BOOK REVIEW

THE COMING OF AGE. By Simone de Beauvoir. Translated by Patrick O'Brian. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, N.Y., 1972. Pp. 585. $10.00.

It is well recognized that the elderly in our society constitute a severely disadvantaged minority. In spite of their widely publicized plight, their disadvantaged state is tolerated by society at large with a degree of indifference and callousness that is morally indecent.[1] Society's treatment of the aged raises many serious philosophical and moral questions. Two such questions are particularly basic to an understanding of society's current attitudes. First, why is this morally indecent situation tolerated? Second, why are its victims, the aged, such nonresisting parties to their own undoing?

Let us consider the first question. Normally, members of a disadvantaged class, whether they be Blacks, the poor, or Vietnamese peasants, are perceived by members of the dominant and often persecuting social class as distinctly "other," as members of some out-group, perhaps even as less than fully human persons. Thus, when members of the dominant group attempt to think in moral terms about their obligations

1. The moral indecency here is normally a lack of both justice and charity, but there are a few cases where justice may not be involved. Some—though certainly not most—old persons may be disadvantaged primarily because of their own culpable failure to provide for their old age when they had an opportunity to do so, and it is very doubtful that these persons have a right to demand, in the name of just treatment, that society compensate them for this lack of foresight. A morally decent person, however, presumably will not limit his moral outlook to the demands of justice based on rights. For example, no one has a moral right to be forgiven for wrongdoing; yet, we would surely make a harsh moral judgment on a person who, as a matter of principle, never forgave others. No matter what he might avow in theory, a morally decent person could not in practice simply ignore human suffering with the claim "they brought it on themselves"—even in cases where this claim is true. Callous people, though perhaps not lacking in justice, are clearly lacking in such other moral virtues as chastity, mercy, and moral humility.

It is important to emphasize that most failures to provide for one's own old age are not culpable; for such things as failed pension plans and medical bills that wipe out one's insurance and life savings are not normally in one's power to prevent. And, the government has certainly done precious little to prevent them. In these cases, the demands for assistance transcend demands for charity and move toward demands for justice. Of course, social institutions are not precision instruments. Thus, any program designed to satisfy only just demands will inevitably satisfy some demands that are not just. The alternative, however, is not to satisfy the just demands. This has no more to commend it than the suggestion that we should abandon all programs of social welfare because they occasionally reward some chiselers.

to other persons, it is easy not to consider these minorities. When, even more commonly, members of the dominant group think in a purely selfish manner, it is even easier to leave these groups out of consideration. "After all," the thinking may run, "I am not Black, or poor, or an Asian peasant and I have little or no chance of becoming so. Thus, why should I care how such groups are treated? What consequences could this ever have for me?"[2]

But old people constitute perhaps the only disadvantaged minority about which even this purely selfish line of thinking is mistaken. For each one of us stands a very good chance of becoming a member of the elderly class; and the standards of treatment that we advocate or tolerate for this group are standards under which we ourselves may eventually live. In this perhaps unique case, the members of the dominant class are doomed to become victims of those very attitudes and policies which they, in their present role, perpetuate. People's failure to recognize the inherent self-interest in this case demands investigation, for here we seem to have a case where decent treatment should not have to depend upon the uncertain motivating power of moral considerations. Pure selfishness ought to be sufficient motivation for any rational person to avoid adopting attitudes and policies which will someday harm, degrade, or even destroy him. And yet the actual state of affairs clearly shows that this has not been sufficient, and this is surprising and puzzling. Failures to act morally, though always lamentable, are far too common to be surprising. Failures to act—or at least attempt to act—in what is clearly in one's own self-interest, however, are not so easily understood.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Coming of Age*, agrees that indifference to old people, so clearly against everyone's self-interest, is a unique puzzle which must be resolved before we can begin to develop rational and decent policies for dealing with the aged.

> It is common knowledge that the condition of old people today is scandalous. Before examining it in detail, we must try to understand how it comes about that society puts up with it so easily. As a general rule society shuts its eyes to all abuses, scandals and tragedies, so long as these do not upset its balance; and it worries no more about the fate of the children in state orphanages, or of juvenile delinquents, or of the handicapped, than it does about the aged. In the last case, however, this indifference does on the

2. This is, of course, the problem noted in Justice Stone's famous footnote in United States v. Carolene Products Co., 304 U.S. 144 (1938): "[P]rejudice against discrete and insular minorities may be a special condition, which tends seriously to curtail the operation of those political processes ordinarily to be relied upon to protect minorities, and which may call for a correspondingly more searching judicial inquiry." *Id.* at 152-53 n.4.

> face of it seem more astonishing, since every single member of the community must know that his future is in question; and almost all of them have close personal relationships with some old people. How can their attitude be explained?[3]

Mlle. de Beauvoir has asked the right question, but her attempt to answer it is, alas, befogged by intellectual schizophrenia. With an apparent uncertainty over exactly what the task of the book is to be, she jumbles philosophical analysis with anecdotal sociology and armchair psychology. She justifies her rather dilettantish survey of the scientific literature on aging on the ground that aging must be understood as a complex biological-psychological-existential-sociological phenomenon and, therefore, any adequate study of it must be "exhaustive."[4] Her study is so cluttered by an unorganized listing of various claims and findings, however, that it is more exhausting than exhaustive. There is a certain level of detail that is inadequate for *any* audience, and Mlle. de Beauvoir seems to hit this level with great regularity. For the specialist, the data presented are insufficient and the citations and footnotes totally inadequate. For the generally educated reader, there is too much detail and show of scholarship; brief summaries of conclusions would be adequate. Also, certain issues of obvious importance—for example, the legal problems faced by old people—are skimmed over superficially or ignored entirely. A good chapter on legal problems would have been of much greater value than yet another tedious example of how some obscure primitive tribe treats its aged or one more anecdote about how some famous literary figure behaved during his old age.

An even deeper intellectual schizophrenia is revealed in the tension between Mlle. de Beauvoir's present commitment to Marxism, on the one hand, and the insights and patterns of analysis which one associates with her earlier "existentialist" writings, on the other. When writing as a knee-jerk Marxist, she makes such claims as the following:

> [I]t is the exploitation of the workers, the pulverization of society, and the utter poverty of a culture confined to the privileged, educated few that leads to . . . dehumanized old age.[5]
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> . . . Far more than the conflict between generations, it was the class struggle that gave the notion of old age its ambivalence. . . . It is the ruling class that imposes its status upon the old.[6]

This claim, at least in such a simplistic form, cannot possibly be correct, for it goes against the basic insight that Mlle. de Beauvoir has

3. S. DE BEAUVOIR, THE COMING OF AGE 216 (1972).
4. *Id.* at 9.
5. *Id.* at 7.
6. *Id.* at 215.

already noted: old age is a class someday to be occupied by everyone. Since everyone, rich or poor, Black or white, must grow old and suffer the social degradation of the old, the mistreatment of this class cannot, for reasons previously noted, be understood in exactly the same way that we might understand other examples of discrimination and persecution—namely, as the exploitation of one class by some other totally distinct class. Of course, Marxist theory may indeed explain some of the special problems of people who are both old and poor. But it would be a simple mistake to think that the social and personal problems of old age are confined to the elderly poor or even that these problems are always more extreme among the poor. My own, admittedly limited, experience inclines me to think that old people tend to suffer less loss of status and dignity in working class communities, particularly in small or rural communities, than they suffer in middle class communities. Apparently, middle class children and relatives, being highly mobile and "on the make," have little time to be bothered with the aged. Additionally, some of the problems of old age exist only for those who are affluent—only children of the rich seek to have their parents declared legally incompetent in order to control their money. Since the old, as a class, cut across all other socio-economic classes, one has to be very careful in attempting to apply Marxist theory to the problem of aging. Callous and dehumanizing attitudes brought to bear on the aged may, of course, be produced by conditioning and educational factors in bourgeois capitalist societies. This is a suggestive point, and I shall have more to say about it shortly. Demonstrating its truth, however, requires something more than slogans about "class struggles."

I previously suggested that pure selfishness ought to be sufficient to motivate any rational person to avoid the adoption of attitudes and policies which will someday harm, degrade, or even destroy him. What this suggests is that the attitudes and policies we adopt with respect to the elderly are a product of something deeply irrational within us—a kind of self-deception about our own future as a member of the aged class. Though we are all destined to become old, we cannot face this. As a result, we fly in the face of obvious fact and treat the old as something they clearly are not: a distinct "other," something different from us, something less than fully human. As I have previously argued, the old are not a distinct minority class on a par with, for example, Blacks, the poor, and Asian peasants, and we only deceive ourselves into thinking that they are. It is in depicting the nature and structure of this self-deceptive process that Mlle. de Beauvoir is at her best. Indeed, here she is insightful to a degree that, in my judgment, more than compensates for the lapses into Marxist sloganeering and the tedious presentation of

quasi-scientific detail. Her thoughts here make the book significant and worthwhile. Consider the following discussion of death and old age:

> When the time comes nearer, and even when the day is at hand, people usually prefer old age to death. And yet at a distance it is death that we see with a clearer eye. It forms part of what is immediately possible for us: at every period of our lives its threat is there: there are times when we come very close to it and often enough it terrifies us. Whereas no one ever becomes old in a single instant: unlike Buddha, when we are young or in our prime we do not think of ourselves as already being the dwelling-place of our own future old age. Age is removed from us by an extent of time so great that it merges with eternity: such a remote future seems unreal. Then again the dead are *nothing*. This nothingness can bring about a metaphysical vertigo, but in a way it is comforting—it raises no problems. 'I shall no longer exist.' In a disappearance of this kind I retain my identity. Thinking of myself as an old person when I am twenty or forty means thinking of myself as someone else, as *another* than myself. . . . When we look at the image of our own future provided by the old we do not believe it: an absurd inner voice whispers that *that* will never happen to us—when *that* happens it will no longer be ourselves that it happens to. Until the moment it is upon us old age is something that only affects other people. So it is understandable that society should manage to prevent us from seeing our own kind, our fellowmen, when we look at the old.[7]

Why is it that we see the old as so distinctly other, as less than full persons? Here it is at least plausible to appeal to certain aspects of Marxist theory. In bourgeois society, people tend to define themselves as people in terms of their projects, in terms of what they seek to accomplish or do.[8] And, in a purely capitalistic society, the value of what a person does is a function of the price that others, through the market, put upon it. We are all taught, at a very early age, that what we do is not to be thought of as having value for its own sake, as valuable for the satisfaction it provides in itself. Rather, only instrumental value is recognized, and our work, and with it our own self-image as a person, takes on the character of a mere commodity. Hobbes, the greatest philosopher of bourgeois society, put it very succinctly: "The value, or worth of a man, is, as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power; and therefore it is not

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7. *Id.* at 4-5.

8. For more on self-definition in terms of projects, see J. SARTRE, BEING AND NOTHINGNESS (H. Barnes transl., 1956). *See also* Murphy, *Rationality and the Fear of Death*, 59 THE MONIST, Apr. 1975.

absolute, but a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another."[9]

The old, for a variety of physiological and socioeconomic reasons, cease to have the kind of value described by Hobbes. As a result, they cease to be thought of as persons whom it is morally indecent to neglect. Having been taught this general outlook, they cease to think of themselves as persons. It is common for disadvantaged people to adopt a view of themselves which is consonant with their degraded social role. Since the old are no exception, we have an answer to the second basic question I raised at the outset: why are the aged on the whole such nonresisting parties to their own undoing? They do not resist their treatment for the same reason that women for a long time did not resist theirs. Seeing themselves as less than full persons, they do not really perceive their treatment as unjust.

Marx argued that in certain historical contexts our social being determines our consciousness, our self-concept. When the consciousness of a particular group has been distorted, the first step in any major improvement in their social condition must be a change in their consciousness. As women's liberation has shown, such changes in consciousness tend to be self-fulfulling. When people act like full persons and demand respect as such, they tend to be perceived by others as full persons and treated accordingly. All of us have been and continue to be improved as human beings by women's liberation, and we are all in debt to those women activists—including Mlle. de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*[10]—who started to bring about the change of consciousness among women. Thus, instead of wondering solely about what we can do for the old, we might also hope that they can do something for us. What we may need in part is a social movement of "aged liberation" characterized by old people acting like full persons and making the demands appropriate to that status. The existence of such a movement would improve the lot of all aged and would provide an image of old age for the rest of us that is less fearful and thus less likely to produce the kind of destructive self-deception about our own future which lies at the heart of the present social oppression of the aged. Simone de Beauvoir's passionate but unsentimental[11] book is perhaps a first step in the liberation of old people and, as such, it is to be welcomed and

9. T. HOBBES, LEVIATHAN 55 (A. Waller ed. 1904).
10. S. DE BEAUVOIR, THE SECOND SEX (1947).
11. The French title of the book is *La Vieillesse. The Coming of Age*—a romantic euphemism calling to mind such other euphemisms as "golden years" and "senior citizen"—is preposterous as a translation. The correct translation, of course, is simply *Old Age.*

forgiven for many of its faults. For, as Mlle. de Beauvoir clearly perceives,

> We must stop cheating: the whole meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us. If we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are: let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. It must be done if we are to take upon ourselves the entirety of our human state.[12]

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12. S. DE BEAUVOIR, *supra* note 3, at 5.

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