



# Loss, Loneliness, and the Question of Subjectivity in Old Age

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Accepted: 27 March 2023  
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## Abstract

When a loved one dies, it is common for the bereaved to feel profoundly lonely, disconnected from the world with the sense that they no longer belong. In philosophy, this experience of ‘loss and loneliness’ has been interpreted according to both a loss of possibilities and a loss of the past. But it is unclear how these interpretations apply to the distinctive way in which loss and loneliness manifest in old age. Drawing on the phenomenological analyses of old age given by de Beauvoir and Améry, I consider how the diminishment of the capacity for projection and recollection complicate recent interpretations of loss and loneliness, whilst nevertheless reinforcing the conclusion that in old age subjectivity is necessarily impoverished. Developing a critical stance on de Beauvoir and Améry’s underlying conception of subjectivity, I turn to Levinas in considering whether or not there is a way to reimagine subjectivity such that the estrangement and alienation of older adults might be ameliorated rather than exacerbated. Grounded in the passive body-in-itself rather than the self-transcending capacity of the body-for-itself, I suggest it becomes possible to reconceptualise the experience of loss and loneliness in old age; both in terms of what is lost and what needs to be restored if older adults are to be helped to find themselves at home in the world in the midst of, and indeed because of, manifold loss.

**Keywords** Loneliness · Bereavement · Old age · Subjectivity · de Beauvoir · Levinas

## 1 Introduction

When a loved one dies, especially an intimate partner, it is common for the one bereft to feel intensely lonely. The world in which the loved one was present falls away and one can feel a lack of interpersonal connection so profound that one finds oneself detached and estranged from one’s surroundings, with a sense that one no longer belongs. When sustained, this experience of profound loneliness in the midst of loss can have a significant and deleterious impact upon the grieving process (Vedder et al. 2022; Lund 1989; Fried et al. 2015). Confronted with a world in which one’s loved one is now painfully absent, the bereaved must navigate this distressing experience of disconnection in order to relearn the world, restore a sense of belonging, and feel once again at home in the world after loss (Attig 2011). There have been several recent attempts at interpreting the philosophical significance of this experience of estrangement

after bereavement, which I will term the experience of ‘loss and loneliness.’ In particular, researchers have focussed on clarifying both what it is that is lost in this experience, and what needs to be restored if one is to feel at home again in the world. In their broadly commensurable approaches, Matthew Ratcliffe interprets this experience of being adrift in an unfamiliar world after a loved one dies according to the *loss of possibilities* (Ratcliffe 2019a, b, c, d, 2020, 2022, forthcoming), whilst Thomas Fuchs understands it according to the irrevocable *loss of the past* (Fuchs 2018). Whilst Ratcliffe focusses on the significance of possibility and Fuchs on recollection, their interpretations are nevertheless contiguous in that they are grounded in a comparable conception of subjectivity, namely: subjectivity as constituted by the self-transcending capacity of the body-for-itself. On this view, dominant throughout existential phenomenology, existence is simultaneously extended across past, present and future, and is defined by the active and intentional projection into possibilities and recollection of the past. Whilst both Ratcliffe and Fuchs recognise that the transcendent capacity of the body-for-itself is significantly affected by loss and loneliness, its structure nevertheless remains intact, and it

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plays a crucial role in the restoration process of relearning how to be at home in the world.

Whilst I am broadly sympathetic with Ratcliffe and Fuchs' interpretations of loss and loneliness, the concern I want to raise in this article is whether or not their approaches are sensitive enough to the distinctive way in which this experience manifests in *old age*.<sup>1</sup> This concern is important, not least because older adults are the cohort most likely to suffer a significant bereavement (often as part of a multitude of compounding bereavements) and to experience intense and prolonged loneliness in the wake of such a loss (Anderson and Dimond 1995; Costello 1999; Glick et al. 1974; Hawkey and Cacioppo 2010; Parkes and Prigerson 2010; Shear et al. 2013; Schoenmakers et al. 2012; Stroebe et al. 2007; Szabó et al. 2019; Utz et al. 2013; Van Baarsen et al. 1999). This concern is further pressing because phenomenological studies of aging such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (1970/1996) and Jean Améry's *On Aging* (1968/1994) demonstrate that old age is a time when the transcendent capacity for projecting towards possibilities or recollecting the past is increasingly and *irrevocably* diminished. If the body-for-itself is undermined irreversibly, it becomes difficult to see how those in old age might constitute the meaning and significance of their subjectivity at all, let alone reorient themselves to the world after loss.

Operative here and throughout this article is the Sartrean idea that human bodily experience is ambiguously composed of both the lived body as it is subjectively experienced (being-for-itself) and the corporeal body as it objectively endures (body-in-itself); an iteration of the conventional distinction between the *lived body* (*Leib*) and the *corporeal body* (*Körper*) informing many phenomenological interpretations of embodiment (Plessner 1975). In *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1978), Sartre defines the 'body-for-itself' as the self-transcending, active body, through which one projects towards possibilities and recollects the past, in order to grasp one's finitude, take hold of the meaning of one's existence, and work towards one's essence. By contrast, the 'body-in-itself' describes the immanent, passive body which exists factually as a material, biological organism that can be affected. The relationship between the two is complex: an entangled yet disunified tension between *being* a body and *having* a body. As Sartre writes: "The body is what I

nihilate. It is the in-itself which is surpassed by the nihilating for-itself and which reapprehends the for-itself in this very surpassing" (Sartre 1978, p. 309). Composed of the body-for-itself and the body-in-itself, Bernhard Waldenfels conceptualises this ambiguous, twofold structure of embodiment as the "split self," both "seeing and seen, hearing and heard, touching and touched, moving and moved" (Waldenfels 2011, p. 49). As Waldenfels notes, the "inner tension between both poles leaves room for extreme forms of fusion as well as dismemberment." That is to say, the proximity and distance between the body-for-itself and the body-in-itself "leaves room for the most diverse forms of pathology." And yet, unlike depersonalization in schizophrenia or fixation in trauma which "do not fall completely outside the normal splitting of our self" (51–52), I want to suggest that old age is a special case, wherein the split self suffers an inevitable and *irretrievable* collapse.

Drawing on the phenomenological analyses of old age given by de Beauvoir and Améry, the first aim of this article is to demonstrate how old age can be seen to diminish the transcendent capacity for projecting towards possibilities and for recollecting the past. In so doing, I will consider the ways in which this diminishment complicates Ratcliffe and Fuchs' interpretations of loss and loneliness, whilst nevertheless reinforcing the conclusion that in old age, subjectivity as the self-transcending capacity of the body-for-itself is necessarily impoverished. Developing a critical stance on de Beauvoir and Améry's underlying conception of subjectivity, the second aim of this article is to then consider whether or not there is an alternative interpretation that might be more sensitive to the distinctive way in which loss and loneliness is manifest in old age; attempting to ameliorate rather than exacerbate the estrangement and alienation of older adults. Turning to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, I suggest that by grounding subjectivity in the passive body-in-itself, it becomes possible to reconceptualise loss and loneliness in old age; both in terms of what is lost and what needs to be restored if older adults are to be helped to find themselves at home in the world again in the midst of, and indeed because of, manifold loss.

## 2 Old Age and the Problem of Possibility

In their unprecedented phenomenological studies of old age, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Améry conceptualise aging according to the diminishment of the ground of possibility.<sup>2</sup> In *The Coming of Age* (1996) De Beauvoir describes

<sup>1</sup> As emphasised by Kydd et al. (2020), there are significant inconsistencies in how 'old age' is defined in the gerontological literature. In light of the ageist criticisms they raise around the terms 'oldest-old' and 'fourth-age,' this article will use the terms 'older adults' and 'those in old age' to refer to elderly people whose experiences resonate with the diminishment of being-for-itself described throughout. Importantly, this could apply to many adults over the age of 80 but likely not all, and to some adults in their 60's and 70's but likely not many.

<sup>2</sup> As Stoller emphasises, feminist philosophy has largely neglected the phenomenon of aging and compared to de Beauvoir's other seminal work, *The Second Sex*, *The Coming of Age* has received relatively little attention (Stoller 2014, pp. 4–10). Stoller's edited collection is an important exception.

this process according to the simultaneous contraction of the twofold finitude of human existence. Following Sartre (1978), she considers that finitude is conferred upon the human being in two ways: firstly, it is experienced passively through the immanence of the body-in-itself which, as a factual and contingent biological organism, is necessarily subject to material deterioration and decay. Secondly, finitude is confronted actively through the transcendence of the body-for-itself which, in projecting towards death, takes hold of the meaning of one's existence. Though these processes are ordinarily distinct, in aging the finitude of the body-in-itself and the body-for-itself become simultaneously apparent, contracting together such that one feels "doubly finished." As the immanent duration of the in-itself becomes shorter, the body deteriorates exponentially. Correlatively, as the transcendent temporality of the for-itself becomes more closed, the reduced capacity for projecting towards meaningful projects and possibilities undermines any transformative potential for surpassing or transcending oneself. This reciprocally and mutually-reinforcing contraction of finitude conditions the diminishment of the ground of possibility in aging (de Beauvoir 1996, p. 373).

As Améry emphasises in *On Aging* (1994), this diminishment of possibility in aging is a uni-directional and irreversible process, meaning that old age can be understood as a sickness, a form of suffering from which one can never recover (Améry 1994, p. 33). Increasingly unable to define the meaning and significance of their existence according to what they will *become* in the future, those in old age find that the world withdraws itself, and becomes adversarial and hostile (Améry 1994, pp. 37–38). With a 'look' of condemnation, older adults become radically other; invisible and alienated, they are strangers to themselves and to the world (Fisher 2014). In the midst of this estranged state, "[w]hen the world alters entirely or displays itself in such a way that remaining in it becomes unbearable" (de Beauvoir 1996, p. 443), both Améry and de Beauvoir suggest that death becomes acceptable, even preferable. As de Beauvoir writes:

Even if the elderly man does retain some health and strength and if society does not suddenly tear him from his occupation, his desires and his projects, as we have seen, wither away because of his finitude. The programme laid down in our childhood allows us to do, know, and love only a limited number of things; when this programme is fulfilled and when we have come to the end of our possibilities, then death is accepted with indifference or even as a merciful release — it delivers us from that extreme boredom that the ancients called *satietas vitae* (de Beauvoir 1996, 443–444).

According to de Beauvoir and Améry therefore, aging involves the irrevocable weakening of the body-in-itself and the diminution of projection by the body-for-itself, which

together implicate the diminishment of the ground of possibility. This attenuation then effects a fundamental disconnect between older adults and the world, involving experiences of loss, loneliness and alienation that are so profound, that death can become more desirable. It is from within the context of this precarious and estranged existence, that older adults are the cohort most likely to both suffer a significant bereavement and to experience intense and prolonged loneliness in the wake of such a loss. How are we to interpret the distinctive way in which loss and loneliness manifests in old age, in terms of what it is that is lost in this experience, and what needs to be restored if one is to feel at home again in the world? In my view, the diminishment of the ground of possibility in old age complicates Ratcliffe's lost possibilities approach. At the death of a loved one, Ratcliffe suggests, the bereaved loses the possibility of relating to the loved one who has died; to the projects and habitual practices that they developed throughout a shared life; and to a wider range of interpersonal possibilities that, whilst painfully inaccessible to one, continue to be accessible to others (Ratcliffe forthcoming, p. 9). Focusing on that which is lost, the death of an intimate partner at any age will almost always involve the excruciating loss of the possibility of relating to that person, and of shared projects and habitual practices as far as these still remain intact. Ratcliffe's account is very helpful in describing the lived experience of this loss of the future. Nevertheless, his interpretation loses some of its explanatory value when we consider that, prior to the death of a loved one in old age, it is probable that both these dimensions of possibility have already been diminished by the manifold losses (both bereavement and non-bereavement related) that are intrinsic to the aging process itself, such as death, illness, disability, relationship or family-breakdown, retirement, or poverty. As such, it is difficult to extract the loss of a wider range of interpersonal possibilities that may or may not have resulted from the death of an intimate partner, from those that have resulted from old age itself. Indeed, it is definitive of aging process that possibilities that are inaccessible to one, continue to be painfully accessible to many (usually younger) others. In this sense, the experience of loss and loneliness in old age does involve a loss of possibilities as Ratcliffe suggests, but these are likely to become increasingly indistinguishable from the diminishment of the ground of possibility that de Beauvoir and Améry demonstrate is inherent to the aging process itself.

Turning then to that which must be restored if one is to find oneself at home again in the world after loss; Ratcliffe's account implies that, whilst the capacity for projecting into possibilities is significantly affected in the midst of loss and loneliness, the ground of possibility nevertheless remains intact, and relearning the world after loss involves reconstructing novel futural possibilities that are no longer directly contingent upon the loved one who has died. Yet,

on de Beauvoir and Améry's account, the reconfiguration of possibilities would be precluded in old age by the diminishment of the ground of possibility. Without any possibilities through which the devastating and often debilitating experience of loneliness might be transformed, de Beauvoir and Améry conclude that those in old age are left to suffer without any hope of reprieve. Again, Ratcliffe's account is very helpful in describing the lived experience of profound loneliness, and could be appropriated in line with de Beauvoir and Améry to explain why it is so often painfully prolonged in old age. Yet, the implied conclusion that the loss of the possible means those in old age are simply condemned to suffer estrangement and isolation is to my mind a reductive and direct consequence of the underlying conception of subjectivity in which it is grounded. Like de Beauvoir and Améry, Ratcliffe appeals implicitly to a conception of subjectivity as being constituted by the self-transcending capacity of the body-for-itself. When subjectivity is conceptualised in this way, not only does aging preclude the possibility of finding oneself at home in the world again after loss, but it is unclear how old age might be considered constitutive of subjectivity *at all*. As Lennon and Wilde emphasise, this bleak reality is expressed throughout de Beauvoir's *Coming of Age*. They write:

On this picture, our failing body becomes something opposed to a self struggling to maintain an active engagement with the world. Such activity is what, for [de Beauvoir], constitutes our distinctive humanity. We are most fully human when pursuing active, future-directed projects. In so far as the body necessitates a passivity, a mere existing, then the conclusion seems to be that we are less fully human than in our younger days... This conclusion, one in which our vulnerability to our bodies, the world and other people is a threat to the realisation of our selfhood, is a deeply troubling one. It is troubling not only as an account of ageing, but also for other dimensions of our life, for all our bodies get fatigued and ill, undergo rather than initiate, and experience processes over which we have no control (Lennon and Wilde 2019, 36).

In this way, the diminishment of the ground of possibility complicates explanations of the distinctive experience of loss and loneliness in old age such as Ratcliffe's, which privilege the loss of possibilities. It does so both in terms of that which is lost and that which must be restored if one is to find oneself at home again in the world after loss. In particular, when subjectivity is conceptualised according to the self-transcending body-for-itself, it is difficult to see how those in old age might belong to the world as a subject at all. The question then arises as to whether the experience of loss and loneliness in old age might be more appropriately understood according to the loss and reconfiguration of one's

*past* as emphasised in Fuchs' account and, further, whether the past unlike the future might offer a means through which to constitute subjectivity in old age.

### 3 Old Age and the Problem of Recollection

When the capacity for self-transcendence through the projection into possibilities is significantly diminished, de Beauvoir emphasises that older adults come to focus anew upon the recollection of the past. Indeed, it is common for those in old age to delight in the magic of recollecting the intense emotional impressions, images and fantasies formed in childhood (de Beauvoir 1996, p. 361), which can be a source of "inexhaustible joy" (de Beauvoir 1996, p. 372). In so doing, de Beauvoir argues, the old person attempts to "give his existence a foundation by taking over his birth or at least his earliest years... as he is about to step out of this world he recognizes himself in the baby that stepped out of that other unborn world" (de Beauvoir 1996, p. 372). Unable to transcend oneself through the projection into possibilities therefore, one attempts to constitute the meaning and significance of one's subjectivity by transcending oneself in the recollection of the past.

Nevertheless, as de Beauvoir stresses, attempts at recovering the past are flawed in old age; experiences, relationships, events, interactions, or ideas are increasingly forgotten or misremembered, regardless of how significant they were at the time. For de Beauvoir, this is reflective of the fact that aging involves a diminishment of the ground of recollection. She writes:

A friend said to me, 'I find very old people touching because of the long past they have behind them.' Unfortunately this is just what they do not have. 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. Most of the wreckage that can still be seen is colourless, distorted, frozen: its meaning escapes me. Here and there, I see occasional pieces whose melancholy beauty enchants me. They do not suffice to populate this emptiness that Chateaubriand calls 'the desert of the past' (de Beauvoir 1996, 365).

The difficulty of retaining and recuperating the past can be exacerbated by the onset of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's or dementia, wherein even the wreckage of the past can become difficult if not impossible to see. Importantly, there is an asymmetry between the diminishment of the ground of possibility and that of recollection; whilst the twofold contraction of finitude means the former is definite, the latter is more indefinite and diffuse.

Accordingly, an impossible future is not experienced in the same way as an even significantly distorted past. And yet, the diminishment of the ground of recollection can still be seen to profoundly intensify the fundamental disconnect between oneself and the world and can entrench the feeling of estrangement and alienation in old age. In part, this occurs because the inability to recollect one's past means that one's sense of self becomes increasingly fragile, resulting in a sense of disorientation from oneself. This is then significantly compounded by the fact that, as one ages, the world itself becomes increasingly unrecognisable and unfamiliar, and those in old age are forced into the painful recognition that they "do not understand the world any more" because "the world they understand no longer exists" (Améry 1994, p. 102). As discussed, it is from within the context of this alienated state that those in old age are the cohort most likely to suffer profound loss and loneliness. Whilst the diminishment of the ground of recollection is less definitive than the diminished ground of possibility, my view is that it still complicates Fuchs' interpretation of loss and loneliness, which relies upon the loss and reintegration of a past remembered (Fuchs 2018). For Fuchs, when a loved one dies the past in which they were present, splinters apart from the present in which they are now painfully absent. Confronted with this ambiguous conflict between past and present, presence and absence, the bereaved is forced to navigate between two seemingly incommensurable worlds and can feel profoundly disconnected from their surroundings as a result. Considering that which is lost, a fundamental component of bereavement over the death of an intimate partner undeniably relates to recollections of a shared past, however broken, inaccurate or indistinct these memories may be. Fuch's account is very helpful in describing the lived experience of this loss of the past. Nonetheless, as with Ratcliffe's loss of possibilities interpretation, Fuchs' account loses some of its explanatory value when we consider that, prior to the death of a loved one in old age, one's sense of connectedness to the past through both individual and collective recollection has often already been diminished by the manifold losses (both bereavement and non-bereavement related) that are intrinsic to the aging process itself. For example, through the loss of one's parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins and childhood friends as a result of death, estrangement or relationship breakdown; through the demolition or renovation of one's childhood home and surrounds; or through the loss of significant concrete objects such as photographs or belongings. As emphasised by de Beauvoir and Améry, these losses are then compounded by the diminishment in the cognitive capacity for recollection itself which, in the case of neurodegenerative conditions, can be profound, as well as the fact that the world itself becomes increasingly unrecognisable in old age. In this sense, it is difficult to extract the lack of connection to one's past that may or may not have resulted from the death

of an intimate partner, from the loss of recollection that is inherent to the process of aging itself. Accordingly, whilst the experience of loss and loneliness in old age does involve a loss of the past as Fuchs suggests, it is likely to become increasingly indistinguishable from the comprehensive loss of the past that de Beauvoir and Améry demonstrate is inherent to the aging process itself.<sup>3</sup>

Focussing then on that which must be restored if one is to find oneself at home again in the world after loss, Fuchs' claims that reorienting oneself towards the world after loss involves integrating the lost past into the present. This is accomplished through identification with the deceased loved one, and through the representation and narration of their life through recollection. However, the diminishment of the ground of recollection in old age significantly complicates one's attempts to reorient oneself to the world after loss through the reintegration of a remembered past. Conceptualised according to the past, therefore, it becomes difficult to see how profound loneliness, the feeling that one is adrift in an unfamiliar world with the profoundly unsettling sense that one no longer belongs, might be transformed in old age. For older adults the world has already become unfamiliar, and attempts at grounding the meaning and significance of one's existence through integrating a recollected past are *already* faltering. With the capacity for self-transcendence through the intentional recollection of the past already undermined in this way, it becomes difficult to see how those in old age might draw upon the past in order to feel at home in the world in a life-sustaining way.

Taking the diminished ground of possibility and recollection together, de Beauvoir argues that those in old age are faced with a "limited future and a frozen past," unable to project into possibilities or to recover the past in any meaningful way (de Beauvoir 1996, p. 378). Because de Beauvoir and Améry view subjectivity as being constituted by the self-transcendence of the body-for-itself, old age necessarily renders it 'unrealizable,' such that the meaning and significance of existence becomes irretrievably impoverished. As de Beauvoir writes:

...one of the elderly man's greatest difficulties is the retention of his feeling of identity. The very fact of

<sup>3</sup> As noted, there is an asymmetry between the diminishment of the ground of possibility and that of recollection; whilst the two-fold contraction of finitude means the former is definite, the latter is more indefinite and diffuse. Limited to just de Beauvoir and Améry's accounts of old age, it seems clear that the possibility of a continuing bond between the bereaved and their deceased loved one that relies upon recollection would be diminished at least to some extent. However, more research is needed into the experiences of bereaved older adults to determine the different ways in which an attachment to a deceased loved one might be retained despite the loss of the past, for example, through body memory which is discussed below.

knowing that he is old turns him into another being whose existence he cannot manage to realize; what is more, he has lost both his ‘label’ and his role in society— there is no longer anything by which he can identify himself, and he no longer knows who he is. When, as it often happens, the ‘identification crisis’ is not overcome, the old person remains in a state of confusion and distress (de Beauvoir 1996, 493–494).

Stripped of their identity, those in old age are objectified in their alterity and reduced to the outsiders’ point of view from ‘without.’ Older adults come to lose themselves in the shame and humiliation of being for others (de Beauvoir 1996, p. 290), and it becomes difficult to see how those in old age might constitute the meaning and significance of subjectivity at all. For de Beauvoir and Améry, to age is to suffer overwhelming loss and loneliness, which complicates the interpretation of loss and loneliness according to either Ratcliffe’s loss of possibilities or Fuchs’ loss of the past. The diminishment of the ground of possibility and the ground of recollection make it difficult to explain precisely what is lost when a loved one dies, and, more concerningly, to conceive of how those in old age might reorient themselves to the world after loss. Nevertheless, appropriated to a phenomenology of aging, both Ratcliffe and Fuchs’ accounts would be well-positioned to help explain why, in the case of old age, the irretrievable diminishment of the ground of possibility and recollection is so devastating and debilitating. Further, their shared commitment to the conception of subjectivity as being constituted by the self-transcending body-for-itself could add support to de Beauvoir and Améry’s conclusion that the inability to project or recollect necessitates the impoverishment of subjectivity. However, in my view this would result in a reductive and narrow interpretation of loss and loneliness in old age that would exacerbate rather than ameliorate the distressing estrangement of older adults. In pursuing an alternative and more expansive interpretation, I suggest it is necessary to challenge the underlying conception of subjectivity as the self-transcending body-for-itself, upon which de Beauvoir and Améry and Ratcliffe and Fuchs’ arguably rely.

A tension within De Beauvoir’s work gives some promissory indication as to what the recovery of subjectivity in old age might look like. Whilst de Beauvoir conforms to the interpretation of subjectivity as being constituted by the transcendent capacity of the body-for-itself, Lennon and Wilde (2019) point to an ambiguous tension within de Beauvoir’s work, namely, between transcendent projection and the affective immanence of the sensual and erotic (see also Bergoffen 2014; Shabot 2016). In so doing, they suggest that de Beauvoir affirms the significance of the passive body-in-itself in the constitution of subjectivity, and thereby conveys hints of Levinas as well as Sartre in her

work. Indeed, whilst most phenomenological interpretations of embodiment involve both the passive body-in-itself and the active body-for-itself, the self-transcending body-for-itself is for the most part privileged in the constitution of subjectivity, and thus the meaning and significance of existence. By contrast, Levinas argues that in the demise of the body-for-itself in old age, the passive body-in-itself and its vulnerable and susceptible being for another is in fact disclosive of a more fundamental form of subjectivity. In so doing, I suggest that Levinas opens up both a completely different way of understanding old age, as well as a means through which those in old age might be helped to find themselves at home in the world again in the midst of, and indeed because of, manifold loss.

#### 4 Levinas and the Question of Subjectivity

In works such as *Totality and Infinity* (1961/1969) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974/1991), Levinas puts forward an interpretation of the passive body-in-itself in relation to subjectivity (see Lupo 2017; Tengelyi 2009). For Levinas, passive bodily states such as happiness, enjoyment, suffering and fatigue are what condition one’s relation with the immanent contents of sensible experience such as “thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun” (Levinas 1969, p. 112). In this sense, the passive body-in-itself (the body that is seen, heard, touched or moved) exists prior to the activity of the body-for-itself (the body that is seeing, hearing, touching or moving), and thus precedes reason, reflection and representation (see Levinas 1991). Furthermore, in contradistinction to the prevailing Sartrean view which privileges the body-for-itself, Levinas suggests that it is the passive body-in-itself rather than the active projection into possibilities that is constitutive of subjectivity, the “personality of the person” and the “the ipseity of the I” (Levinas 1969, p. 115). In contrast to Sartre, therefore: “[I]f life is an existence that does not precede its essence. Its essence makes up its worth; and here value constitutes being. The reality of life is already on the level of happiness, and in this sense beyond ontology” (Levinas 1969, p. 112). In Levinas’s reimagining of subjectivity, the passive body-in-itself thus constitutes the essence of being, and is that upon which the meaning and significance of existence depends.

Crucially for Levinas, this constitution of subjectivity in the body-in-itself is disclosed through adverse experiences such as *aging*, which reveals the inherent susceptibility and vulnerability of human existence: the “self uncovered, exposed and suffering in its skin” (Levinas 1991, p. 51). The fragility and frailty of corporeal adversity in aging captures the idea of life *despite* life, a self that has been deposed of its ego and the transcendent capacity of the body-for-itself.

This struggle is essential, for Levinas, because it is in being wounded by experiences such as aging that one is torn from oneself and turned towards the sacred alterity of the face of the other and thereby the most primordial form of subjectivity: the unexceptional responsibility of *being for another*. Levinas writes:

Thus it is not as a freedom, impossible in a will that is inflated and altered, sold or mad, that subjectivity is imposed as an absolute. It is sacred in its alterity with respect to which, in an unexceptionable responsibility, I posit myself deposed of my sovereignty. Paradoxically it is *qua alienus* — foreigner and other — that man is not alienated (Levinas 1991, 59).

In contrast to the shame and humiliation in de Beauvoir's account, the experience of being alienated and estranged is thus in theory what makes it possible for those in old age to find themselves at home in the world in being for another. Améry captures this paradox with the idea whilst the aged body is prison constructed from "heavy breathing, painful legs, and the arthritically plagued articulation of our bones," it is "also our last shelter." It is here that "the most extreme human authenticity" emerges, "since in the end it is what is finally right" (Améry 1994, p. 35). For Levinas, too, the recognition of one's own susceptibility and vulnerability is what discloses the most extreme human authenticity, and here it is the turn towards the other, in *their* transcendence, as that which is finally right.

Underpinning Levinas's retrieval of subjectivity in the passive body-in-itself is a correlate reconceptualization of temporal experience (Severson 2013). Whilst the active ego of the subject constitutes time through the transcendent projection towards possibilities and the recollection of the past, Levinas argues that the more profound subjectivity disclosed in aging temporalises according to the unique concept of *diachronic time*. Diachronic time is the time of the transcendent other, which "precedes any moment of recollection, recovery, or synthesis" (Severson 2013, p. 228). Accordingly, for Levinas, diachronic time denotes the "irreversible, unrecoverable, unrepresentable and immemorial *past*" through which one comes face to face with the alterity of the other (Severson 2013, p. 191). Importantly, because the immemorial past "cannot be synchronized in a present by memory and historiography" (Levinas 1991, p. 89), an asynchronous *gap* opens up between the past time of the other which has been irrevocably lost and the present time of the subject who cannot recover that which has lapsed. It is in this gap that the self "comes to pass" (*Se passer*) (Levinas 1991, p. 53). Turned towards the immemorial past of the other that has always come *before*, one finds oneself by losing oneself "in this past that precedes the self" (Severson 2013, p. 231).

By recovering subjectivity in the passive body-in-itself, the most primordial form of which is disclosed in aging as

being for another, Levinas provides an important framework through which to reconceptualise old age. Like de Beauvoir and Améry, Levinas conceptualises old age according to a process of increasing fragility and frailty. And yet, it is in this breaking down of the body-for-itself that the fundamental vulnerability and susceptibility of human existence *as such* is disclosed. In this way, not only does Levinas give us a means through which to call into question the idea that the decline of being-for-itself in old age necessitates that subjectivity becomes impoverished, but he suggests that it is precisely the diminishment of the ground of possibility and recollection that opens up a radical new conception of the self; namely, subjectivity as being constituted by the passive body-in-itself, deposed of the ego, that is defined by being for another.

## 5 Reconceptualising Loss and Loneliness in Old Age

Understood as such, Levinas's retrieval of subjectivity is suggestive of some possible ways in which we might reconceptualise loss and loneliness in old age. For Levinas, it is precisely in no longer belonging to the world, that those in old age are exposed to a radical new way of being at home in the world, namely: in and *through* the passive body-in-itself which, in its exposure and vulnerability, is being for another. What might this look like in a more concrete sense? As de Beauvoir writes, "Every human situation can be viewed from without—seen from the point of view of an outsider—or from within..." (de Beauvoir 1996, p. 10). Viewed from *within*, it is necessary to interpret the *experience* of manifold loss and attempts at restoration according to the passive body-in-itself. Of significant importance here is the growing body of research on body memory, which is composed of aggregate layers of inter-corporeal and inter-affective memories, which are retained at a bodily level even if they have become irretrievable through recollection (Casey 1987; Fuchs 2017, 2020; Køster 2020, 2021; Summa 2014). Whilst Fuchs' work on grief and loss is informed by the idea of subjectivity as being constituted in the self-transcending capacity of the body-for-itself, his work on dementia is concerned instead with the subjectivity given by the passive body-in-itself, when the capacity for self-transcendence has been significantly diminished (Fuchs 2020). Looking at the concept of personal identity and the lived body in dementia, Fuchs demonstrates that those suffering dementia in old age can retain implicit bodily procedural, situational, incorporative and intercorporeal memories into the late stages of illness, each of which are fundamental in the formation and sustaining of subjectivity. In this way, familiarity with the use of objects such as a violin (procedural); with the atmosphere of one's surroundings and the

affective associations invoked such as an oft-frequented park (situational); with sedimented practices and habits such as playing a game of football (incorporative); and with non-verbal embodied affective communication such as a loving embrace (intercorporeal), can all afford significant means of connection with oneself and with the world (Fuchs 2020, pp. 670–672). Taken together, these complex patterns of intercorporeal and inter-affective memory, which exist prior to reflective consciousness, are constitutive of subjectivity in the passive body-in-itself.

Regardless of the extent to which the ground of recollection has been diminished, this conception of body memory gives us a framework through which to reconceptualise both the manifold losses suffered by those in old age, as well as the means through which they might be helped to reorient themselves to the world. It is not fundamentally in conscious projection or recollection, therefore, that those in old age undergo the loss-oriented experiences of ambiguous presence and absence, and restoration-oriented experiences of renewed presencing but within the felt sensibility of embodied affectivity. This means that loss and restoration are experienced primarily in the joy or sorrow, happiness or longing one feels when one encounters light, air, ideas, spectacles, sleeping, thinking, reading, tasting soup, or feeling the warmth on one's face. In helping those in old age to process their grief as well as reorient themselves to the world, it is therefore important to prioritise therapeutic interventions that focus on the passive body-in-itself and body memory in particular, such as animal therapy, massage therapy, dance therapy, art therapy, and music therapy, as well as care settings that co-locate childcare and old-age care (Bolton 2008; Evans and Garner 2004; Herron et al. 2023; Jacobson et al. 2019; Rio 2009). From a Levinasian perspective, these therapeutic contexts can use embodied affective experiences as a means through which to recognise and then hold the vulnerability of older adults in a respectful intercorporeal, inter-affective encounter. In so doing, those in old age are allowed to recognise their own radical contingency upon the other, which opens up a diachronic gap through which their subjectivity might 'come to pass.' Recognised as subjects through their passive body-in-itself, those in old age can be helped to feel at home in the world in the midst of, and indeed *because of*, manifold loss.

This turn to the other then leads to the importance of reconceptualising loss and loneliness from the view from *without*. Specifically, in order to interpret the experiences of loss and loneliness in old age meaningfully, it is essential that subjectivity as the active self-transcending capacity of the body-for-itself be called into question and reimagined *by the other*. Given the proliferation of ageism and the extent to which those in old age continue to be othered, marginalised

and oppressed, such a reconceptualization is difficult but critical. As de Beauvoir writes:

The fact that for the last fifteen or twenty years of his life a man should be no more than a reject, a piece of scrap, reveals the failure of our civilization: if we were to look upon the old as human beings, with a human life behind them, and not as so many walking corpses, this obvious truth would move us profoundly (de Beauvoir 1996, 6).

In order to look upon the old as human beings, I suggest it is essential that subjectivity in old age be reimagined by the other as being constituted in the passive body-in-itself. In so doing, it becomes possible to recognise, as Fuchs does in his work on dementia, that one's "response and relational capabilities," such as the "ability to give expression to joy, gratefulness, sorrow or fear" are a "significant foundation of...personhood." Further still, this passive body-in-itself is then "the basis of the claim for respect, recognition and dignity which also persons suffering from dementia raise towards others" (Fuchs 2020, p. 674). Indeed, following Levinas, not only is the passive body-in-itself of the human being a significant foundation of subjectivity, it is the most primordial form of subjectivity that is uniquely disclosed in old age. Human existence is inherently vulnerable and susceptible, but the marked fragility of old age means that older adults are forced to suffer this precarity in a way that many others are not able or not willing to. To age is to suffer overwhelming loss and loneliness. And yet, for the transcendent other to reimagine subjectivity as being grounded in the passive body-in-itself is to recognise that old age is not a deficient or impoverished form of alienated existence, but a revelatory one; one that, by deposing the ego, comes closest to realising the meaning and significance of human life as being for another, with the reciprocal respect, recognition and dignity that this demands. By interpreting the lived experience of old age according to the passive body-in-itself it becomes possible to see how those in old age might be helped to find themselves at home in the world in, and because of, manifold loss.

**Funding** This work was supported by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) - UKRI: [Grant Number AH/T000066/1].

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author has no conflict of interest to declare

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