

Tadeusz Sławek
University of Silesia
Katowice, Poland

An essay a young man could never write. On old age and education.

*Will you still need me, will still feed me
When I'm sixty-four*

—John Lennon and Paul McCartney, “When I’m Sixty-Four”.

(at AGE Annual Conference, December 2014)

I want to speak on old age not only as a certain period in an individual's biography but, first of all, as a disposition which we have to work on and develop since our early days. Although the process of ageing is inevitable, nevertheless we are not doomed to old age; rather, we have a disposition to it, a disposition to a certain attitude towards life, a disposition which we need to care about and cultivate, if our existence is to be meaningful. In fine, we take old age to be a sum of human conscious efforts which we undertake on behalf of the meaningfulness of life. Hence, in this short essay I am not going to focus on the statistics of demography (the process of ageing of Western societies is well documented) or economics (for instance, a growing hiatus between the pension system and financial capacities of states as a major factor threatening the social contract); I am convinced that speaking about this on this forum would be like bringing coal to Newcastle. To create the general ramifications for my speech suffice it to mention only two kinds of data: first, that before 2050 20% of the world population will be sexagenarians, while in Europe this number will most likely rise to 33 per cent; and, second, that while now four employed contribute to maintain one pensioner, in 2040 their number will fall to two. But to meditate upon this precarious situation, I would rather concentrate on ageing as a problem of ethical and educational sensibility seeing in these two areas a thoughtful preparation of a further discussion which could offer some political, social or economic propositions. What is at stake, I propose, is urging the society to think of ageing as a part of the general problem of the meaningfulness of life in contemporary disenchanted world of risk, and, hence, our initial claim is that the problem of old age is so urgent and pressing because it tells us that something is wrong with the way in which we have organized our life which, not infrequently, we may be tempted to summarize as that of people of whom W.H. Auden says: „Their lives were boring and undignified:/ They worked a little, they consumed, they

died”¹. (735)

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The title of this essay is an effect of the intellectual indebtedness. It is a free variation on the first line of a sequence of poems which the Polish Nobel prize winning poet Czesław Miłosz wrote when he was approaching his ninetieth birthday.² As the title of the poem, *A Theological Treatise*, convinces us, the matters discussed in it will not be trivial. The text is not only a kind of *summa theologica* but, primarily, a *summa existentia*. What is at stake is, as Miłosz claims, the “first things” amongst which the truth is the most essential. It is in the light of this premise that the opening line, “A young man could not write a treatise like this”, becomes so disturbingly important. The reason which accounts for this lack of faith in the abilities of “a young man” has nothing to do with a conventional argumentation connecting old age with experience, the argumentation which turns man into a bank of knowledge in which time accumulates, whether we want it or not, information, facts, and memories. What is responsible for this specific inability of Miłosz’s “young man” is a crucial and stunning absence, a dramatic lacuna opening amidst our daily concerns, which, despite all its harsh, sometimes even brutal, material conditions lack seriousness and solicitude. Deficiencies of seriousness from which suffers the discourse employed in dealing with social, economic, and political issues, a discourse which largely confines itself to the language of economy, impoverish and narrow the horizon of our reflection and make us unable to *understand* such question as that of inevitable ageing relegating them merely to the area of problems to be (economically, socially, medically) *dealt with* and *be done with*. Hence the characteristic prayer with which Miłosz closes the first section of his *Treatise*: “May reality come back to our speech”. This wish will guide us, with the help of a few eminent philosophers and poets, in this humble meditation on old age as an attitude, rather, then merely a *problem*.

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- 1 W.H. Auden: „Symmetries & Asymmetries”. In: W.H. Auden: *Collected Poems*, ed. E. Mendelson. Vintage Books, New York 1991, p. 735.
 - 2 Cz. Miłosz: „Traktat teologiczny”. W: Cz. Miłosz: *Druga przestrzeń*. Znak: Kraków 2002.

In January 1798 Kant writes a letter to Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland, a professor of medicine at the university of Jena and a personal physician to the emperor Friedrich Wilhelm III, which offers a few interesting insights into the nature of ageing. Unable to do here justice to this text, let us only concentrate on the manner in which the philosopher speaks of old age as of a question of a specific twisting together of man, time, law, and education. From the very opening gambit we learn that old age is the period in human life the characteristic feature of which is what Kant calls *procrastinatio*, “the habit of postponing important decisions”³. Hence the very first disagreement between the way in which our world (what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “system-world”) is organized and old age: **the world is run on the principle of the economy of time which should never be wasted and which calls for a prompt action, an immediate re-action to the circumstances, while old age, on the other hand, delays responses, postpones decisions, puts off actions and thus challenges the world from within.** Old age as an attitude and a chain of unceasing efforts to make our lives meaningful is rebellious and transgressive. While the young produce and accumulate like sheriffs of Nottingham, the old behave as if they were Robin Hoods – they procrastinate, that is “steal” from the resources of the rich. As the English proverb has it “procrastination is a thief of time”. Roberts Schwentke grasped this well in his 2010 film *RED* (retired extremely dangerous) in which four, by far not young, agents played by Helen Mirren, Bruce Willis, Morgan Freeman, and John Malkovitch successfully dismantle corrosive strategies of the system-world.

But, what is even more intriguing, the old manage to perform these transgressive operations precisely from within the scheme which organize and institutionalize the world; the old age is not an obstacle but just the opposite – a helpful factor. The four retired agents in Schwentke's film, people who have been badly affected, if not damaged, by the risks of their profession and serious diseases (as W.H. Auden says in his poem on old people - “each has her own nuance of damage”⁴), know the secrets and tactics of the system, have kept their friendly, not merely formally administrative, connections which provide them with all the necessary information. Kant, at the moment of the writing of the letter 74 years old, is, in fact, doing a similar thing: he responds, in January 1798 to Hufeland to thank him for a book which he had sent him over a year before. In

3 I. Kant: „On the Power of the Mind to Master Its Morbid Feelings by Sheer Resolution. A Letter in Reply to Privy Councillor and Professor Hufeland”. In: I. Kant: *The Conflict of the Faculties*, tr. M.J. Gregor. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London 1979, pp. 175-213.

4 W.H. Auden: „Old People's Home”. In: W.H. Auden: *Collected Poems...*, p. 860.

the world of quick responses such a situation is scandalous, and it seems that it can be saved only by a recourse towards senile forgetfulness. But it is not due to the senile amnesia that Kant's letter is so delayed. Nothing further from the truth; Kant, the old man, remembers, and remembers very precisely. He reminds Hufeland that he had sent him his book “on 12 December 1796”. **Old age is a particular form of remembering which undertakes a critique of a memory of the operating system of the world which wants to act as fast as possible.** Kant, age 74, is teaching Hufeland, age 36, an important lesson: if modernity has been established on the principles of “more” and “faster”, if notions like “patience” and “delay” have been stigmatized in Faust's famous exclamation *Fluch sei der Hoffnung! Fluch dem Glauben,/ Und Fluch vor allen der Geduld!*, then we need to recover a position from which these formative ideas of “more” and “fast” can be interrogated. What is at stake is precisely not a rejection but interrogation. Old age, as Kant demonstrates, can be a temporal designation of such a place of interrogation. As Jan Patočka says “it is not a question of rejecting technology and its products. The vital question is not rejection but asking ourselves whether we can live exclusively on their basis”⁵.

Before moving on, let us formulate our first lessons of old age as designed by Kant and grasped by an eminent poet. (1) Old age, as an attitude problematizing system-world on behalf of the meaningfulness of life, is a way of reflecting on the fundamental notions upon which modernity have been founded; a distance which the “elderly” perceive between the world which they could refer to as “theirs” and contemporary technology does not necessarily alienate them. I think opposite is true: this distance helps them to generate a critical appreciation of the contemporary moment frequently lacking from its young champions. W.H. Auden makes his senior citizen, who has previously confessed all his reservations about “lasers and electric brains”⁶, to angrily exclaim: “Me alienated? Bosh! It's just/ As a sworn citizen who must/ Skirmish with it that I feel/ Most at home with what is Real”⁷. **Listening to old age would allow us to “skirmish” with, rather than passively accept, the system-world, and thus feel more “at home with what is Real”.**

(2) Old age also wants to bring back to us the attitude of a patient tarrying with the world, a culture of *Langsamkeit*, as opposed to the (Goethe's word) *veloziferisch* civilization of the system-world. The rhetoric of the culture of *Langsamkeit* is that of a friendly conversation rather than that of a

5 I am using the Polish translation of Patočka's essays *Kacirske eseje o filosofii dejin* published as *Eseje heretyckie z filozofii dziejów*. Aletheia, Warszawa 1997, p. 97.

6 W.H. Auden: „Prologue at Sixty”. In: W.H. Auden: *Collected Poems...*, p. 831.

7 W.H. Auden: „Doggerel by a Senior Citizen”. In: *Ibid.*, p. 852.

public address. Auden, sympathizing with young protesters of the 1960s, nevertheless charges them with an atrophy of friendship: “Why strip naked and bellow words of four letters in public? Poor young things, can it be none of you have any friends?”⁸. Old age desires company not only because of its loneliness but, first of all, because it wants to bring us back to a good, *thoughtful*, and not merely *pragmatically useful* word. **That is, it wants to show us what our life is like when our being together, our *vivre ensemble*, is sane and dominated by care rather than by competitiveness.**

(3)Old age is transgressive not only because it wants to interrogate the very principles of the system-world, but also because it clearly demonstrates weak points of this system, one of the most dramatic of which is the inability of the system-world to understand old age and respect its different perspectives. The old are the bad conscience of the system-world which has globalized economy and subjected everything to the logic and discourse of numbers, and statistics of economy in the service to pragmatic usefulness and short-sighted and short-distance profit. Let me repeat – **the old are the bad conscience of the system-world**, unlike governments which, according to to Albert Camus *par definition, n'ont pas de conscience*⁹ the bad conscience which vexes the world that wants to remain for ever “young”. Stephane Hessel at the age of 93 writes his best-selling manifesto which electrified the post 2008 crisis world with its explicit title *Indignez vous*.

(4)Hence, lesson 4 will have to deal with law and education. The former constitutes the most fundamental and general scheme of the organization of the world; the latter is responsible for making people enter the world in a way which would make their lives reasonable and purposeful. Kant offers us another thought-provoking insight: although certainly law is necessary to create a framework within which approaches towards and procedures concerning old age will be possible, nevertheless no law as such can even approximate the very heart of the problem of old age, of the tired and retired, which is its relationship and connection with the young, productive and energetic. A poet again comes to our rescue with the reticent but strikingly accurate description of the problem. In 1967, from within the colourful reality of a hippie counterculture, W.H. Auden asks, “Can Sixty make sense to Sixteen-Plus?/ What has my camp in common with theirs,/ with buttons and beards and be-ins?”. **No serious approach to the question of ageing is possible without concentrating upon the human connection, focusing upon a quality of human connectivity**

8 W.H. Auden: „Shorts II”. In: *Ibid.*, p. 859.

9 A. Camus: „Les deracines”. In: *Témoins* n°5, printemps 1954.

linking man with one another and the world. This fundamental connection, older than laws, Aristotle referred to as “friendship”, and it is a question of human connectivity that ought to constitute the heart of discussions upon old age.

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“Can Sixty make sense to Sixteen-Plus?” is the most urgent question concerning not only old age but, with its help, our being together, our ability to *vivre ensemble* or *Zusammenleben*. Kant is right – no law can regulate this area. One of the mistakes of the European Community is its believe in the omnipotence of law and, as its consequence, a proclivity towards overregulation on the basis of a conviction that all walks of life and all domains of human existential experience can be illuminated and improved by way of law. This very well may be the case of what Martin Buber famously called “existential mistrust” which disfigures authenticity of human life. Let me repeat: **no law can effectuate a situation in which sixty would make sense to sixteen-plus which means – no law can guarantee us a being together which would make sense because sense, generally speaking, lies outside the range of law.**

Kant's letter to young Hufeland will help us again. The philosopher is convinced that old age ought to be honoured; honouring old age belongs to one of the most essential moral duties holding within social structure. But, at the same time, Kant realizes that the age itself cannot be the cause of this respect; it is not enough to live LONG to earn respect. The sentence has to be reaccentuated: one has to LIVE long in order to deserve being honoured. This is the appropriate quotation from Kant: “The duty of honoring old age is not really based on the consideration that age, because of its frailty, can rightly claim from youth (...). Old age, therefore, claims to be considered something meritorious besides, since respect is due to it”. It is important to note that old age does not deserve honour because it provides man with a greater knowledge or expands his or her skills, neither does it qualify the old to automatically reasonably rule the young... none of this is true. There is something “meritorius”, *etwas Verdienstliches*, in old age only to the extent to which it enables the young to see how human beings ought to deal with their time and mortality. Old age unveils human mortality not because an old person is statistically closer to death than a young one, but because it demonstrates the value of human life, each human life, as depending upon our awareness of mortality. The old person can be a model of how to LIVE a life not eluding

and evasively escaping its problems but struggling with them. This is precisely the *etwas Verdienstliches* in man: the ability to meaningfully cope with the time which has been given us to live, that is - to LIVE a meaningful life despite or perhaps even due to one's being mortal, despite life's inevitable sufferings and weaknesses. Here is Kant again: "This is the reason why old people should be honored, as long as no shame has stained their lives – simply because they have preserved their lives so long and set an example".

But to be able to honour old men for this ability, to deeply respect old men and women as guardians of life against the temptations and incursions of death, against all the ominous winds of crises and various dangerous turns our lives may take, to be able to do this, one has to understand life as more than the process of acquiring "more" in the ever "faster" way. There is more to life than labour market and professional skills. People who do not see it will never be able to respect the elderly. Unable to deal with mortality (and death is the most radical opposition of "more", in death there is only less and less, so that ultimately nothing remains which in our civilization of accumulating things must seem a scandal) as an element and factor of life, they will be blind to those who have been wisely doing it for many years. Thus, **education is a key to a redefinition and repositioning of old age in the society**. While in this context we mostly speak of the education of the elderly themselves, of life-long learning and third age universities, beyond doubt all necessary and valuable propositions, now we want to shift our attention to education of the young. It is there where attitudes towards life are being shaped, and hence it is on the degree to which school education will be able to make its adepts aware of the necessity of asking what T.S. Eliot called "overwhelming questions" that depends the way in which old men and women will be looked at and treated in an by the society.

Most likely, we cannot prepare ourselves for old age, if by preparing we mean something more than saving a certain amount of money stashed away for the rainy day. We can and should, however, prepare ourselves for being able to, first, see life in all its seriousness (which certainly implies the issues of suffering, pain, mortality), and, second, talk about it in a language which would do justice to the seriousness of the matter. The greatest danger which casts its shadow upon the way in which we perceive and administer old age lies in education, that is in what happens many decades before we recede into the darker wood of age. Over the years, and the process has intensified recently, education has been treated by the society as basically a most efficient way of

preparing young men and women for specific professions by providing them with adequately specific skills. Education has become a synonym of the technology of learning (hopefully financially profitable) conceived of with the view of delivering people prepared to more or less clearly defined professions which, in turn, are thought of as the main device of the technology of living. In this process which takes place between technologies of learning and technologies of living something important, something meritorious, *etwas Verdienstliches*, is lost: the ability to face human life with all due seriousness. Profession and labour market have risen as the two dark melancholic signs above young people's lives. Education has evolved in an unfortunate belief that it is essential to become first a good, marketable professional to be a good human person, whereas the opposite seems to have been historically true – it is on the foundation of a good person that a good and socially welcome professional is constructed. Speaking from within the belly of the capitalist-techno-bureaucratic-corporate whale, we have to ring a warning signal which Jan Patočka in 1970s was sending from within the belly of the communist monster: a true education as care for the growth of the human individual has to rise from the care of the soul. Plato's *Epimeleia tes psyches*, the care of the soul, is the foundation of Europe, but if this is the case, we can say that the respect for the old is also one of Europe's cornerstones.

The authors of a study prepared by the Polish Institute of Citizens' Affairs in 2009 rightly claim that one of the most perilous traps of the contemporary system-world is a belief in education as a provider of the technologies of profession extended into technologies of living. Hence, as we read in the study, “the education of the mature person should not be limited to acquiring of technical-professional skills. The ever growing intricacy of the social world should make us more alert to a knowledge which would enhance our skills of communicating with others. More specifically, we should amplify our knowledge of consumer and labour rights as well as a knowledge concerning ecology”¹⁰. (49). We should certainly make one step further. If, to endorse the theses of the authors of the report we need to extend the range of what we learn far beyond the limits of the technologies of profession, then it is not enough, although necessary, to learn the labour law and ecological conditioning of human existence, but it is also vital to study arts and literature – humanities in most general sense of the word. Since the report specifically underscores the need to spur and animate the “curiosity of the world” as the element which energizes creative

10 O. Szukalski: „Przygotowanie do starości jako zadanie dla jednostek i zbiorowości”. In: *Przygotowanie do starości. Polacy wobec starzenia się*, ed. P. Szukalski. Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa 2009, p. 49.

activities of the individual, then nothing can do it better than humanities not as an alternative to, but as a necessary, indispensable factor correcting the miscalculations and simplifications of the technologies of learning and technologies of life as technologies of profession.

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Martha Nussbaum in her remarkable study *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs Humanities* published by Princeton University in 2010 targets education for economic growth as a force which, by a radical and arrogant marginalization of humanities, disables human individual and, in a longer view, human society. What Nussbaum notes as the general symptom: “all over the world, programs in arts and humanities, at all levels, are being cut away, in favor of the cultivation of the technical”¹¹, is one of the most important reasons for our inability to understand old age as an **existential and human** (and not merely medical, economic, social, political) position. Nowhere more painfully and dramatically do we see the accuracy of Heidegger's charge that we, modern Westerners, have lost the meaning of what it means to be, nowhere is this question of *Seinsvergessenheit* more visible, than in the plight of the old and our helplessness vis-a-vis old age. For all practical reasons, this particular existential disease dangerously disfiguring human life and human society is a result of an education which neither understands nor cherishes the significance of sympathy and sensibility. As Nussbaum claims in the same passage, education for growth fears arts because “for a cultivated and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of obtuseness, and moral obtuseness is necessary to carry out programs of economic development that ignore inequality. It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learned any other way to see them”.

When Kant, in his response to Hufeland in January 1798, draws a demarcation between philosophically conceived medical science and medicine as application of surgical or pharmaceutical means, he, in fact, wants to emphasize the fact that the technology of learning needs to be founded upon man's conscious effort to think himself or herself as a point where a wide variety of existential effects are twisted together. Hence, before medicine becomes a medicine of drugs, it needs to be a medicine of virtue. As he says, “medical science is *philosophical* when

11 M. Nussbaum: *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs Humanities*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2010, p. 23.

the sheer power of man's reason to master his sensuous feelings by a self-imposed principle determines his manner of living. On the other hand, medical science seeks the help of external physical means (drugs or surgery) to stimulate or ward off these sensations, it is merely empirical and mechanical". The way to a cure leads primarily through one's manner of living, one's *Lebensweise*, whereas the necessary technology of curing works upon the level of physical symptoms and is qualified as *empirisch und mechanisch*. Reading Nussbaum's message through the lenses of Kant's examples enables us to say that ageing, to be understood as much more than a medical or economic problem, needs to be perceived as a result and effect of one's *Lebensweise*, that is as one's life's experience which will never allow to fit itself in the bureaucratic formulae.

This *Lebensweise* is philosophically and existentially grounded and therefore education without access to humanities and art, education promoted now as education for growth and crude practical immediate usefulness, is main obstacle for a society that wants to understand and merely to "solve" or "pacify" old age as an economic or medical problem. Kant is, however, very specific in his instructions. For example, he strongly warns us against too much warmth, too much sleep or a pampering attitude towards oneself. Such instructions as "The bed is a nest for a whole flock of illnesses" (*Das Bett ist das Nest einer Menge von Krankheiten*) or a strict reminder of the necessity of work - "Some elderly people *coddle* themselves (*pflügen*) ... because they think they can prolong their lives by avoiding discomfort ... by relegating to others work they could do themselves", can very well be placed as pieces of priceless advice for modern readers.

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But the most crucial point, a real nexus of his theory of old age, lies in his firm belief that it is the autonomous human individual that is the only real guarantor of well spent life, that is life prolonged as long as possible, that is life continued in its full flavour and taste in old age. A good life is one of a human individual who *does* rather than is *done to*. Our sense of life depends thus on two factors: our ability to do things, to creatively intervene in the Real, and our mental disposition to fight against inevitable physical weaknesses and limitations coming with age. This is the appropriate from Kant's letter: "And since our *joy de vivre* depends more on what we freely *do* with life than on what we *enjoy* as a gift from it, mental work can set another kind of heightened vital feeling against the limitations that affect the body alone". What Kant calls "mental work",

Geistesarbeiten, is mandatory in order to set off the incursions of disease and weakness and thus can save our “vital feeling”, *Lebensgefühl*. To continue with Kant's terminology, the question of old age consists in the degree to which we will be able to create for ourselves a *Lebensweise* which would be supported, as long as possible, by *Lebensgefühl*.

This dovetails with the problem of education upon which our attitude towards ageing hinges. One can prepare oneself to old age only if one thinks oneself and the world in a manner which does not allow itself to devolve to become a mere identification with a profession and its technology of living. If we permit this devolution to happen, then the end of the professional life, retirement, disengagement or the loss of a job will turn out to be overwhelming crises which, as statistics prove, not infrequently can lead to a suicide. This is what Nussbaum refers to as education which, unlike education for growth, enables us to “see the full humanness of the people with whom our encounters in daily life are especially likelt to be superficial at best, at worst infected by demeaning stereotypes”¹². Let us not forget that one of the most pervasive stereotypes of our culture concerns focusing public attention upon lives of the young and prosperous. A culture of celebrities impedes and does everything to destroy the culture of *Langsamkeit*.

We cannot deny: a lack of understanding of old age has been a dominating factor in our culture. One may paradoxically so, since Western societies are ageing quickly, and the more they age, the less they want to understand ageing. At best, they translate it into the language of medicine, social services, and statistics of economy. Kant advises us otherwise. It is a different, more thoughtful education of the young, which can change our attitudes towards the old. Kant refers to this education as to a “philosophy” and dons it with a very important mission: it is philosophy that can lead us towards old age, to be more adequate – that can leading us, throughout our life, towards old age. Philosophy, says Kant, “whose interest is the entire final end of reason ... brings with it a feeling of power (*Gefühl der Kraft*) which can well compensate for the physical weaknesses of old age by a rational estimation of life's value”. The point, however, is that education for growth has nothing to do with the feeling of power, neither can it tell us anything sensible about the *Schätzung* of our lives. As long as we keep this model of education, cutting on the number of courses in arts and humanities, we will not be able to come to terms with old age. Nussbaum envisages a grim future in this respect: “Such will be our future *if* we continue down the road of 'teaching to the test', neglecting the activities that enliven children's minds and make them see a

12 Ibid., p. 107.

connection between their school life and their daily life outside school”¹³.

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So the question which needs to be asked all over again is Auden's “Can Sixty make sense to Sixteen-Plus”, but we should not forget about its Lennon's and McCartney's brilliant companion piece: “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm sixty-four?”. We need to address these issues not merely on behalf of appropriate institutions but, first of all - through these institutions - as human being in all our humanness. If these questions remain unasked, if we do not rediscover a language in which we would be able again to genuinely talk about the seriousness of life, we will share the fate of those whom Auden, with bitter anxiety and mercilessly cruel precision, described in his 1970 poem “Old People's Home”: “...their generation/ is the first to fade like this, not at home but assigned/ to a numbered frequent ward, stowed out of conscience/ as unpopular luggage”.

¹³ Ibid., p. 141.