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**JAMES HILLMAN
ON THE IDEA OF BEING OLD**

Abstract. James Hillman is highly critical of the widespread discrimination and neglect of older people in our culture. He argues against this deeply immoral and pervasive phenomenon, which is summed up in the term ageism. In his critique, he proposes a new perspective in which the idea of human character is central. It allows us to see a deeper dimension of our personal and social life, to see old people as extremely valuable and even necessary for the continuation of civilisation.

Keywords: James Hillman, old, character, ageism.

James Hillman, a contemporary American psychologist and philosopher, writes on the idea of old age and the meaning of ageing in his book entitled “The Force of Character”¹. In his book, J. Hillman offers a fundamentally different view of old age from the dominant attitude that discriminates against older people as infirm, with progressive physical and mental disabilities. He is critical of the phenomenon known as “ageism”², which implies an ingrained mindset of categorising older people as disabled, unproductive and therefore superfluous and therefore a burden on society. In our civilisation, where productivity is the main measure of a person’s worth, societies have a negative attitude towards old age³. What is more, this point of view makes us victims; at a certain stage of life, people come to see themselves as condemned to grow old. It is a vision that the philosopher’s refusal of the reduction of all human existence to physiology is intended to eliminate. Hillman puts its idea in the following way: “I (...) am trying to get rid of an idea, or at least shove aside the fixed notion that we are basically physiological creatures and that therefore our thinking about ourselves can be reduced to thinking about our bodies. This notion dooms us; we become victims of aging. We believe our entire existence is yoked to and most – dramatically in later years – governed by physiology”⁴. Instead, the philosopher

proposes another idea, that of linking human existence to human character⁵. The last period of life before natural death is essential for its full development. The last years of your life are a time for reflection on your own character and your own vocation. Hillman encourages us to explore what character is and what role it plays in our lives: “To make some sense of later years and the often absurd predicaments and ridiculous degradations congruent with age, we do well to return to one of the deepest questions human thought has posed. What is character, and how does it force us into the patterns we live?”⁶

Ageism

The phenomenon of discrimination against older people, captured by the term ageism, is critically addressed by Hillman. The Global Ageism Report 2021 provides a precise definition of the phenomenon of age discrimination: “Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards people on the basis of their age. It can be institutional, interpersonal or self-directed. Institutional ageism refers to the laws, rules, social norms, policies and practices of institutions that unfairly restrict opportunities and systematically disadvantage individuals because of their age. Interpersonal ageism arises in interactions between two or more individuals, while self-directed ageism occurs when ageism is internalized and turned against oneself ... Ageism often intersects and interacts with other forms of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, including ableism, sexism and racism. Multiple intersecting forms of bias compound disadvantage and make the effects of ageism on individuals’ health and well-being even worse”⁷.

Hillman describes ageism as a “patronizing” trap into which our thinking about the last years of a person’s life has fallen, the term literally meaning discrimination against people because of their advanced age. This way of thinking and discriminating is meant to qualify people with physical and mental burdens that affect the way they are able to function. He likens ageism to a concept of class. The reason for this is the current Western model of thinking, based primarily on biology and economics, which has led to the marginalisation of ideas about the soul and the role of consciousness in life processes⁸.

In this context, the French writer Simone de Beauvoir’s book “*La Vieillesse*” is worth mentioning. “Old age” is an accurate translation of the title “*La Vieillesse*”, under which the book was originally published in Paris

in 1970, although in the US it was published under the more misleading title “The Coming of Age”⁹. Beauvoir posed some brutal questions there: are old people human? Have they ceased to be human? Such questions should be the result of an analysis of attitudes towards older people. It is certainly a reference to the taboo of old age. The social status of old people in our society is low. Old people are seen as some kind of freaks who do not have the same needs, feelings or rights as the rest of us. The elderly are condemned to poverty because they are inactive and therefore unable to act to defend themselves. Nevertheless, expectations of them are exorbitant; their behaviour is supposed to represent all virtues. Their feelings and sexuality, on the other hand, appear to the young as something repulsive. The philosopher gives a brutal assessment of society: old people are treated like rubbish, deprived of the minimum resources, condemned to a sad and dull vegetation¹⁰.

Hillman suggests that discrimination against older people stems from an idea that reduces people to the realm of their physicality and physiology, the idea that is widespread, dominant in society and deeply ingrained in our thinking. The inevitable process of ageing, the gradual loss of health, vitality and physical and mental fitness, leads people to fear, disagreement or resignation.

Older people are seen as struggling with the misfortune of being old. Hillman puts it this way from a so-called “outside” perspective. On the other hand, by also writing about the so-called ageism trap, he captures the “internal” perspective, i.e. the mindset of the person themselves. The philosopher uses the word “trap” in this context, the so-called “ageism trap”, into which a person who is experiencing a mid-life crisis falls or falls in their thinking around mid-life. Well, many years before the onset of old age, as the emerging symptoms of the body and mind diminish with time, people begin to feel a growing fear of it. The identification of old age with unhappiness seems to be the “real truth” for them, and they are unable to free themselves from such a sorrowful interpretation. Asking questions about the meaning of ageing around mid-life, which coincides with the so-called “mid-life crisis”, is something of a norm. Hillman calls it a “central crisis of our own nature” and it is a kind of loss of illusion. Thinking about old age in midlife is done without fully understanding it, and is actually reduced to anxiety and fear.

People in their fifties who consider ageism to be the “real truth” inevitably fall into a trap and become internally torn. On the one hand, there is a growing pessimism, or even despair, at seeing in themselves the symptoms of losing their full physical and mental capacity. On the other hand, there may be a denial of this state and a strenuous effort to improve one’s

physical condition or to work intensively on one's spiritual development. In this context, the philosopher refers to the two attitudes mentioned above that a person can adopt in this situation of experiencing increasingly ailing manifestations of impairment, namely a pessimistic or an optimistic attitude. However, both positions are based on the same assumption: that ageing is an undesirable and unpleasant inconvenience, a misfortune that happens to people as time goes by¹¹. Hillman expresses this idea in the following statement: "The optimistic and pessimistic views share a premise. Old age is affliction. Whether you overcome it or succumb to it, the nature of old age is undeniably solitary, poor, nasty, and far too long. We can picture ourselves imprisoned in penury, set own in a bare nursing home, ma, mute, and smelly, waiting for the end"¹². Therefore, irrespective of one's personal attitude towards the ageing process, it is widely considered a profound misfortune.

Hillman's polemic against age discrimination is based on his firm belief that human existence cannot be reduced to physiology. For a man convinced of the inseparability of his existence from his physicality, the latter becomes a dramatic burden that completely dominates the last years of his life. He would be condemned to the process of ageing and all the discomforts that go with it. If this were the case, man would be reduced to the role of victim. The philosopher proposes a different view of ageing: instead of identifying a person's life with their physicality, he links their existence to their character¹³. Hillman is of the opinion that: "Psychology looked backward to study character development, neglecting the plain evidence that character reveals its full shaping force in most of us much later. We become characteristic of who we are simply by lasting. How we age, the patterns we regularly perform, and the style of our image show character at work. As character directs aging, aging reveals character"¹⁴. According to the philosopher, who is also a trained psychologist, academic psychology neglects the idea of character, which he believes is crucial to understanding the idea of ageing.

Side Effect

Robert N. Butler in his book "How to Survive? Being Old in America" questions the value – and therefore the legitimacy – of living a long life for this very purpose. According to him, advances in medical development should lead to the creation of a very large group of people for whom a long life is possible, but the enjoyment of such a state of affairs is negligible¹⁵.

Hillman also discusses ageing as a result of medical advances and the possibility of living longer than in previous centuries. He wonders whether it is at all appropriate to link the two phenomena in this way, i.e. to treat old age as a side-effect of the development of civilisation. His conception of old age as linked to human character is incompatible with such an identification. It may be appropriate to recognise ageing as a side-effect of scientific development. There is no doubt that people now live much longer than in previous periods of history. It is perhaps tempting to conclude that because medicine and technology make it possible to live longer, this comes at a high price: progressive deterioration and disintegration of body and mind, advancing illness, a sense of dullness and loss in the world.

However, Hillman does not agree with such a reductionist view of the problem, although he does not deny the suffering of the elderly. He offers us a different vision of old age, which he sees not as a state of unhappiness but as a necessary stage in human life for the sake of the spirit (soul)¹⁶. He writes: "I cannot support the theory that human longevity is the artificial result of civilization, its science and its social networks, yielding a crop of living mummies, paradoxes suspended in a twilight zone. The old as 'retards'"¹⁷. According to Hillman, longevity, and with it old age, is not an artificial or accidental result of the development of civilisation. Old people should not be reduced to "handicapped" individuals, somehow suspended between the realms of life and death.

Ageing is built into natural physiology. The philosopher points out that the human body continues to exist long after fertility and the ability to bear children have ceased, many years after it was in great physical shape, with a thriving musculature and clear sensory experience. According to Hillman, what is needed for a different view and understanding of old age are the imaginative ideas of the mind¹⁸. He is convinced that with their help the phenomenon of ageing can be completely and permanently reassessed. In the following statement he expresses this view: "Aging is no accident. It is necessary to the human condition, intended by the soul. Aging is built into our physiology; yet to our puzzlement, human life extends long beyond fertility and outlasts muscular usefulness and sensory acuteness. For this we need imaginative ideas that can grace aging and speak to it with the intelligence it deserves. You will find the vision in this book. It offers the promise of refreshing the reader's mind with a shower of insights whose goal is to affect transitions to later years profoundly, even permanently"¹⁹. The philosopher hopes that his concept can change superficial and widespread discriminatory attitudes, and that his vision can be an effective antidote to ageism.

Linking Ageing with Character

Hillman points to the need to understand the relationship between the idea of ageing and the idea of character. The latter requires a long life in order to develop fully. In this way the philosopher understands the meaning and purpose of ageing. The fact that death is the end of life does not necessarily explain the purpose of ageing. Rather than seeing ageing as a side effect of living a long life, the philosopher points to a certain legitimacy and even necessity of this phenomenon, and even speaks of its desirability. In rejecting the identification of human existence with physicality, Hillman questions the purpose of ageing. He sees the meaning of human ageing as complementary to the development of a person's character, as opposed to the common perception of old age as a period of wear and tear and disease of the body, exhaustion of physical and mental strength, and waiting for death.

The ageing process affects both the body and our whole nature, the person we are becoming and the person we were years ago. Character shapes our appearance, our attitude to the world, to others, our habits, our peculiar behaviour²⁰. Philosopher writes: "What ages is not merely your functions and organs, but the whole of your nature, that particular person you have come to be and already were years ago. Character has been forming your face, your habits, your friendships, your peculiarities, the level of your ambition its career and its faults. Character influences the way you give and receive; it affects your loves and your children. It walks you home at night and keep you long awake"²¹. A character is a determining force, it ages and at the same time matures with the passage of time.

Understanding Aging

In order to have an understanding of what old age is in people's lives, a psychological approach to the subject is necessary. Hillman writes: "To explain aging we usually turn to biology, genetics, and geriatric physiology, but to understand aging we need something more: the idea of character. Biology is not the body itself, only a way of describing it. Aging is mediated by the stories told about it. Biology tells one kind of story, psychology another. Or better said, psychology attempts to understand biology's explanations"²². Hillman distinguishes between "explaining" ageing and "understanding" ageing. Explanation usually involves the use of biological, genetic or geriatric physiological categories. Understanding, on the other hand, requires a psychological concept of character, because biological images are

only a way of describing the body, not the body itself. To understand ageing, we need to psychologise it, we need an insight into the psyche (soul). Here Hillman builds on the view he took from Jung that our primary reality as thinking beings is the soul. Psychology, therefore, takes precedence over biology, and the idea of the soul, however vague, is the overarching idea and thus the organising idea of the others in our psychologising.

One might ask whether it is possible to think about old age without considering the phenomenon of death, since ageing inevitably leads to leaving this world. Hillman deliberately avoids this connection, without, however, denying such a turn of events. Old age is something we can experience, whereas death eludes such a possibility. Hillman does not see dying as the main purpose of ageing, although in the natural course of things an old person dies, and so we tend to interpret old age as a process of a person's helplessness, infirmity and sense of uselessness. Philosopher assumes, however, that if one were to consider old age as a kind of "structure" or idea with its own essential value, then "utility" and "usefulness" would take on an aesthetic character, and aging could perhaps be considered an art form. Archetypal representations of ancestors can be seen in old people²³. Hillman writes: "Must the soul be properly aged before it leaves? We can then imagine aging as a transformation in beauty as much as in biology"²⁴. What is more: "Instead, let us entertain the idea that character requires the additional years and that the long last of life is forced upon us neither by genes nor by conservational medicine or by societal collusion. The last years confirm and fulfill character"²⁵. Old age can be that time in a person's life when we see the past as a coherent whole, with our fully developed character as the guide.

A similar idea is found in Arthur Schopenhauer's views. He sees the last years of life as a certain period of its completion, requiring reflection, analysis and interpretation. The philosopher expresses this idea as follows: "Metaphorically speaking, we could say that the first forty years of our lives provide the text, the next thirty provide a commentary on it, and it is only the commentary that allows us to fully understand the meaning of the text, its structure, its morality and all the subtleties of its meaning"²⁶. Here we can take up the common view of Schopenhauer and Hillman that the last years of life are the summation and the understanding of own life.

Cicero was a philosopher who also appreciated the privileges of old age, pointing out that the necessary conditions for well-being are the sharpness of mind and moral conduct in our early years. What is crucial is that you have to be able to adapt to changes in life's circumstances. An old man can also be satisfied if he chooses activities he can do and trains his mind

accordingly. In this way, despite the loss of physical strength, he can lead an enjoyable life. A fit mind comes to the fore and need not be at the expense of physical weakness²⁷. According to Cicero: “A happy old age (...) follows a well-spent youth. We must learn (...) to adapt ourselves to the surroundings in which we find ourselves, and fortunate shall we be if we have trained our minds to pursuits and occupations in which we can still, in spite of lessened strength, indulge. The mind need not of necessity share the infirmities of the body”²⁸. Such an idea is also in line, to a certain extent, with the views of Hillman.

Schopenhauer, like Cicero, argues that youth is a time for accumulating experience, while the later years of life are a time for analysing it and attempting deep insight. Old age need not be associated with burden and suffering, provided that there has been adequate spiritual and intellectual development since youth. A mindless life full of urges cannot lead to a beautiful old age. The end of life, according to Schopenhauer, is “the end of the masquerade”. It is then that what man has been in life is revealed, his character is revealed. The old man shows his face to himself and to those around him²⁹. Here we can see a completely convergent thought with Hillman’s view.

Character

Hillman’s use of language is often poetic, and so is his description of his original conception of the character. He devoted his bestselling book *The Soul’s Code*³⁰ to this issue. The philosopher deliberately leaves his terminology undefined and ambiguous, and speaks clearly about the need for poetic, modern fiction rather than scientific accounts. He turns to myth because he believes that science is not called upon to explain our ultimate origins and the reasons for our lives. As a psychologist, he rejects the dominant psychological theories, but does not reject scientism in favour of faith³¹.

Although a psychologist himself, Hillman is critical of modern psychology, speaking of fundamental flaws in its terminology that make the picture of the human being obtained by this science incomplete. In fact, Hillman is convinced of the existence of a certain innate factor which is the essence of human character and which, given to us from the beginning, makes us have one or another attitude towards the world and thus largely determines our fate. Depending on the context, the author defines this invisible factor using various terms: image, fate, genius, vocation, daimonion, soul or destiny. This factor is the essence of character, yet modern psychology and

psychiatry completely ignore it, even though the essence of their research is supposedly the soul or psyche. Hillman emphasises that the purpose of this variety of terms is to confirm the existence of this mysterious factor, not to explain what “it” is. The nature of this factor remains unclear, and it manifests itself mainly in what psychologists call symptoms: intuitions, violent upsets, anomalies that disrupt routine activities. Hillman conceives of the daimonion, which he also calls the “acorn”, as a mythical entity. It governs our lives even though it is invisible; and because “invisibility” cannot be measured, weighed or otherwise quantified, it baffles common sense as well as psychologists. Science has abandoned the centuries-old search for the soul in various parts of the human body, and so has scientific psychology, while at the same time rejecting the idea of the soul altogether³².

Hillman quotes, *inter alia*, the words of Heraclitus, a philosopher who lived before Socrates and Plato: *ethos anthropoi daimon*. He points out that in twenty-five centuries of philosophy it has most often been translated as “character is fate” (or “destiny”; character is fate). The meaning of this saying is not clear. Nevertheless, it is often quoted and many have tried to interpret it. The word *ethos* can be translated as “ethics”, but it also carries the meaning of the word “habit”. Perhaps Heraclitus would have been of the opinion that *ethos* is habitual conduct (habitual behaviour). The way in which you behave is the way in which you are and the way in which you will be. Modern psychological therapy, Hillman argues, wrongly postulates the illusion of the existence of a personal, hidden, truer human self, independent of what the person actually is. Hillman’s point is that Heraclitus’s position on this is a realistic one: you are what you are. The word “what” is key here. A person’s behaviour is in line with their inner image or character³³. Hillman writes: “You are how you are. ‘How’ is the crucial term, which links life as it is habitually ‘behaved’ with the call of your image”³⁴. Thus, daimonion can be interpreted as ingrained character traits that primarily keep a person’s conduct within the framework set for them by their genius (given to them as an image). These patterns of character are the result of our analysis of the course of our destiny, that is, our behaviour³⁵.

Ageing is the deliteralisation of biology, just when we are most under siege and harassed by it. Understanding this requires psychological ideas, especially the imaginative concept of character. This comprehension, which the ageing mind seeks to give to the ageing body, helps to transform the body into a metaphor and adds further layers of meaning to the various biological processes that take place within it. The later years of life allow us to re-read and re-interpret what previously seemed to be just literal biological issues.

According to Hillman, the psychological perspective is coming to the fore, that our original basis of being is shifting in the direction of the soul³⁶. Hillman is convinced that analysing the idea of character from the perspective of human ageing and old age is an endeavour that offers new cognitive perspectives. The strength of character, primordial and determinant, has a fundamental significance for our lives, behaviour and destiny. This is expressed in the following words: "An inquiry into character by means of aging takes us into unexplored terrain. The current maps of aging, which don't consider character, the factual and flat, leaving the reader with no peaks of inspiration, no depths of soul, while writings on character present themselves less as guidebooks to the quarries and springs of human nature than as handbooks for raising, and upbraiding, youth. (...) the force of character is natural before it is moral. Character must first be investigated as an idea before we submit it to moral connection"³⁷.

The Old and The Young

Elderly people have an important place in the social structure, contrary to what lies at the heart of ageism. As mentors, they even seem indispensable for cultural development and the continuation of civilisation. Reductionist theories such as the selfish gene theory do not provide a convincing answer to the question of why women live so long, even for decades, after their fertility and reproductive potential has ceased. On the one hand, grandparents play an essential role in family life. They reduce the likelihood of infant mortality and help care for grandchildren. Grandmothers not only help to raise their grandchildren, they are also carriers of cultural knowledge. Both elements of their activity and influence are extremely important. Grandparents can be the guarantors of the biological and civilisational survival of human societies. In such a context, discrimination against the elderly is not only profoundly immoral, but also absurd and even sinister³⁸. Again, Hillman points to the idea of character, an imaginative perspective that not only governs people's lives but is also a source of influence for younger generations. He writes: "Grandparenting begins in the character of the older person who has an eye on the character of the young ones and searches for their grander possibilities. A grandparent can afford visions grander than the difficult and dutiful routines of the parents. The old man's eyes may be clouded but his vision may see clearly, partly because is close to the child's affection"³⁹. Even in highly developed societies, the role of the elderly seems to be something that should not be ignored.

Some conclusions

Through his concept of character, Hillman offers us a fresh perspective on what old age is in human life and the role of old people in society. He directly addresses the negative and unfortunately common phenomenon of discrimination against people because of their age. The idea of character allows us to see the uniqueness of all human beings, to value their existence. It allows us to look at a person not from the point of view of their physicality and physiology, but also from a psychological perspective. Older people have an important cultural role to play, and their influence can last even after their death, as long as they remain with us as ideas. Hillman's theory takes into account self-sacrifice, the desire for the good of others, and the preservation of traditions, history and the transmission of civilisational values. Contrary to what simplistic geneticism suggests, our goal is not just our own survival.

N O T E S

¹ James Hillman, *The Force of Character and the Lasting Life*. First Ballantine Books Trade Edition, July 2000.

² https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4046150. Robert N. Butler first used the term 'ageism' in the late 1960s to describe the problematic process of systematically stigmatising people on the basis of their age.

³ A. Kępiński, *Rytm życia*. Kraków 1992, 166.

⁴ J. Hillman, *The Force*, *ibidem*, xvi.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*, xv.

⁷ Global report on ageism (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2021), xvi.

⁸ J. Hillman, *The Force*, *ibidem*, xviii.

⁹ Simone Beauvoir, *Old Age*, London, UK: Andre Deutsch, Weidenfeld and Nicholson and G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972. 592 pp.

¹⁰ S. Beauvoir "Starość" (*La vieillesse*) Published by Czarna Owca, 2011. Translation: Zofia Styszyńska, 7–8, 11.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, xiv–xv, xviii.

¹² *Ibidem*, xvii.

¹³ *Ibidem*, xvi.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, xvii–xviii.

¹⁵ Robert N. Butler in his book "How to Survive? Being Old in America", 2003; <https://www.press.jhu.edu/books/title/3040/why-survive>. "Butler questions the value of long life for its own sake; modern medicine, he says, has ironically created 'a huge group of people for whom survival is possible but satisfaction in living elusive'".

¹⁶ J. Hillman, *The Force*, *ibidem*, xiii.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem, xiv.

¹⁹ Ibidem, xiii.

²⁰ Ibidem, xiv–xv.

²¹ Ibidem (xv).

²² Ibidem, ziv.

²³ Ibidem, xiv–xv.

²⁴ Ibidem, xv.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ A. Schopenhauer, *W poszukiwaniu mądrości życia. Parerga i paralipomena*, t. 1, Warszawa 2002, 621.

²⁷ Cicero. *On old age*: Cicero, Marcus Tullius, 2009. <https://archive.org/details/cu31924026475230/page/n9/mode/2up>

²⁸ Cicero *On Old Age*, ibidem, xi–xii.

²⁹ A. Schopenhauer, *W poszukiwaniu mądrości życia*, ibidem, 622.

³⁰ J. Hillman, *Kod duszy: W poszukiwaniu charakteru człowieka i jego powołania*, Warszawa 2014, transl. Jerzy Korpanty; (*The Soul's Code: On Character and Calling*, 1997).

³¹ Ibidem, 11, 33, 48, 137–138.

³² Ibidem, 10–11, 92–93, 96.

³³ The translation of the word daimon is straightforward, as it is the Latin equivalent of genius, and more modern synonyms include angel, soul, paradigm, image, destiny, inner twin, acorn, life companion, guardian, voice of the heart. The multiplicity of terms captures the plurality and ambiguity inherent in the nature of the daimon. It is the personification of the (imaginary) spirit, which in Greek psychology was also the personal fate of man, the genius that accompanies man. This is why the word daimon has sometimes been translated as fate or destiny, and sometimes as genius, but never as one's own self, ego, self, or the English self. Ibidem, 257.

³⁴ Ibidem, 258–259.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ J. Hillman, *The Force*, ibidem, xvi–xvii, xix.

³⁷ Ibidem, xx–xxi.

³⁸ J. Hillman, *The Force*, ibidem, 187–189.

³⁹ Ibidem, 188.

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