explain how aging has a specific duration—that is, we experience a phenomenology of intervals that signify changes in time periods in our lives (i.e., an afternoon, a summer, a youth). In general we experience shorter intervals when we are young, but when we are older change is more gradual and thus intervals have a longer duration. Duration is not determined necessarily by biological age because the anticipation of youth and its correspondent shortening of intervals becomes available through an upset in habitual life, something available at any age. When we travel, for example, we experience upheaval and detailed memory because travelling upsets our habitual existence and routinization. We can compare the duration of travel with the duration of youth. In travelling we are engrossed in new environments and unable to predict what the future holds. Quoting Eugène Ionesco’s *Journal en miettes*, “two days in a new country are worth thirty lived in familiar surroundings, thirty days worn and shortened, spoiled and damaged by habit” (376).⁶

Changes in lived time can be gradual and barely noticed, but Beauvoir’s interesting contribution to a phenomenology of aging is that a boundary mark experience shapes the ways in which we experience our habitual lives, projects, relationships, memories, and existence generally. We realize that we have passed a half-way mark in our lives: “the whole of a long life is set and fixed behind us, and it holds us captive” (373). The past pulls on the present and the bigger the past gets the more difficult it is to project ourselves beyond it. In *La Vieillesse* Beauvoir gives countless examples of people who have a heavy past and difficulty projecting beyond it. This difficulty, or resistance is heightened even further when we stake our onto-security on strict continuity of the past into the present.

Continuing, Beauvoir uses the example of the scientist whose research is rendered out of date by new research that comes after his “time” as a leader in his field. She gives examples of professors who would prefer to forge the results of their research so as to retain old knowledge paradigms rather than adapt themselves to new research findings. Despair at a social

situation can cause this same kind of rigidity. There is no reason to adapt ourselves to a future with no promise, we must hold on to what we have in the present and its connection to a past in which we are invested. Thus, we hold ever more firmly in our grasp habits that we repeat and consequently enshrine in lived experience. Beauvoir also gives us the example of the politician whose political beliefs are made irrelevant when present material conditions change. Confronting the impossibility of continuing the past into the future, the politician's outdatedness can be read as resistance to "keep up with the times" and adapt to the new present. Allowing the past to overtake the present rigidifies our habits and makes them resistant to change. When habits are based on enshrining the past into the present, we may cling or hold on to them because they express the limit of our transcendence as determined by our phenomenology of time. Because we cling to certain habits we are not revealing that we have a weak will, but rather how our particular situation is temporally burdened. There is nothing inherently wrong with being out of step with the present, but when we unnecessarily cling to a past that escapes our present grasp, we can investigate it in terms of our lived temporality. When habits prove difficult to change it may signify our position in time as burdened by the past, by our existential situation. Beauvoir writes:

The aged man's inward experience of his past takes the form of images, fantasies and emotional attitudes. He is dependent upon it in still another way: it is the past that defines my present situations and its outlet into the future; it is the admitted fact, the base from which I project myself and which I must go beyond in order to exist (372).

That is, how we experience the past is not merely an attitude we take up in memory, it is a phenomenological structure that affects how we transcend in the present. Beauvoir admits this is true at any age—that is, we derive all of our cultural tools from the past, a state described by Heidegger as the "totality of involvement" (*Bewandtnisganzheit*). This past pre-exists the individual within a culture and is then incorporated into present projects.

The past is not always stultifying in the present—Beauvoir writes that we can incorporate the past into a present project and so relate to it and keep it living. If we have passed a boundary mark and no longer keep the past alive in our projects, we repeat actions merely because it was what

we did in the past. Beauvoir calls this a “lifeless requirement.” Her example:

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 (396).

Beauvoir offers us a way around this dilemma. Following Sartre, she writes that it is our connection to the future that determines whether the past is living or not. Her examples of this are bad faith, for example, a man resists aging, so asserts his solidarity with his youthful self. Beauvoir writes: “They set up a fixed, unchanging essence against the deteriorations of age, and tirelessly they tell stories of this being that they were, this being that lives on inside them” (362). This is why routinization can gain importance for the aged person.

Touching the boundary mark can close off possibilities for adapting our habitual life to new situations. The past can swamp the present with lifeless requirements when the future is no longer alive with possibility. This can be exacerbated by what Beauvoir calls “social time”—the temporality of the values of a particular cultural context. In Émile Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) is Baudu, a character who has invested his being externally in his shop. When the need for his services was outstripped by a changing political economy, he experienced this change as especially devastating. He saw the death of his future in the redundancy of his shop. Beauvoir finds this character rich with insight:

If Baudu had been younger he would have wanted to modernize his shop and he would have done so. But this shortness of his future and the weight of his past close all outlets to him. His shop was the reality in which he had his objective being: once it is ruined he no longer exists – he is a dead man under suspended sentence (385).

Though it is social time that outstrips Baudu, it does this because he has aged. The changed social time he lives combines with his embodied temporal situation to change his style of

existence—he is now “a dead man under suspended sentence.”

Oksala’s worry that phenomenology creates universals insensitive to the ways in which cultural conditions promote the stable, predictable ways that subjects are formed, is quelled by Beauvoir’s examples of experiences of aging where people avoid touching the boundary mark of their lives; reaching the boundary mark is not a universal experience of aging. She acknowledges, for example, how some societies have different material conditions that produce their relationship with the future. Arguing with Marx, she suggests that in “repetitive societies” a person can “live on” in the family farm, in their offspring, and in any other place labor is focused. We can avoid touching the boundary mark if we live on in projects that we anticipate will persist into the future, even if we cannot be entirely sure that these projects will persist. In so-called “repetitive societies” the aged could have lived on in younger generations. These societies valued elders quite differently. They were considered depositories of experience; their existence achieved “the final stage of a continual advance...life’s highest pitch of perfection” but this belies how aging appears in western capitalist society, in our time or in Beauvoir’s. She quotes Sainte-Beuve, “We harden in some places and rot in others: we never ripen” (380).⁷ With the advance of technology and changing material conditions the aged person finds himself out of date. To move himself forward he must “perpetually be tearing himself free from a past that holds him with an ever-tighter grasp: his advance is slow” (391).

Cultural conditions can change how we experience ourselves in time, which affects habitual life, our transcendence into the future, and our relationships with the generations around us. Beauvoir is committed, however, to the view that even if it is possible to have a culture that prevents us from touching the boundary mark, our phenomenology of time roughly corresponds to biological age. Social time can speed up, as Baudouin exemplifies. But, society makes variable not just time, but death as well. Further, there are many different aspects of our finitude out of which we make phenomenologically salient meaning (sexual difference being an important example here). My hope is that Beauvoir’s explanation about how to keep the future alive once we have touched the biological boundary mark of our finitude can give us guidance for how to go on when we touch a cultural boundary mark, a possibility that should be explored in another paper.

I think that we can understand the touching of a boundary mark as a kind of existential depression that demands an adequate response.

How do we keep the future alive so that we can expand our project at any biological or cultural time? Beauvoir offers a promising solution when she writes that the strength of the norms in our environment can safeguard us from depression initiated by a boundary marked future. She explains that “categorical imperatives arising from the past retain all their strength: this piece of work must be finished, that book written, these interests safeguarded. When this is so, the elderly man starts a race against time that leaves him not a moment’s respite.” Therefore the present can still become fully saturated with goals even within sight of a shrinking future (379). This reveals a remarkable consistency with what she wrote in *Pyrrhus* and *Cinéas* twenty-seven years earlier:

The writer is impatient to have finished a book in order to write another one. Then I can die happy, he says, *my* work will be completed. He does not wait for death in order to stop, but if his project engages him right into future centuries, death will not stop him either (113).

Beauvoir mentions the aged person who plants trees that she knows will out-live her; when she takes on a project that goes beyond her own death, her labor survives her and possibilities in the future are re-enlivened in the present. Anticipation returns as the future expands beyond biological life.

The suggestion that we try to re-enliven categorical imperatives of the past in order to re-enliven the future can only get us so far. Beauvoir neglects the bigger issue of how to make a break from the past that keeps our habits rigid. Revisiting the categorical imperatives that once strengthened transcendence can resuscitate old possibilities and help to retrieve them from depression and hopelessness. The scientist who cannot adapt his scientific paradigms to keep up with the present could revisit the scientific categorical imperatives of his youth that kept him thirsting for discovery and open to whatever exploration the scientific method may bring. If the existential depression that results from a boundary mark experience has ethical implications they appear at the level of re-enlivening possibilities. If it is possible, how and when do we re-enliven possibilities?

In particular contexts, do we re-enliven imperatives from the past when social and political forces make it nearly impossible to perform this retrieval? If the retrieval is possible, my suspicion is that we can connect with past imperatives by performing past habits in

ways that mimic when they were living requirements. In the same way as planting a tree that will outlive us, we can extend an enlivened future and thus affect anticipation of a future that is not only ours. Perhaps through habit, repeated action can bring us to a time when our future was young and we can trigger the lived body's phenomenological memory of thrusting towards a lively future. In much the same way, reconnections with past relationships could provide the living requirement necessary for retrieving culturally dead possibilities from their grave.

Looking to the past to retrieve imperatives as a way of countering resistance to change, however, may be complicated when we are overly invested in a particular possibility that deadens those around it. Beauvoir acknowledges that revisiting the past will not necessarily give us what we are looking for in this retrieval because we experience the past in the present *qua* past. We never get back the freshness of when the past was the present:

There are many things that we are powerless to summon up but that we can nevertheless recognize. Yet this recognition does not always give us back the warmth of the past. The past moves us for the very reason that it is past; but this too is why it so often disappoints us – we lived it in the present, a present rich in the future towards which it was hurrying; and all that is left is a skeleton (365-6).

An example would be a professional athlete who, due to an unforeseen injury, can look into the past and only see it saturated by imperatives for high-performance sports.⁸ Revisiting imperatives of the past has to contend with the selective memory (i.e., the imperative of sports overshadows other things that were once important) and the relationships of strength that different imperatives have with each other (the norms of achievement in sports might be of a different strength and importance than those of family or education and so act to deaden those around it). When we are heavily invested in a particular imperative—past or future—it can be afforded special status in lived experience; it can become enshrined. Investment serves to establish the ways in which we make meaning out of our situation and other norms that guide our experience. What Beauvoir neglects to explain is how imperatives that keep us steaming towards the future can also keep us reticent to change. While it may be useful to revisit the past for categorical imperatives that will re-enliven our future, the ideals that we retrieve can themselves cause a reticence to change because the ideal may be especially exclusionary. Particular ideals can have exclusion built into their meaning, which can also keep us resistant to change. The holding

of this kind of ideal would produce a rigid habit of overinvestment; we can enshrine in it the power of revealing the whole world to us.

Beauvoir shows us there are many different ways in which the past can come to us: “I call to mind some scene that happened long ago, it is fixed against that background like a butterfly pinned in a glass case: the characters no longer move in any direction. Their relationships are numbed, paralysed (366). Also, she writes: “The past is not a peaceful landscape lying there behind me, a country in which I can stroll wherever I please, and which will gradually show me all its secret hills and dales. As I was moving forward, so it was crumbling” (365). While it is true that the past is quantitatively growing as we age, it is false that the meaning of the past is then guaranteed; “the meaning of the past event can always be reversed” (366).

Beauvoir’s interesting contribution is that aging, more than any consciousness of our death makes us more fully aware of our finitude. In the face of an even larger past, the aged face the difficulty of transcending the past and anticipating the future. Beauvoir’s idea here offers an interesting consequence that because of the weight of the past behind the old, their transcendence beyond it may be that much more valuable.⁹ That is, a transcendence that creates new habits in spite of a weighty past is a higher existential achievement (377). It is easier for the young person to pick themselves back up when the stakes are down because the past is easily sloughed off in favour of a new present, but for the old, the burden of the past is so great that transcending it can seem impossible.

IV.

Beauvoir’s view goes beyond a pragmatist’s reading of habits, which tend to focus on educating the young because the old are necessarily rigidified. Beauvoir’s view — because it takes the aging person as an existent in a situation — cannot rest social change on the social categories “the old” and “the young.” Her view extends beyond calendar age because the old can have any number of attitudes towards their past, experience breaks with the past, travel and have new experiences that defy stagnant habituation. Similarly, her view extends to younger existential situations because we can imagine a case where the young can fail to anticipate a future full of possibilities as in cases of boundary marks determined by the values and political economy of a culture. These extensions prompt us to investigate boundary marks that are not related to biological death.¹⁰

Beauvoir noticed that our cultural narratives inform how we understand our own boundary marked future and here is where we should revisit Oksala’s concerns about phenomenology’s usefulness for

feminism. The boundary mark in Beauvoir's work is relative to culture, though our existential situation remains the same. It is universal *that* we age, but not *how* we age. Since it is the *how* that is phenomenologically relevant for understanding experience, Beauvoir has found a way to take cultural conditions and explain how experience can be affected in predictable ways. If cultural conditions are materialized when existents make meaning of their situation, then it is possible to extend the concept of a boundary mark past our biological body as dying and towards our cultural body as dying. In much the same way that the boundary mark as age is culturally produced, cultural narratives and political processes can effect an experience of our body that exceeds the "pre-theoretical" body of biology, and gives us a cultural body with a life of its own.¹¹

A general example of extending boundary marks into a cultural phenomenology would be that under the economic pressure of late capitalism, or what Adorno called the "performance principle," there is the phenomenon of 'blowing it.' Especially since the economic collapse of 2008 attaining a comfortable economic position is foreclosed for many. Given the difficulty of economic success, performance pressure tells us that if we have failed to "make it" by attaining some upward mobility, the story goes, by age 30, then future possibilities contain a clear boundary mark—if it hasn't already been passed. A specifically white and upwardly mobile norm of femininity reads that if women failed to find a man to marry by a certain age, then they are destined to become childless failures. Similar to Beauvoir's account of aging, we can imagine these 'failures' as a loss of anticipation for the future because they experience passing a real -and yet culturally produced—crucial juncture in life where the death of possibilities can cause the rigid reliance on habit that makes one "set in their ways." Beauvoir's view is that how we experience our possibilities is dependent on how we experience ourselves in time; we are more adaptable to new situations when the future appears to us as abundant. Going in this direction, Beauvoir can provide us with guidance about how to change resistant habits that are strongly informed by cultural meanings.

Cultural boundary marks are lived through our bodies, our basic habits. In "Throwing Like a Girl," Iris Young argues that feminine bodily experience is of the lived body as "both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act" (38). This is because women are discouraged from experiencing themselves as pure presence to the world. Instead they are taught to express themselves as

simultaneously presence and awareness of objecthood—a dual structure of the relationship towards our possibilities for spatial movement. Many of Young's examples have to do with taking up space, for example, spreading out in or constricting one's bodily space. The lived time of feminine bodily experience can then be added to this spatial feminine phenomenology. How are women and girls experiencing lived time? Can we marry these insights to better understand feminine experience and ultimately women's oppression. A phenomenology of boundary marks as cultural can ground a political critique of how they are constructed, distributed and how they can contribute to phenomenological limits to possibilities. Representations of women and girls as "waiting" for Prince Charming to wake them up, waiting to become a wife, a mother, validated by male authority can affect the temporal horizon of feminine experience. This attitude is reflected in self-help literature, for example, in *1001 Questions to Ask Before You Get Married*, the author shares the following anecdote:

On my wedding day, my 82 year-old grandmother pulled me aside and, in a voice that was almost a whisper, said, "When I got married, all I did was cry for the first two years!" A few hours later, my new husband's grandmother came up to me and said, "Dear, now that we're family, I would like to share something with you... When I got married, all I did was cry for about two years!" Since my grandmother doesn't speak English and my husband's grandmother doesn't know a word of Spanish, I knew they weren't in cahoots.

How society views marriage can be a boundary mark, something worth grieving, something that limits possibilities, diminishes anticipation and possibly rigidifies habit. It is especially shocking, perhaps, because, especially for women, it is supposedly when life "begins."

Here a feminist expansion of Beauvoir's insights can take a foothold.

¹² We can politicize the creation and experiencing of boundary marks. Many women who I have discussed this paper with have immediately read the boundary mark of aging analogously with beauty ideals for women. I am acutely aware of my own context. As a girl, I believed that I could not be a particular kind of white beauty because I had freckles, green eyes, and brown hair. I had blonde hair and blue eyes until I was two years old and I remember family members reminding me of that as I grew up. I

believed that I had a “chance” to be beautiful but that it “didn’t work out for me.” This message, received at such a young age, functioned to perhaps not rigidify habits, as I had few at the time, but it did lessen anticipation. I did not expect romantic interest in me when I was older, I did not expect to have a career that I thought only available to “the beautiful,” and so on. The messaging I received was that it was “too late” for me.

A norm of femininity is to be vigilant against “premature aging” (an interesting concept in its own right). I have been told that it is never too early to start a night time skin care regimen, not to touch your eye lids and brows too much (encourages wrinkle growth), and to guard vigilantly against any sign of aging be it cellulite, dark skin spots, grey hair, wrinkles, and so on. The everyday practical suggestions from other women combine with advertisers who play on women’s fear of premature aging and being “past one’s prime.” The same norms simply do not apply to men—indeed, the distinguished older man trope almost mentions itself. Women experience the norms of femininity that correspond to guarding against physical markers of lived time. I can only gesture at these implications in this space, however, I hope to have shown that there are effects in our embodiment that twine together our cultural notions of time and our lived temporality and that this twining deserves feminist description and critique.

If we take Beauvoir’s methods of cultural phenomenology seriously we see that time shows itself when we have experiences such as “running out of time” “time flying” and so on. Even though our experiences are always temporal, the temporality of experience often recedes into the background until we have experiences that challenge our notion of steady, sequential time. What the boundary mark experience does is jolt us out of our everyday involvement and flattens out anticipation in unpredictable ways. The personal experience of passing a boundary mark, experienced as a lived awareness of time is informed by our cultural notions of time. To marry Young’s insights with those from feminist phenomenology of time, we can think about women’s experiences as caregivers and without enough time to themselves. If women’s spatiality is limited and their time belongs to someone else, what would a boundary mark experience look like in this situation? If women do experience themselves as lacking personal time, a kind of phenomenological exhaustion can occur when a future horizon is frozen, occupied by the time of others, and predictable. A feminist politics of the futurity of women’s horizons is then necessary and it is unsurprising that seeds of this would be found in Beauvoir’s corpus.¹³

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Notes

¹ It also is not clear that we ought to maintain a firm distinction between phenomenology and anthropology, and other human sciences. Eva Gothlin writes “[In a] Heideggerian kind of phenomenology whose logical consequence would be being unable to determine the meaning of sexual difference in itself and absolutely, while at the same time recognizing its existence. And we must also be aware that the signification of the sexed body is always dependent on how the body as situation is concretely lived and disclosed, a disclosure that in turn is related to a situation of significations already given...It is thus no coincidence that when Beauvoir describes sexual initiation, for example, she relates a whole spectrum of different ways to live it, ways that are dependent on the general cultural situation and the specific situation of an individual woman, a situation that, in turn is dependent on her relationship to her parents, previous erotic experiences and so forth” (Eva Gothlin. “Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Claudia Card, ed. 45-65, Cambridge UP (2003), 56).

² “But her body is not enough to define her; it has a lived reality only as taken on by consciousness through actions and within a society; biology alone cannot provide an

answer to the question that concerns us: why is woman the *Other*? The question is how, in her, nature has been taken on in the course of history; the question is what humanity has made of the human female” (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier, (New York, NY: Random House, 2010), 48).

³ Beauvoir relies heavily on the concept of the practico-inert in this chapter. She leans on Sartre to define this key term; “He defines this as the whole formed by those things that are marked by the seal of human activity together with men defined by their relationship to those things: as far as I personally am concerned, the practico-inert is the whole formed by the books I have written, which now outside me constitute my works and define me as their author” (Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 372-3).

⁴ For Heidegger death is our ownmost possibility because no one can die in our place. There are many things that we do that others can leap in and do for us but no one can take away our dying. This is significant because we can reorient ourselves towards authenticity if we retrieve our ownmost possibility by making ourselves aware of our being-towards-death. This is how we guarantee that the possibility we are acting towards is not constituted by the-they or “the public” in non-Heideggerian.

⁵ Helen Fielding has argued (forthcoming 2012) that the rigidity that Beauvoir posits for the aged in *LV* does not necessarily entail emotional rigidity, but rather that the aged person can repeat habits in the present for the purposes of deepening the feelings that they have associated with the habitual movements. I think she is right to read Beauvoir in this way, and that the emotions we have are not necessarily entailed by the rigidity of habits. Fielding is considering the individual repetition of the habit in the present and does not assume resistance to change that guides my project. Although it would be interesting to investigate how the individuals can shift their emotions associated with a habit in order to deepen the feelings in the ways that Fielding outlines, she does not assume at the outset that the individual wants to change the habitual movements.

⁶ Eugène Ionesco, *Fragments of a Journal*. Trans. Jean Stewart. London: Faber and Faber, 1968.

⁷ Sainte-Beuve was an important literary critique in France’s nineteenth century. Friedrich Nietzsche responds to him as a philosopher in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889).

⁸ I am grateful for Janine Jones for bringing this to my attention.

⁹ I am indebted to Shannon Musset for pointing out this potential problem in Beauvoir’s view of transcendence.

¹⁰ I am wary to extend Beauvoir’s phenomenology to include cultural death as a process that can crystallize our reliance on habit because I resist the possible slippage toward trivializing the experience of the aged who touch boundary marks that characterize biological death. I read *La Vieillesse* in part as an extended meditation on the processes by which the experience of the aged is trivialized in society and so I take Beauvoir’s work seriously as philosophy and also as a political undertaking, as it was surely intended. *LV* makes a profound political and philosophical contribution to understanding the trivialization of the experience of the aged and, without diminishing this contribution, Beauvoir’s phenomenology can usefully speak to broader phenomenological questions.

¹¹ Here I am following Judith Butler who argues in *Bodies that Matter* that we cannot talk about a “pure” material body outside of the operations of power that produce bodies as intelligible (9).

¹² I am very grateful for an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to expand on this aspect of the paper.

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