

Article

Confronting the Alienating Gaze towards the Ageing Individual

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore how ageing people experience a dehumanizing gaze that transforms them into objects of sympathy or uselessness or helplessness, which impacts their self-image, emotional state, and social connections. I do this through Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the gaze and Simone Weil's concept of attention vis-à-vis the alienating experiences of older adults. From Sartre, I show how the gaze functions as a source of social exclusion for elderly people, while Weil's concept of attention presents an opposing way to handle the objectifying gaze. I establish a dialogue between the two philosophers to demonstrate our ethical duty when interacting with older adults through attention as a validation of the natural dignity of ageing people while understanding their pain as a demand for justice, love, and compassion. The dialogue operates through dialectical means because Sartre's phenomenology shows how objectification risks occur through the closed gaze, and Weil's ethics of attention reveals the opposing practice of open gaze, yet these two do not produce a unified solution. This paper contributes to ageing studies through the development of a phenomenological and ethical framework to understand the ageing body while advocating for improved ways to interact with elderly people.

Keywords: Sartre, Weil, ageing, alienation

Old age¹ represents a natural universal process that humans need to experience during their developmental life cycle. The main changes people experience during this stage primarily affect their physical

¹ The paper uses "the elderly," "older adults," "older population," and "ageing individuals" interchangeably to describe people who reach their life cycle's later stages. I will explore the deeper conceptual issue of alienation that ageing individuals experience. The confrontation between ageing individuals and their sense of estrangement emerges from analyzing physical changes alongside social attitudes and institutional frameworks which lead to self-disconnection and social isolation. The paper's central argument about ageing as an existential and relational disconnection receives direct attention through its title focus on "alienation."

appearance while also reducing their strength and autonomy.² Physical transformations during ageing become the most noticeable indicators of ageing, because they influence both how the elderly view themselves and how society treats them.

Modern cultural practices toward elderly people reveal the dominant social views about ageing in today's society. The norm in numerous Western nations consists of institutionalized elderly care through nursing facilities. The Philippines has begun adopting this approach through the establishment of some aged residential facilities in its urban areas. These facilities provide a practical solution for adult children who lack the ability to personally care for their ageing parents, yet they create significant emotional and financial challenges. The modern approach represents a complete break from traditional Filipino cultural norms based on family responsibility. The definition of modern cultural practices does not create a straightforward distinction between Western and Philippine cultures. The ageing experiences of Filipinos occur in a mixed environment because Western-style institutional eldercare exists alongside traditional family-based caregiving practices. The interpretive framework presented in this work does not create a binary opposition between Western and Filipino cultures but shows how global ageist marginalization patterns transform local caregiving standards. The analysis of the Sartre–Weil dialectic within this hybrid context reveals the ethical conflicts that occur when family-based eldercare traditions encounter institutional and neoliberal elderly care systems. The traditional approach also comes with various challenges despite its advantages. The dependent relationship between ageing parents and their children through caregiving maintains a basis in care but leads to feelings of social isolation. The reduction of elderly people to economically dependent and physically fragile individuals results in their treatment as burdens instead of dignified persons with agency.³ Through this process, older adults experience a silent marginalization that prevents them from participating actively in society.

In this paper, I examine the current social exclusion and marginalization that affect elderly people at present. I will use Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the gaze to study the methods through which ageing individuals become objectified by other people.⁴ I maintain that the way people look at others diminishes their being and reduces their emotional strength. I will use Simone Weil's ethical concept of attention to develop an

² Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Ageing in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2.

³ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 12-15.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 340.

alternative method for observing and connecting with others. This framework uses Sartre and Weil as central interlocutors instead of other thinkers who have studied ageing and perception because their work best explains the alienating effect of being seen. The phenomenological approach of Sartre's *le regard* theory specifically reveals how ageing makes individuals vulnerable to being transformed from subjects into objects. Sartre specifically reveals how ageing makes subjects vulnerable to the gaze of others through his work, although Simone de Beauvoir studied ageing as cultural exile and Maurice Merleau-Ponty focused on embodied reciprocity. The vulnerability of subjectivity under the other's gaze becomes more pronounced during the ageing process according to Sartre. Sartre fails to provide any direction about ethical responses to such alienation. The framework then requires Weil's essential contribution. Through her concept of attention, Weil establishes a practice of perception which depends on humility, love, and receptive openness. Weil presents a non-possessive openness which enables others to appear without appropriation, while Emmanuel Levinas describes the face as a command for responsibility, and Iris Murdoch defines the just and loving gaze. The ethical vision presented by Weil directly addresses the common experiences of invisibility and infantilization that older adults face. The framework of Sartre and Weil presents a dialectical system where Sartre identifies objectification risks and Weil develops a method of attention that restores dignity. The dialectical approach I describe does not follow Hegelian synthesis but creates a tension between Sartre's analysis of alienating gaze and Weil's ethics of attention, which enhance each other. The distinction between the closed and open gaze emerges as a dialectical pair because the closed gaze reveals how ageing individuals become objectified, yet the open gaze shows how ethical attention can prevent this reduction.

The Ageing Process and Its Challenges

Life naturally includes ageing as a fundamental element. People who live into their older years experience both the accumulation of wisdom, reflective abilities, the decline of their capacities, and the loss of important aspects of life. In developmental psychology, scholars study old age as the concluding life period, which brings distinct responsibilities and profound existential obstacles. According to Erik Erikson, integrity and despair form the psychosocial conflict during this stage, while Robert Havighurst lists declining health and retirement and changing social roles as developmental tasks.⁵ These theoretical frameworks show that ageing exists beyond

⁵ Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: Norton, 1982); See Robert J. Havighurst, "Developmental Tasks and Education," in *Journal of Education*, 96 (1973), 5.

biological changes because it involves personal aspects and social interactions.

In this paper, I examine ageing through social and philosophical perspectives while excluding biological, psychological, and economic aspects. The exclusion of biological, psychological, and economic factors from ageing does not imply their irrelevance to the process. Pascal Massie and Mitchell Staude explain that ageing unites biological elements with personal aspects and social dimensions. The reduction of ageing or the selection of one aspect over others fails in understanding the complete phenomenon. The ageing process creates an unresolvable complex nature.⁶ The selection of philosophical aspects in my research stems from a focus on scope rather than purposeful exclusion. This paper aims to establish dialogue between existential-ethical analysis and ageing studies, which lacks sufficient philosophical investigation. The research incorporates biological and psychological findings when they support the main philosophical inquiry about how different ways of observing older adults affect their dignity, agency, and their visibility. Horace Kallen correctly explained that ageing describes the complete span from birth to death which modern society uses to describe an advanced period of life after reaching adulthood.⁷ According to his observations, ageing represents more than temporal progression because it evolves into a social and cultural phenomenon that gains importance during the later stages of life. Social gerontology establishes its claim upon the shift from bodily perspectives to self-perception within social frameworks, as this field evaluates how older adults are treated by society.⁸

Through social gerontology, the field transforms the physical aspects of ageing into an examination of how society views elderly individuals, their social positions, and social exclusion. Social status refers to the elderly population's material well-being, along with their treatment and perception by society.⁹ The physical changes that accompany ageing including declining mobility and appearance alterations along with diminished productivity result in social detachment from others. Instead of experiencing old age as a period of rest and reflection for fulfillment, many elderly people suffer from emotional states of loss and desolation. Later life dignity erodes primarily because of feeling unimportant instead of physical limitations. The

⁶ See Pascal Massie and Mitchell Staude, "Ageing-in-the-World," in *Continental Philosophy Review*, 57 (2024).

⁷ See Horace Kallen, "Philosophy, Ageing, and the Aged," in *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 6 (1972), 4.

⁸ Harry R. Moody and Jennifer R. Sasser, *Ageing: Concepts and Controversies*, 9th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2017), 64.

⁹ See Chris Gillead and Paul Higgs, "Gerontology versus Geriatrics: Different Ways of Understanding Ageing and Old Age," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Ageing*, ed. by Geoffrey Scarre (UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 38.

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unfavorable ageing experiences emerge from social frameworks which people develop through their collective reactions and interactions. The elderly population becomes invisible in modern society. The term “modern society” describes cultural environments from late modernity which base their values on consumerism and neoliberalism while emphasizing youthfulness, productivity, and independence. The sociological meaning of invisibility refers to social exclusion and silenced voices instead of actual disappearance. Older adults continue to appear in family settings and cultural media, but their viewpoints remain ignored while their roles become minimized, and their existence is mainly seen as requiring care. The social structures of today create widespread yet incomplete invisibility for ageing individuals. People evaluate the worth of elders through their economic value and their ability to fit in the societal norms of youthful energy. Jean Améry argues that society tends to view elderly people as nothing.¹⁰ Using postcolonial theory, the concept of the subaltern developed by Gayatri Spivak emphasizes how the elderly face similar marginalization as colonized peoples by losing their ability to self-represent.¹¹ They exist without being heard because their voices remain disregarded. The public sphere silences them so their pain becomes inaudible, and their personal identity disappears. The described social situation exists worldwide beyond the Philippines. The Filipino population displays global patterns of elderly marginalization through disregard as well as tokenistic treatment and institutional placement. The elderly face frequent treatment as nuisances instead of receiving recognition for their life experiences and remaining abilities.

Academic research about ageing exists in a state of underdevelopment across various fields. Philosophy shows a distinct absence of attention to this topic. The fundamental existential concepts of death, freedom, and embodiment receive more attention in philosophical discourse than ageing does. The field of ageing has received substantial philosophical attention.¹² On another note, the Philippines limits gerontological studies to psychology and sociology which creates a theoretical void that this research

¹⁰ See Jean Améry, *On Ageing, Revolt and Resignation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1968), 68.

¹¹ Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 276.

¹² *The Coming of Age* by Simone de Beauvoir stands as a fundamental work, while Margaret Gullette, Hanne Laceulle, and *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Ageing* showcase the gradual growth of this field. The phenomenological study by Pascal Massie and Mitchell Staude titled “Ageing-in-the-World” follows this direction of research. The number of philosophical works about ageing remains significantly lower than the extensive body of literature on death, freedom, and embodiment in existential philosophy. The philosophy of ageing exists as an underdeveloped field which requires additional systematic research rather than being considered a complete void. The current paper aims to contribute through this approach.

paper aims to fill.¹³ The complete comprehension of ageing as a human experience requires philosophical examination to study social alienation and visibility issues that older adults encounter because of ageist discrimination. The philosophical approach functions as a methodological bracketing which enables the existential-ethical aspects of ageing to become more apparent. The psychological frameworks (e.g., Havighurst) and feminist phenomenology (e.g., Young) enhance the philosophical analysis instead of replacing it.

The complete understanding of older adult marginalization requires us to shift from sociological descriptions and psychological diagnoses toward phenomenological and existential analysis. The framework receives its phenomenological designation because it studies how elderly people experience ageing through their self-perception when others observe them. The concept of existentialism reveals how ageing creates freedom, alienation, and embodiment as fundamental human conditions that face a crisis. The ontological signals demonstrate that the ageing subject transforms from being a subject into an object through the social relation of the gaze. The ethical framework extends beyond description because it establishes a responsibility model for our interactions with others. The analysis includes analytical elements because it separates open from closed gaze to reveal the differences between various observation methods. I establish its methodological foundation through these combined terms. The elderly experience invisibility and muted subjectivity not primarily because of physical changes or altered social roles, but because others fail to recognize them as subjects—persons with histories, agency, and dignity—rather than as mere embodiments of decline.¹⁴ The process of being observed and evaluated by others becomes essential for understanding the internal feelings of alienation that occur during ageing. The process of losing personal control over identity while others start to objectify older people represents a fundamental ontological issue. The existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre provides valuable insights at this point. Through Sartre's concept of the look (*le regard*), "we can understand how elderly people become objects in society because they

¹³ The majority of Philippine gerontological scholarship exists within psychology and sociology because researchers focus on demographic changes and family caregiving systems and psychosocial adjustments. The UP Population Institute published Grace T. Cruz's *Ageing in the Philippines: Issues and Challenges* in 2019, while Adrian N.S. Badana and Ross Andel wrote "Aging in the Philippines" for *The Gerontologist* in 2018. The existing research provides important insights but fail to examine the philosophical and ethical aspects of ageing. The present research addresses two main issues: the general lack of attention to ageing in philosophical studies and the specific need for Philippine philosophical examination of ageing as a systematic problem.

¹⁴ I used the term "true form" to refer to the understanding of older adults as narrative beings who create their own meaning rather than being defined by biological deterioration or economic need. In *Ageing and Self-Realization: Cultural Narratives About Later Life* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018), Hanne Laceulle shows how ageing persons should be viewed independently of deficit-based cultural scripts.

experience fixation and marginalization while losing their complete subjectivity in a culture that values youth and utility and seeks visibility.”¹⁵ Sartre’s philosophical ideas about the look are complemented by Simone Weil, who developed a Christian mystical approach to ethical attention. The theological context of Weil’s work does not prevent her from defining attention as the rarest and purest form of generosity which stands in opposition to Sartre’s phenomenological study of the look. Weil presents an opposing method of observation which avoids objectification while preserving the dignity of others through generous attention.

Sartre’s Notion of the Look

The study of older adults’ internal suffering and marginalization requires moving past sociological descriptions to perform a phenomenological investigation which explores how others affect subjective experiences. The concept of the look (*le regard*) developed by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* provides this analytical framework. According to Sartre, we are not isolated consciousnesses. Our existence exists within the social world because we exist as objects for others. Through the Other’s look, we become visible, but this visibility comes at a cost: it objectifies us.¹⁶

The experience of being looked at by another person reveals to me that I exist both as an active subject and an observed object. The awareness of being observed leads me to recognize that others judge and interpret me. The Other’s gaze transforms me into a being who exists for the Other beyond my self-perceived identity.¹⁷ The encounter changes my status from a self-creating consciousness to an object that exists within the perspective of another person. The look establishes intersubjective relations yet creates alienation because my identity becomes defined by external perspectives rather than my own self-authorship. This process creates negative effects that often produce anxiety and shame and cause people to accept restrictive stories.

Sartre’s framework becomes particularly important when applied to the study of ageing. Older adults face continuous social scrutiny that carries cultural stereotypes about ageing that link it to physical deterioration, cognitive decline, uselessness, and dependency. These gazes persist beyond

¹⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 282-285. In particular, the keyhole voyeur vignette illustrating how the gaze of the Other transforms subjectivity into objecthood. See Luna Dolezal, “Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging: Reconsidering Sartre’s Account of Shame,” in *Human Studies*, 40 (2017), which situates Sartre’s gaze within broader phenomenological and ethical frameworks.

¹⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 340.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 345.

casual observation because they exist as institutionalized forms of perception throughout media, healthcare, and everyday social interactions.¹⁸ The elderly become trapped by these forced identities that Kathleen Woodward describes as “the mirror of age.”¹⁹

The experience of objectification exists beyond philosophical ontology²⁰ because it directly affects how people perceive themselves in their everyday lives. The gaze performs more than observation because it penetrates through skin layers to affect psychological states which determine self-perception. The way society views ageing bodies creates psychological distress which leads to feelings of self-worth decline and social exclusion and emotional detachment. The experiences described by Sartre demonstrate affective alienation which results in both lost agency and declining vitality because the world no longer validates one’s worth. Objectification transforms from a philosophical concept into a fundamental existential and bodily experience. The weight of existence that many ageing people carry includes both their frail bodies and their self-image that external observers have reshaped. The ageist gaze makes this situation worse because it turns elderly people into functional problems to be managed instead of seeing them as persons with agency, histories, relationships, and dignity that continue beyond decline.²¹ The gaze fails to recognize elderly individuals as narrative beings who possess memories, experiences, and exercise agency. The focus of this gaze rests on decline indicators such as tremors, forgetfulness, and wrinkles which lead to silent conclusions of inadequacy. Sartre warns about the complete power of the Other’s gaze which removes the subject’s freedom and potential.²² In *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir shares similar concerns about how society handles older adults by stating that society actively removes them from meaningful human existence instead of just ignoring them. She maintains that the aged receive treatment as if they belong to a different species which results in their symbolic and existential removal

¹⁸ See T. Storm Heter, “Sartre and the Gaze: From Shame to Liberation,” in *Sartre Studies International*, 9 (2003), 53.

¹⁹ Kathleen Woodward, *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 195.

²⁰ I used the phrase *beyond ontology* to mean that the concept of objectification extends past philosophical ontology because it represents a lived experience which produces concrete psychological and social effects. In this sense, Sartre uses the concept of the gaze in *Being and Nothingness* to transition from an ontological explanation of intersubjectivity toward an existential and phenomenological analysis of alienation in real-life experiences.

²¹ The concept of “full personhood” refers to the acknowledgment of older adults as beings who possess experiences and meaning while maintaining their agency and dignity instead of being viewed as dependent bodies. This concept aligns with the “true form” I previously described which represents the actual lived experience of the ageing self. Laceulle explores this concept in *Ageing and Self-Realization: Cultural Narratives About Later Life*.

²² See Gail Linsenbard, *Starting with Sartre* (London: Continuum, 2008), 98.

from the common structures that organize daily life.²³ The elderly exist outside the productive, desirable, and progressive social time framework which defines normal temporal structures. The elderly experience denial of both visibility and temporality because society views them as past remnants instead of present participants or future contributors. She maintains that old age transforms into a social state of non-existence which creates a transitional phase where people lose their human status in the eyes of others. Ageing functions as both a biological transition and a social punishment that removes individuals from meaningful existence. The dehumanizing removal of elderly people from social interactions occurs through institutional rules and cultural beliefs as well as through the way we observe them. The way we perceive others and the permission we give them to be perceived establishes their position within the current moral and social structure.

The way people observe does not exist as a single uniform practice. In my reading of Sartre, there are two distinct forms of observation: the open gaze and the closed gaze. A note on terminology: I use multiple contrastive pairs which include alienation vs. connection, sympathy vs. dignity, and visibility vs. invisibility. I use these terms to describe different aspects of a single dialectical framework rather than presenting them as separate conceptual systems. The core distinction exists between the closed and open gaze. The open gaze functions to validate and dignify while creating connections between people, but the closed gaze performs objectification, exclusion, and infantilization. The other paired terms should be interpreted as different aspects or effects of this fundamental dialectic instead of functioning as separate binary oppositions.

Going back to the open gaze, it functions as an ethical perception method because it refrains from making judgments while creating opportunities for disclosure and maintaining space for others to present themselves naturally. The open gaze functions similarly to Levinas's "face-to-face" encounter because it resists converting the other into a category.²⁴ Levinas describes the face as more than physical appearance because it reveals the absolute uniqueness of the other person. True recognition of the other occurs through their disruptive presence which forces us into responsibility. Through open observation, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in support of Sartre, argues that we experience perception reversibility which reveals that seeing another person means being seen by them, and this mutual

²³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. by Patrick O'Brian (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 284.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194.

visibility produces an ethical bond.²⁵ The space of mutual visibility creates a field where the ageing body moves from being an inanimate viewing object to an active perceptive entity. The reversibility breaks down the observer–observed hierarchy which enables a more reciprocal mutual mode of being-together. The elderly possess both perception and expression abilities despite their physical weakness because they remain active subjects who can see and respond. The open gaze seeks to identify unfinished human elements in the ageing subject while avoiding their deficit-based perceptions, such as wrinkles and forgetfulness. The gaze of the open eye rejects the “arrogant eye” approach which Iris Marion Young describes as viewing others from a place of dominance or observation or emotional detachment.²⁶ Through this vision, she identifies embodied vision as a type of perception which combines situated partial perception with attentive awareness of the lived experience of others. When working with elderly people, it becomes essential to understand their unique nature through focused attention because their experiences cannot be reduced to abstract concepts or common traits.

Through the open gaze, people establish a connection with others instead of simply perceiving them. With this, the elderly gain permission to show themselves without undergoing any form of correction or pity, or infantilization. The process of disclosure happens beyond words because it emerges through body movements, quietness, and deliberate pacing as well as emotional connection. To perceive these expressions correctly, the observer needs to develop Simone Weil’s concept of attention, which she explains as the most exceptional and purest form of generosity.²⁷ In this context, attention represents a moral approach which means being available to others. A person needs to clear their mind of preconceived notions so that the genuine nature of the other person can emerge. When looking at elderly people we should view them as persons who maintain their capacity to experience joy, along with obtaining valuable insights and establishing meaningful relationships.

The ethical way of looking at people includes political effects. A society that bases its visibility systems on usefulness and productivity faces resistance through the practice of extending open observation to elderly individuals. The open gaze breaks the dominant cultural belief that ageing makes people irrelevant, creating space for new narratives about caregiving relationships, spiritual development, and creative expression during older adulthood. Hanne Laceulle maintains that we require an ethics of ageing that

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133.

²⁶ Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 123.

²⁷ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial, 2001), 64.

uses narrative approaches to surpass biological and economic evaluation by listening to life stories of becoming.²⁸ The open gaze establishes the condition for this listening to occur. Through the open gaze, we must reconsider both our views on ageing people and our understanding of the nature of time. The closed gaze supports the concept of *chrononormativity* which Barbara Adam describes as a strict temporal system that measures life through developmental events and economic productivity.²⁹ The open gaze fights against the strict timeline by establishing that time during old age remains valuable and meaningful. Such time holds ethical worth. A society needs the open gaze to uphold human dignity from birth until death because it is essential for any community that wants to maintain dignity throughout all life stages. This transformation of care into a moral interaction occurs through the open gaze. Through frailty, a person continues to be a meaning-making subject. This method restores in elderly individuals the face that ageist culture habitually removes from them. The distinction between open and closed gazes exists as a dynamic system rather than a fixed typology. The open gaze gains its ethical importance through the threats which the closed gaze presents, yet the closed gaze requires the open gaze to demonstrate its complete meaning. The ethical significance of our visual interactions with ageing people emerges from their dialectical relationship.

The closed gaze, on the other hand, functions as an oppressive form of practice. It assumes, defines, and imposes. The ageing body receives interpretation through a restricted viewpoint which focuses on perceived losses while ignoring ongoing developments. Modern societies display a widespread closed gaze because they both worship youth while fearing the process of ageing. According to Margaret Gullette's "decline narratives" theory, cultural training programs teach people to view ageing as a complete loss of beauty along with competence, energy, and relevance.³⁰ Such narratives create heavy burdens that transform good intentions into paternalistic or patronizing behavior. Family members start to replace the elderly person's voice with their own instead of engaging in dialogue, while institutions focus on safety measures that strip away the elderly person's autonomy. The loss of autonomy emerges directly from the closed gaze because it makes assumptions about ageing people's identities, capabilities, and their acceptable life choices. Annette Baier identifies a moral deficiency in intergenerational ethics by showing how elderly people receive treatment

²⁸ Laceulle, *Ageing and Self-Realization: Cultural Narratives About Later Life*, 129.

²⁹ Barbara Adam, *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 102.

³⁰ Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, 25.

as if their preferences lose validity when their youth ends.³¹ The closed gaze functions as both a method of observation and an instrument of epistemic injustice because it treats elderly individuals as objects of concern while denying them the status of knowledge producers or meaning makers.

The closed gaze exists because neoliberal values emphasize productivity alongside independence. Societies that measure worth through output create subtle social exclusion for people who appear unproductive. The closed gaze portrays ageing as a moral deficiency because it displays dependency and decay which ultimately lead to death. Cultural theorist Susan Sontag examines how illness and ageing become symbolic representations of weakness and waste through language which actively contributes to the marginalization of ageing bodies.³² Through its dual nature, the closed gaze operates as both an ethical framework and an aesthetic perspective. The closed gaze observes elderly people but fails to penetrate their inner selves, as it detects deterioration instead of life experience and uselessness instead of inner strength. The transformation of our ageing, relational, and responsibility perspectives requires more than criticism because it needs a complete shift in how we envision these concepts. The open form of the gaze needs development because it requires us to suspend judgment while enabling dialogue and recognizing the complete personhood of ageing subjects beyond their biological limitations and societal fears.

The ethical significance of our observation methods toward others, particularly the elderly population, reaches its peak level. Sartre's phenomenology demonstrates that observation always carries an unneutral quality. Our observation practices either restrict or free people while simultaneously creating alienation or affirmation. We need to determine methods of observation that prevent reduction of others. A gaze that enables elderly people to show their complete being rather than viewing them as historical remnants while maintaining their current dignity and upcoming possibilities.

Sartre shows how observation affects human existence through his work which demonstrates how perception functions as both a liberating and imprisoning force that leads to alienation or affirmation. Observation of elderly people needs to evolve beyond its current passive or diagnostic nature into a moral response. A new form of observation should exist which prevents the reduction of others to their physical weaknesses while avoiding the fixation of their identity to past times.

³¹ Annette C. Baier, *Reflections on How We Live* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 82.

³² See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2001), 90.

Simone Weil's Attention

The essential contribution of Simone Weil emerges at this point. Weil argues that attention represents a state of being present which surpasses basic observation because it actively resists the urge to control or define others. The open gaze risks establishing dominance, but Weil's attention starts with silent humility and the readiness to hear the other person through their presence, even if they do not speak. Through Weil, we transition from an ethics of vision to an ethics of receptivity which enables us to see without consuming but instead through listening.

The essential question—*What kind of response does seeing the elderly suffer demand of us?*—emerges when elderly people experience alienation because it demands our response to their suffering. Simone Weil provides the most profound yet challenging answer about how to respond to an ageing person's suffering, through the practice of attention. The world's dominant structures of distraction and individualism, together with instrumentalized care, require a complete shift in perception which Weil calls ethics of attention. Weil restores attention to its ethical nature by defining it as an intentional unselfing practice which reveals the other person in their complete singularity.³³ The need for this specific kind of attention becomes most critical during the ageing process. Older adults receive treatment as problems to be managed alongside pity-based responses which fail to acknowledge their complete personhood. Weil's definition of attention for the elderly means being fully present to them without any judgment or agenda while dropping protective filters that reduce authentic moral connections. The importance of attention in ageing becomes evident when we examine Frits de Lange's concept of "existential gravity of ageing." According to de Lange, suffering from old age includes illness, fragility, and exclusion but suffering in old age refers to the existential burden of dependency and loss and the approaching end of life.³⁴ Weil argues that understanding attention stays with suffering without dismissing or fixing it while acknowledging the actual condition of the afflicted person. The elderly need this form of generosity because they experience silent and invisible suffering which goes beyond medical treatment. Through her ethical framework, Weil converts ageing from a marginalized state into a place where human dignity remains visible during periods of decline. Iris Murdoch supports Weil's discussion on attention and maintains that it means directing

³³ See Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Help Today* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1997), 132.

³⁴ Frits de Lange, "Suffering from or in Old Age? The Existential Gravity of Ageing," in *Journal of Population Ageing*, 14 (2021), 357.

a just and loving gaze toward individual realities.³⁵ The perception of others requires looking beyond their usefulness in society or productivity to see them through the perspectives of love and justice.

Weil maintains that developing this ethical form of attention serves both personal virtues, social and moral responsibilities. She maintains that modern society, which emphasizes ambition, ego, and speed, destroys our ability to focus on others, particularly those who need our attention most.³⁶ The elderly face the highest risk of losing their capacity for attention because society views them through negative lenses. Weil demands that people practice “active passivity” which means waiting instead of seeking and listening instead of imposing.³⁷ The practice of ageing requires us to fight against speaking on behalf of elderly people so they can express themselves freely.

The highest expression of attention merges with the essence of love. Weil explains that intellectual attention requires the addition of acceptance, consent, and love, which form a higher level of attention.³⁸ Weil defines love as a moral openness which grants reality to the other person. Emmanuel Gabellieri argues that Weil believes attention brings the other into existence by giving them moral weight, value, and existence in the moral universe.³⁹ Through attention we actively bring the other person into existence.

The divine presence that flows from others should be recognized as the true nature of such love instead of viewing it as selfless giving. Weil maintains that love, which starts with consent, differs from desire-driven love because it represents openness toward loving without seeking possession or results.⁴⁰ The Christian ethical *caritas* finds expression in this kind of love which develops from justice alongside humility and respect for human nature. Weil presents a form of neighborly love which opposes utilitarian ethics because it reveals suffering persons as sacred rather than moral objects. The importance of this concept becomes particularly evident when observing how society handles ageing individuals. In Weil’s ethical framework, we must develop a new way of seeing that brings back dignity to people whom society treats as invisible burdens or disposable objects. Loving the elderly other involves more than functional care because it establishes their status as

³⁵ See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 34.

³⁶ See Weil, *Waiting for God*, 65-66.

³⁷ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 2002), 117.

³⁸ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 66.

³⁹ Emmanuel Gabellieri, “Simone Weil: Attention and the Gaze,” in *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, ed. by Athanasios Moulakis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 98.

⁴⁰ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 108.

individuals who experience both physical and emotional states and hold sacred inner depths.

Weil rejects any religious practice that transforms neighborly love into a way for personal spiritual advancement. According to Weil, true love exists independently of our actions “for God” since it flows through us as God loves the afflicted through our willingness to consent.⁴¹ In this view, we are not the origin of compassion; we are its conduits. Weil’s ethics prove challenging yet essential because they demand our personal diminishment to enable the other person’s growth.

Through our attentiveness, we provide more than care because we actively participate in just actions. Attention establishes a connection which unites separate individuals and hidden people with their rightful place in the world. This kind of moral vision serves as a survival tool for elderly people because their suffering exists as an internal, subtle, and often silenced experience. Through attention we give back to people not only visibility but also meaningfulness.

Towards an Ethical Framework of Ageing from Sartre and Weil

The philosophical perspectives of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone Weil derive from distinct intellectual backgrounds of existential phenomenology and Christian mysticism, yet they develop a productive combination when analyzing the topic of ageing. The concept of the gaze from Sartre’s philosophy precisely illustrates the way human subjects become defenseless when confronted with observing individuals, while their identity gets distorted through others’ objectifying perception. The way others observe elderly people leads to their social estrangement because they face either condescending or dismissive, or paternalistic evaluations which diminish their independence and dignity. As bodies under decline, they lose their status as agents along with their ability to think or bear meaningful content.

Alienation exists as an existential, social, and structural experience. These social norms demonstrate the core values of modernity because they value productivity together with youth status, independence, and new ideas. Modern society views elderly individuals as temporal anomalies which exist outside the framework of “chrononormativity” according to Barbara Adam’s definition of time norms based on work efficiency and contribution. Simone de Beauvoir describes elderly individuals as “exiled from the human condition” because they exist in a timeless state between their past memories and their becoming irrelevant. According to Sartre, exile results from how others perceive age as well as from the effects of ageing itself.

⁴¹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 120-121.

Sartre stops at describing the problem but does not explain how to solve it. Sartre provides a method for analyzing the experience of being observed, yet he fails to establish a set of rules for ethical observation. Simone Weil provides essential guidance because she developed the concept of attention which functions as a moral practice that transforms how people perceive things. According to Weil, active passivity refers to a state of readiness that accepts the full uniqueness of others without any form of intervention or judgment, or appropriation. Through this form of attention, one resists the tendency to own or to form assumptions or to establish definitions. Sartre and Weil present an ethical system that consists of recognizing dangerous observations and acquiring responsible observational skills.

The analysis demonstrates that the relative position between open and closed gazes operates as a dialectical framework. The categories exist in a dynamic relationship because Sartre reveals the alienating power of the closed gaze and Weil presents attention as the practice that defines the open gaze. The ethical framework for dealing with ageing emerges from their interactive relationship. The ethical framework presented by Sartre and Weil functions dialectically to show the risks of looking according to Sartre and the method of responsible looking as taught by Weil. This framework can be articulated through the distinction between the closed gaze and the open gaze. The ageing person faces a reduction to a specific role or function or deficit when people view them through a closed perspective according to both Sartre's and Weil's assessments. The body gets treated as an icon of what is lost instead of being seen as a life-giving container. The silence of elderly people results primarily from the failure to hear them rather than any intention to harm. Such behavior results in both infantilization and neglect while also causing overwhelming inappropriate care.

The open gaze represents more than passive observation since it establishes a moral attitude. The open gaze incorporates Sartre's knowledge of mutual human exposure while following Weil's guidance for *unpossessive* love. The open gaze waits *and* listens. The gaze resists taking over silence through superficial answers or incorrect consolation. The open gaze enables elderly people to communicate their personal experiences and maintain control over their expression of self while preventing others from reducing them to their age or their needs. A person maintains complete ontological dignity regardless of their physical condition or social isolation.

The unified framework provides essential guidance to structure both institutional arrangements and interpersonal bonds. Caregivers display their commitment to elderly care through their choice to view their patients either as care partners or as a completion of tasks. The manner of speaking between adult children and their ageing parents depends on this perspective. Public

discussions about ageing will either present it as a crisis or as a valuable stage of life when people explore its deep spiritual, philosophical, and emotional aspects. The framework presents the opportunity to review our time-related interactions. Weil's ethical framework based on attention functions at a pace that opposes the fast-moving approaches of consumerism and medicalized ageing practices. Some essential truths about vulnerability, along with finitude and grace, become accessible only through periods of stillness and patience. Through this approach, attention serves both as an ethical response toward elderly people and as a spiritual way to fight the dehumanizing fast pace of contemporary existence.

This synthesis between Sartre and Weil establishes a fresh approach to ageing philosophy which accepts dependence, slowness, and death as chances for profound moral relationships. The philosophical perspective understands ageing as an initiation point which leads to different methods of observation and forms of existence and affection.

The act of observing older people with complete attention means we are present in this moment. Our existence counts. Our life continues in its development.

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