

# Old-Age Humility Youth Madness and an Old Virtue

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## Abstract

The dichotomy of youth and old age inevitably signals images of life and death of all existence. Thus, the process of unloved aging in our Peter Pan culture is accompanied by an ego-accentuated fascination with youthfulness, Youth Madness (Jugendwahn) and the urge for self-optimization, which can be interpreted as an expression of a strong will to survive and thus as the little sister of the longing for immortality. As a result, the unrealizable age and aging tend to be marginalized and burdensome. And humility as an attitude or virtue is happy to adapt to this. A good example of old age humility (=Altersdemut) in action is likely to be the hesitant resignation of “old” US President Joe Biden in the summer of 2024. The unwieldy concept of humility carries a heavy burden that includes connotations of sycophancy, submissiveness, cowardice, hypocrisy, servitude or naivety. Humility, combined with the feeling of weakness, lack of self-worth and worthlessness, seems to mean a despondent surrender and a loss of hope. The negative connotations of the term humility are supported by the related word “humiliation”, which is intended to evoke shame and submission in the other person. Even the perhaps somewhat archaic concept of modesty may directly border on the negative connotations of humility. These attributions lead more to a distorted image of an old Christian virtue than to a central aspect of life management in old age. Humility in old age therefore means dealing with two issues seemingly on the losing track of life. Nevertheless, this is undertaken here for the sake of a hidden treasure. The old author is very aware that it is much easier to write about humility, for example, than to live it.

## Approaching an Unwieldy Term

Approaching old age takes courage; accepting it in a friendly way probably takes humility. However, the concept of humility, which quickly has negative connotations, refers nicely to a realistic grounding of the human being, to stay on the ground and to recognize something higher, because the Latin term humilitas and thus also the English humility and humble derives from humus (= earth or soil), which also includes those which creeps on the ground (= humilis) [1]. With this approach, we already locate the term in the “Western” cultural sphere. It can have a significantly different and better meaning in other cultures.

## Extra Biblical Antiquity

Humility (gr. ταπεινότης = tapeinótes; lat. = humilitas) - in the sense of today's understanding, which is strongly influenced by Christianity is an ethical model or virtue. Aristotle dealt with all virtues in his Nicomachean Ethics, both the ethical (feelings and actions) and the dianoetic (knowledge, judgment, ability). They are all the necessary guidelines to be able to find the appropriate or the “correct center” and to do so. However, in the widespread canon of the four classical cardinal virtues of wisdom (φρόνησις = phrónēsis), bravery (ἀνδρεία = andreía), serenity (σωφροσύνη = sōphrosýnē) and justice (δικαιοσύνη = dikaiosýnē), humility (ταπεινότης = tapeinótes) is not mentioned at all. At the centre of Aristotle's doctrine of virtue were high-mindedness (μεγαλοψυχία = megalopsychía), understood in action as self-controlled serenity (sōphrosýnē) and long-suffering or magnanimity, but also gentleness (πραότης = praótēs).

Meekness, the driving force lived in interpersonal actions, would arise from moderation in the “correct center” between angerlessness and irascibility, so it cannot be seen as congruent with humility.

Only in very few places in Hellenistic secular literature do we find the term tapeinós (ταπεινός = low) with positive connotations, for example when the virtue of enduring social position by the lower class was described as ταπεινότες (= tapeinótes). The relationship of the Hellenes to the divine was rather described with terms of reverence, such as δέος (= déos) or εὐλάβεια (= eulábeia). The understanding of humility in antiquity was a “pagan” socio-political one. It was aimed more at the socially lower-class. Thus, the Latin term humilitas (to stay on the ground) comes closer to today's understanding of humility than the ancient Greek tapeinótes (ταπεινότες = humbly accept one's low social position).

## Christianity

In Christianity, the “pagan” socio-political concept of humility is joined by a strong reference to the divine, so that we can speak of a spiritual-social guideline. Martin Luther took the corresponding term ταπεινοφροσύνη (tapeinophrosýnē) from an early ancient Greek Bible text for his Bible translation from 1522 onwards and translated it into German as “Demut”; profane ancient Greek texts apparently do not know this term [2]. The Christian interpretations of humility over the centuries range quite differently from the understanding of humility as mere subordination to the expression of Christian self-awareness. In his letter to the Philippians, for example, the Apostle Paul brings the



virtue of humility into the discursive field, where it says in 2:3,4: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others”. And Matthew 11:29 also says about social behavior: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”. It was precisely because of this willingness to submit that the early Christians became the laughingstock of the proud Romans, who saw them as miserable sycophants. Numerous Christian passages provided justified nourishment for the accusation. Later Christian authors essentially point out that humility must be understood as self-limitation and not as self-dwarfing; not to make oneself small, but to feel smaller through a realistic self-assessment. In this way, humility constitutes the whole dignity of the Christian [2]. The crucifix may be seen as an expression of this attitude.

### Criticism of Religion

Religious critics such as Friedrich Nietzsche saw humility as a protective mechanism promoted by religion for the poor, weak and powerless, who lacked the strength to fight for their happiness. After that, sheer helplessness was transfigured into the virtue of humility. Whatever the theological discussion in Christianity may have looked like and had an effect, humility in most people’s sense of language probably remained linked to the idea of weakness that has been effective since antiquity. But humility was not only something for pious (female!) praying sisters or enslaved weaklings. Even enlightened citizens or philosophers of modern times and areligious or atheistic free spirits were unable to gain much from it. For the master race Adolf Hitler, for example, humility, whose origin he saw in the “oriental idleness”, was the greatest evil for the people.

### Humility in Ethics

In the course of Western history, a more positive understanding of humility has only hesitantly come to fruition; for example, the public denier of God Ernest Hemingway declared: “Humility is not disgraceful and carries no loss of true pride”. As he does several times in his work, he uses a term with strong Christian connotations. The German theologian Wilhelm Dilthey expressed it similarly: “Greatness and humility are not mutually exclusive”. Gratitude and humility can come when we look at the beauty or delicacy of nature, art and culture, their wonders, in the face of which we may feel small. When we have overcome an illness or when a child is born. Where we feel small, but still secure in the great plan of creation, in the great circle of life.

Today, humility in the sense of a humanistic ethic does not mean subservience or fawning, but the insightful acceptance of limits and limitations in the physical, intellectual, emotional, social or spiritual spheres. Humility stands in contrast to arrogance and hybris. Ego recognizes the achievements of old age and can put its own performance in relation to others in a respectful and cooperative way. In humility, ego also acknowledges that there are higher things that cannot be recognized, controlled, or understood. The prerequisite

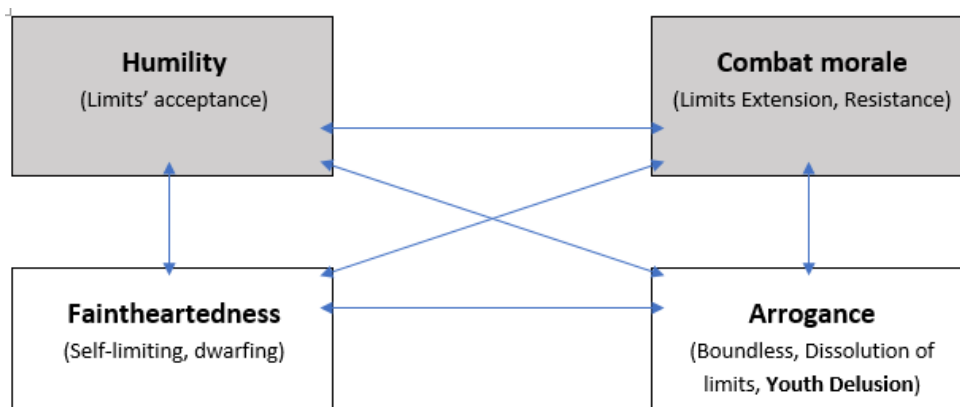
for a humble attitude is that the person is open and willing to learn. Understood in this way, the attitude or virtue of humility can find its place in the ethical canon of believers, atheists, religious people or in the humanistic worldview. Humility can be interpreted religiously, but it does not have to be but the basic feeling of accepting boundaries seems identical in the different interpretations. To distinguish from humility would be false humility, hypocrisy, where in truth pride comes along. In science, the term humility is not used clearly outside of theology; for example, there is no accepted definition or only rare psychological tests that would directly measure humility. For this reason, questionnaires are used that only capture individual elements of humility without using the term itself [3]. The Hexaco-PI-R test can be used to record various personality traits such as sincerity, modesty and self-esteem and infer a humble attitude [4]. Only one clinical test refers directly to youth Madness and presents a rating scale (YMRS) for the use of psychiatric diagnose and therapy (Young et al., 2000). Some studies have shown that humility can be useful to us throughout our lives. For example, children who showed cooperative and reserved behavior were more easily accepted by other children as playmates. Humility is also increasingly seen as a core competence in professional life. Probably because of the inner strength and willingness to cooperate that humility can trigger, titles on humility that focus on leadership skills and strategic management have recently been found [3]. Such advisors aim to lead executives to more effective leadership and business success through humility, which has been a rarity in management so far. Some studies highlighting the value of humility have even prompted the Wall Street Journal to highlight humility as a central skill for leaders.

A humble attitude can be expressed throughout life in selfless action, be it in all forms of helpfulness, in service professions such as care for the elderly or in voluntary work; always when the limitation of the ego is recognized by the ego and ego takes a back seat to age. Especially in old age, however, the acceptance of help comes to the fore over the willingness to help. Interestingly, there is no fixed term in German for the ability to accept help from others, i.e. from “people and machines”. We could therefore simply speak of aid acceptance in the future.

### Humility in the Square of Values

The essential factor for how humility is assessed today is likely to be whether humility is understood as a rigid and isolated virtue or whether it is dynamically accompanied by a balancing sisterly virtue such as the courage to fight. The sister vices of humility and fighting courage would be faint-heartedness on the one hand and arrogance on the other. In the value and development square, it is easy to see how the oscillating fighting courage prevents humility from sinking into faint-heartedness with self-limitation (self-dwarfing) and submissiveness that negates one’s own strength. And humility prevents the courage to fight (Combat morale) from turning into arrogance (Figure 1).

Figure 1:



## Cardinal Virtue

Perhaps we should understand humility as a cardinal virtue that can inspire other positive attitudes, such as empathy, truth, clarity, generosity, modesty, gentleness, appreciation, openness, responsibility, or spirituality. Gratitude is more likely to be felt by people whose attitude to life is essentially characterized by inner satisfaction, which should not be confused with happiness. Where happiness is a rather momentary euphoric sensation controlled by hormones, contentment is an attitude to life that is mainly genetically predisposed largely in childhood and is stabilized by success, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation or recognition. Old-age humility generally accepts the loss of abilities and resources without taking away the courage to fight-an often difficult and painful process of recognition and development that can already be inherent at a young age. Such insight into the necessity, into the acceptance of the unchangeable, also goes hand in hand with melancholy, gratitude or even humor. The Roman tradition coined the phrase for humble self-knowledge: *scio ne scio* ("I know that I know nothing"). A humble person is self-critically aware of his position in the social context as well as his tiny position in time and space; acknowledging this seems necessary in order to be able to age with dignity and to experience relative hope and freedom.

## Fight or Give Up

The value or virtue of courage or the courage to fight, the sister virtue of humility, touches very centrally on the question of combating limitations and diseases through medicines, machines, geronto interventions or aids. Even a humble old person can and should do everything to maintain his health and quality of life, be it he adapts himself or the environment. However, he would not do it beyond the borders that will inevitably appear again and again after all his efforts. He would therefore not suppress or curse the boundaries but would accept them as an expression of the human condition and perhaps process them with melancholy.

## Youth Madness and Images of Old Age

The striking and highly judgmental term "jugendwahn" (= youth madness, madness, omission) also lacks scientific consecration. Nevertheless, it seems to be used as a kind of axiom in gerontological literature, especially in the discussion of aging and age discrimination, but also in journalism, business administration, politics or popular literature. On 31.10.2023, however, it had not yet been included in the German-language Wikipedia and Google listed it almost 84,000 times on the same day. A few literatures on youth Madness can be found in the attached bibliography. Here, therefore, youth Madness is understood as an extreme overvaluation of youth and being young. It has no psychiatric connotation. The youth Madness, which is rampant today almost like a pandemic, is contrasted with gerontophobia or age anxiety: "In the youth delusion, some old age fear has its roots" [5]. In the German dictionary of the Brothers Grimm of 1852, the term "youth mania" is discussed. But even before that, Immanuel Kant had spoken of the delusion of youth at the end of the 18th century when he said: "The man of thoroughness ultimately becomes at most the sophist of his delusion of youth".

On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the term "youth" is used in a somewhat abbreviated form in youth Madness, because the age referred to does not only include youth as the legally defined period from 14 to 18 years of age, but also refers to the phase of life from adolescence to young adulthood. In this respect, terms such as "being young" or "youthful" would better encompass the topic addressed. In this safe space, which is not yet or hardly determined by the profession, the young person can experiment without being fully involved in social obligations. Magret Mead speaks here of a "moratorium" (1961).

The word combination youth-delusion points to a subjective

devaluation of "youthfulness", since the term "delusion" is intended to evoke the associated negative connotations such as "wrong", "crazy", "unreal" or "fantasy". Delusion as a psychiatric term means a wrong and uncorrectable interpretation of reality. In order to distinguish between the values of youthfulness and youth delusion, certain criteria should be used. One criterion for the sign of youth delusion, where the fascination for youthfulness has enantiodynamically turned into addiction and delusion, lies in harmfulness, a second in naturalness or limited functionality. A third criterion would be the effect of external or internal coercion. External coercion could represent an ideological monopoly position as in German National Socialism, combined with collective drill and body cult. An inner compulsion would exist if there was a neurotic body perception disorder such as dysmorphophobia or a manic fixation on male potency, for example as Pantaleone of the *Commedia dell'arte* in the role of lustful old man.

## Youthfulness and Youth Madness

With the advent of writing and the centralization of power in the advanced civilizations of antiquity, the ancients slowly lost their respected position as leaders and advisors in their communities. They were replaced by mostly male rulers, civil servants, ministers, generals, but also theologians, astrologers, philosophers, lawyers and physicians. Only the art of midwifery remained the domain of women for a very long time. In contrast, the process of the loss of power of the elderly is accompanied by a strong fascination with youthfulness or even delusions of youth [6,7]. Youth mania can be attributed to all measures that cause physical, social or economic damage, such as doping, high-risk sports, burnout or the neglect of relationships.

Also, all surgical interventions of aesthetic surgery such as breast changes, intimate surgery such as design vagina (correct: vulva) or scrotal plasty, leg lengthening according to Gavril Ilizarov, Botox injection or nose correction can be counted as youth madness, which have no medical causes such as drooping eyelids, malocclusion, apron or hallux valgus. A gray area is likely to be operations on oversized ears or noses, which provoke malice or bullying. In addition, there are requests for surgery that are brought to doctors due to body perception disorders such as the "fear of ugliness", dysmorphophobia (BDD = Body Dysmorphic Disorder); for example, in the case of the pop star Michael Jackson, which has been intensively disseminated in the media [8]. The force of the delusion of youth is by no means a privilege of youth or adulthood; age is also subject to the dictates of the delusion of youth. But often it is only in old age that the humble and measured recognition of our own greatness as well as the acceptance of the unchangeable seem to bring us freedom from arrogance and youthful delusion.

## Immortality

Early on, the dream of the immortality of man, which can be found in the stories of the peoples, such as the Gilgamesch-Epos or the Alexander-novel. But immortality is due to sexual reproduction not possible. However, in the animal kingdom, for example with jellyfish of *Turritopsis dohrnii*, immortality seems to be achievable through permanent cloning. At Herodotus the image of the fountain of youth appears for the first time which in the further course of the literary and artistic history the eternal youth and thus symbolizes immortality. The visual arts also shaped the idea of the fountain of youth, as in the case of Lukas Cranach d.Ä., 1546. Fiction continues to take up the theme. For example, in the satirical novel "Gulliver's Travels", Part 3, by Jonathan Swift (1726), on a Pacific island, the Struldbrug people attain eternal life, but they age and vegetate joylessly or bitterly and in Michel Houellebecq's utopian novel from 2007 "The Possibility of an Island" aging and thus old age has been abolished: in the fountain of youth of the clone, a new human being is created.



## Youthfulness in Antiquity and Christianity

Old age in history lose its power suddenly, but insidiously and overlappingly. Where in Sparta gerusia still prevailed, 28 male gerontes (= old men) over 60 years of age, the city-state of Athens, for example, developed into a large laboratory of popular rule without princes and tyrants. Kouroi-young men and an androgynous Athena symbolized youthfulness and thus the new value of change in the sculptures. Initially, Judaism had also broken the power of the ancients and supplanted the cult of ancestors or old age. It was no longer the ancients who led the people, but the Spirit of God in Scripture and through the prophets. Christianity then took up this thought and change in values. It also placed humility, the ancient *humilitas* or the *ταπεινοφροσύνη* (*tapeinophrosynē* = to be humble), at the center of ethics under two aspects: humility was considered both a spiritual and – derived from this – also a social virtue. This new message of love, hope and humility was spread by the thirty-year-old “Social Revolutionary” Jesus of Nazareth. In the late Middle Ages, a wealth of texts and songs by young people about young life had developed, often humorous or cynical and sharp: the vagabond poetry of students, scholars and runaway monks, a part of the “travelling people”. From about 1500 with the “beginning of the modern era, youth was the secret center of life in Europe” [7]. In the and Enlightenment, a time of awakening and dynamism in creativity and expansion, the focus of interest was not so much on rebirth as on real life stories of heroic or amorous young people.

## Youth from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Onwards

The late 19th and 20th centuries were permeated by various currents such as German Reformpädagogik like the Waldorf schools or the “Wandervogel” of the ideas contained in it were accompanied by the widespread rejection of aging and old age and a certain compulsion for self-optimization. The part of the National Socialist ideology that indulged in a large body cult can certainly be attributed to the delusion of youth. The propaganda conveyed to the youth that only they were the future of Germany. The old would be the weak democrats. But with youth, a “new generation”, a “new era” was emerging, with Hitler Youth boys “tough as leather, nimble as greyhounds and hard as Krupp steel”, according to Adolf Hitler in his Nuremberg speech of 1934. After the Second World War, rock’n’roll, pop and rock music dominated the youth scene, formative for a long time. The youth became politically active in the student movement from 1968 onwards as well as in the anti-nuclear movement and the peace movement. In the 21st century, the climate crisis then produced internationally oriented climate activists of the “Friday-for-future” (from 2019 on) or the “Last Generation” (from 2021 on).

## Anti-Aging Strategies and Images of Aging

The intense social warning cry “Aging forbidden - stay young!” has produced many measures and procedures of the anti-aging strategy, for example in scientific concepts [9] or guidebooks, especially for nutrition, exercise and memory training. All modern concepts and models of aging assume that aging and the image of old age can be shaped, even if old people often find it difficult to deal with the mostly introjected image of old age and the demands to keep themselves physically and mentally fit. There is still a negative age stereotype at work with corresponding age discrimination (ageism) on the elderly, for example when older employees can hardly find work, or 70-year-olds are denied a rental car [6].

With the idea and practice of the beauty, wellness and fitness industry as well as geronto-intervention and gerontoprophyllaxis, the youth madness as a culmination promises not only an improvement in the quality of life, but also a Lifetime-Extension, like what has already seen Hippocrates or the German doctor Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland in his “Macrobiotics”. The homunculus of stem cell research, once perhaps created in the feasibility delusion of science

and expected by probably the most from potentates and dictators, may at least in Faust’s vial (Goethe, “Faust II”, 2;2). But it doesn’t look like that. Eternal life is not bred in the new homunculus, as many thinkers had imagined with Goethe, but the pharmaceutical industry relies fully on anti-aging manipulation in its laboratories. Billion-dollar start-ups, mostly based in California, are using life scientists and AI to revolutionize the image of the fountain of youth. They build on the findings of epigenetic theory Steve Horvath’s that can explain the aging process due to a program and the function of certain genes. In 2023, Horvath and 200 colleagues were able to start with the so-called “The Pandora Clock” the “clock” of the aging program for all mammals. For example, an age of 150 or 200 years would no longer be uncommon in humans and the economic, social and personal consequences can hardly be overlooked at present. “So far, everything is just conjecture, mind games. It can happen either way. For the time being, one thing is certain: Death may falter, but it will not die. Not yet,” writes Ulrich Bahnsen in a ZEIT article [10].

Currently, the Californian biotech magnate Bryan Johnson, on the other hand, not only wants to live forever, but also wants to turn back the clock of life and become biologically younger in what is probably a narcissistic act of self-optimization. In his sophisticated “Blueprint” system, accompanied by a staff of physicians and ecotrophologists, he relies on nutrition such as the excessive intake of dietary supplements, light therapy, strength training and swimming. In 2021, according to Johnson, his Blueprint program would have reached an age reversal of about 5 years with him. Cost: 2 million euros per year.

But the youth madness does not only know the Extension, but also the lifetime Shortening, which usually only comes into play as a senicide at an unproductive and expensive age. It might end in many cultures as active or passive senicide [11]. In extreme cases, the mixture of youth madness and fear of old age also gives birth to hatred of the elderly, which sometimes turns into psychological and physical violence against the elderly, the “lepers of the meritocracy” [12].

## Ages and Models of Aging

Everyone has an age, but not everyone gets old. When he gets old, the young-old are first assigned to the third or retirement age and from about 85 years of age to the fourth age, the old-old. The last two phases of life are now enormously long, and can sometimes even last as long as professional life. Age as a process remains strangely diffuse. It can neither be experienced nor felt selectively. It seems to be noticeable only to the others, but not necessarily to oneself. Jean-Paul Sartre therefore spoke of old age as the “unrealizable”. And his partner, the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, also came to the conclusion in her epochal seminal work of 1970 (“La Vieillesse” = Old Age) that old age, a “biological-cultural fact”, was unrealizable due to its intertwined circularities. Old age has a bio-psychological dimension or circularity (the inside-inside of the human being: his physicality with the biomorphosis and his psyche), a psycho-social dimension (the inside-outside, such as role attributions) and a social-historical dimension (the top and bottom like poverty and wealth, or, in de Beauvoir’s case, the socialist class struggle). If we look at the bracket between these three circularities, the bio-historical dimension or the time factor (past and present), we see how the body is shaped in and by time or how the body shapes time, for example in the images of old age. We may see the spotlight of old age passing by in the night sky from afar, but we will not see and enter the lighthouse that sends this ray of light until we can say of ourselves, “I am old!” Young-old people only make such a subjective statement at an average age of 78, an intersubjective point in time that could be seen as the beginning of the fourth age of the old-old [13].

Oscillating uncertainly between praise of old age and lamentation of old age, between condemnation and glorification, between delusions of youth and wisdom romanticism, there seems to be hardly a safe haven of evaluation for old age. The widespread fear of old age or the



age complaint is also countered by praise of old age. Even in Cicero, instead of age-specific new values such as serenity or wisdom, there is a whole list of simple reinterpretations of the weaknesses of old age: the lack of physical strength is compensated for by increased foresight, the dwindling pleasures make room for sociability and death is not to be feared because one either goes into the afterlife or disappears into nothingness.

Despite all the rather negative images of old age, age discrimination, loss of function (biomorphosis) and suffering, old age today is very often surprisingly satisfactory on an individual basis, especially in the third age of the young old. Older people today increasingly seem to be true masters of adaptation, leaving the psychological age well behind the biological one. But despite all efforts, the limits of mental and physical resilience are reached in the face of multiple illnesses or functional losses. This progresses differently depending on the person, earlier or more severely.

### Images of Old Age

Despite all age discrimination, today's image of old age is slowly improving depending on the level of education - among the younger people, but especially among the old people themselves. Today's 65-year-olds have a more positive self-image age than previous generations. A negative image of old age can even lead to age self-discrimination and self-fulfilling prophecy in old age. People with a positive age image, on the other hand, can live up to 13 years longer [9]. The dominant image of old age is on the one hand, strongly fed by the fear of loss of performance, illness and dementia, on the other hand, there is a pronounced delusion of youth with values such as dynamism, diet, fitness, beauty and corresponding anti-aging strategies. Behind this image of old age and the delusion of youth there is ultimately the silent but effective idea that only the young, powerful and financially value-creating person would be worth surviving. In this context, beauty has the special role of embodying the value of youthfulness in the literal sense of the word via the contemporary and strongly media-mediated ideal of beauty. Here, on the other hand, cosmetic surgery and slimness mania stand out, which is easy to Anorexia nervosa or Bulimia [14].

### Gerontological Optimism

We find several models in research and literature that focus on aging or successful aging. From the 1960s onwards, the models by Erik H. Erikson, Cumming/Henry, Havighurst, Baltes/Baltes and Rowe/Kahn became known. Behind the age models lies the justified expectation and hope that old age can be shaped [7]. Examples of terms and activity-oriented conceptions of ageing are "successful", "healthy", "active", "productive", "optimal" or "vital" ageing. The model by Baltes/Baltes (1990), for example, shows how the ability to act, the quality of life and the subjective well-being can be stabilized and sometimes even increased by the "orchestration" of three life management strategies: Selection, Optimization and Compensation (SOC) even in the case of functional losses or limitations. Baltes' SOC model can be vividly illustrated by the example of Arthur Rubinstein: the world-famous pianist played fewer pieces (selection), he practiced the others more intensively (optimization) and for complicated, fast music runs he had come up with a trick with a previously unused resource (compensation): before the fast passages he played much slower, so that the following runs seemed faster to the listener. But any other support from outside can also be considered compensation, for example if Rubinstein had chosen four-handed pieces.

Strictly speaking, this strategic SOC model is used in all age groups – in younger age it is probably more easily worn, as many restrictions are temporary. For example, the application of the three strategies in adolescence triggers disappointment rather than despair, but also joy and pride in having solved a problem "cleverly". In old age, on the other hand, the application is likely to be experienced more strongly as coercion and, due to narcissistic insult and shattered self-

confidence, can trigger repression, anger, despair or depression.

With such optimistic models, the discussion about successful aging has long been driven by an overly optimistic focus and an almost elitist view of the feasibility of a disease-free retirement period. Books with titles such as: "Ending Aging. The Rejuvenation Breakthroughs That Could Reverse Human Aging in Our Lifetime" provoke the image of an ageless life or at least disability-free years through such shameless gerontological optimism. The meaning and value of humble acceptance in dealing with the loss of resources or in the case of illnesses and limitations is hardly considered. Thought in one image: the pretty coffee cup is missing the handle [15].

### Humility and Acceptance

Reduction and loss of performance, frailty, suffering, dying and death are an important part of the human condition. The examination of these natural boundaries should be taken into account in detail in the sense of gerontological realism. The concept of humble acceptance can be used to grasp the sensible attitude for this.

### Reactions to Limits

At 40, a person may discover the first gray hairs, at 50 diabetes sets in, at 60 his grandchild runs away from him and at 70 he masters a difficult mountain passage with only the outstretched hand of the mountain guide. He now has three basic options to react to such restrictions or narcissistic insults.

1. Suppression: He distracts from the injury or ignores what is happening.
2. Curse: He quarrels, revolts and laments his fate to the point of depression.
3. Processing: At best, he succeeds in psychological processing, for example through self-reflection and thus acceptance of the unchangeable.

In this way, he could humbly accept the limitation and accept the boundary as a normal process of aging. In 1783, Immanuel Kant formulated this in his "Prolegomena to Every Future Metaphysics" apodictically, but perhaps also comfortingly: "In all limits there is also something positive". The feeling for what has been lost could lead to painful grief and tears or comforting melancholy in the aging person. Wistfulness, perhaps experienced as a bitter-sweet feeling, is carried by the longing for a life lived, for lost abilities and people, by thoughts of missed opportunities, missteps and the knowledge of transience [16].

### Western Individualism

Perhaps the question now arises as to why the term humility still has such negative connotations due to its many connotations. It seems that humility is a concept from the realm of the collective, oriented towards the other, be it humans or gods. In front of gods and forces of nature, we feel small and quickly humiliated, which can trigger fear. This is opposed by Western individualism – learned since childhood and perhaps defended in old age with a desperate will to power. At least egocentric individualism, as it is probably mostly understood. An empty shell, filled with the compulsion for self-optimization, with greed, consumption, career, elbows and status. Humility, on the other hand, respectfully and solidarily refers to the other and to the higher, an attitude that could stop the linguistic style in the forums and platforms of the Internet, which is also penetrating the private and public spheres with great force. Know-it-all buckets full of boundless snot pour out ad personam, devoid of any politeness or net etiquette, on poor contemporaries – usually even in mutual pleasure in indecent injury and aggression.

### Humour

Perhaps humbly accepting boundaries can also help us to grow into humour. In humour we experience a piece of the lightness of life. We



experience it ourselves, but so do our fellow human beings. With humour and perhaps irony, we gain distance from the burdensome and from ourselves. The suffering does not disappear, but it is getting smaller. Thus, I gain a certain superiority over the almighty fate, I am less a servant than a master. Who wouldn't have to smile when a bedridden old man, whose food is brought to his bed on a tray, beams: "Oh, I've ended up in a real 5-star hotel!"

### Balancing and Successive

Presumably, when accepting and coping with suffering, it is more advantageous not to follow the guiding principle of positive thinking across the board, which consistently ends in repression, denial or magic, but to think in a balanced way, i.e. to have the negative present in the background in the orientation towards the positive. To stay with the image of the two sides of a coin: one positive side is seen and has an effect, the second invisible side is conscious, but does not work. This is not repression, but rather a focus that can motivate. An optimist will be able to think more easily in terms of balance. Another possibility of balancing thinking is comparison, which can calm and comfort me in sorrow or suffering. If, for example, I can no longer walk fast enough to reach the departing tram, I can, instead of being annoyed, console myself with the fact that I can still walk at all and am not bedridden. In this way, weakness becomes strength. A comparison with other people who are worse off than me may also have a comforting effect. On the other hand, the summit assault seems to be unfavorable. When I climb a high mountain, I should always have my goal in mind. However, the goal should by no means be the summit, but the next step in the wall or even just the next step. The summit should only serve as a direction. The goal is the next step in the right direction. So I move step by step, hoping for more moments of healing or the last frontier [17].

### What Old Age Humility Can Do

The cardinal virtue of humility has some effects on the psyche and the attitude to life of the human being. In old age, the most important effect is probably the ability to grow old with dignity. This often does not succeed because the fight against old age is waged unconditionally, without a sense of the new era and its tasks, or because the path leads to frustration, anger, resignation and despair; if the negative age stereotype of our society is internalized, if no confidence and hope can be countered to it; when the belief in the value and dignity of all old people has (become) weak; when love for the frail body and mind has been lost; if you need help.

### Acceptance of Help

The ability to accept help is the prerequisite for all compensation when aging with dignity. Like any limitation or illness, the "ability to accept help" (but not the suing for help that also occurs) is often experienced as "having to accept help", as a narcissistic insult and provoke correspondingly defensive reactions. Sandwiched between overcharging and paternalism on the one hand and defensiveness and stubbornness of old age on the other, the right amount of helpfulness and acceptance of help must find its way. For both sides, the understanding of help as "help for self-help" could be valuable [18,19].

### Serenity

Where in the past people prayed, looked at religious images with terrifying torments of hell, listened to a sermon or implored Saint Christopher, today people may seek advice on the Internet as to how an illness can be cured or a painless death can be achieved. So we hope more for a medical-technological coping with illness and dying than for us to have integrated suffering and death into everyday life or our spirituality as a matter of course. A modern *ars moriendi*, which also takes time for the last things, is rather far from us. Seneca had already been convinced: "We don't have too little time, but we waste too much of it". So it would be less important that or how long we live, but how we live. Which may lead us to the "carpe diem"

("pick the day": seize the moment), as Horace put it. According to Reimer Gronemeyer, the necessary serenity (*sōphrosynē*), one of the four ancient cardinal virtues, probably grows with age and is one of the treasures that young people can unearth from the elderly [20].

### Optimism

A positive perspective seems to have a positive effect on the assumption of illness, suffering and death. A humble attitude can fuel optimism because humility knows one's own limits and strengths and can thus make life easier, more self-effective and resilient. The vernacular says that for optimists, the glass is always half full. But to fill it, to fill it up again and again, it takes time. During this time, even an optimist has phases of sagging and pessimism, but this does not determine his entire emotional life in the long run. He can overcome such phases because, like Munchausen, he can pull himself out of the swamp by his own hair due to his resilience. An optimist mainly sees the positive side of the coin by experiencing himself as self-effective. However, it does not suppress the negative side of setbacks and defeats. He tends to reinterpret failure, e.g. he sees setbacks as a serious illness as coming from outside and not as culpably self-caused. Presumably, optimists can also cope better with aging. Pessimists (the glass is always half empty) cannot easily and suddenly overcome the lack of satisfaction with their lives.

### Hope

If we humbly and wisely accept our last limits with "insight into necessity" (Immanuel Kant), because in it our joys, but our hopes come to an end. old age can also give hope and make us happy. "Old age is not dull, because in it come our joys, but because our hopes come to an end" (Jean Paul). And Seneca names the joys of old age, which he "embraces and loves", more precisely: it is not achievements or the pursuit of success, not the passions, it is the pleasure of life, if only man knew how to use it. Hopes are more effective when they are chthonic and less ethereal [21]. If they have a solid, no matter how small, reason; if they hold on to shaking earth with both feet. In the etheric, hope evaporates into fantasies, for example when the universe is supposed to deliver what is hoped for or desired.

### Lived Humility in old Age

Humility in old age is expressed in an inner attitude that knows self-reflection, gratitude, openness, empathy and a positive error culture, regardless of practical areas. As a small practical example, Anne Kratzer cites the constant drinking of caffeinated coffee against the limit of fatigue [22]. All old-age humility – regardless of aging – also carries within it the willingness to help in selfless action, which may have been practiced for years. But in many practical areas of life or situations, when selection, optimization and especially compensation are pending, humility in old age is particularly required. For example, in familiar everyday conversation, when we cannot suppress the weak, perhaps the all-too-human, but can address and express it. When aging, fear, illness, hope and death can find a place in conversation over a beer or on the beach; not always, but again and again. In doing so, we should also be allowed to call a spade a spade.

Furthermore, a lived humility of old age is expressed in many areas of life, for example in clothing. Whenever the clothes of older people do not ape the fashionable trends of youth. Wearing distressed jeans and hoodie for a long time as an 80-year-old probably refers more to the repression of one's own aging than to liberation or a fashionable accessory. If we consider such repression performances, difficulties in accepting aging in practical action can be expected. For example, entry into a sports group or other cultural offers for the elderly could be delayed or cancelled. The use of aids that refer to age and illness, such as memory training, fall prevention, emergency calls or hearing aids, could also be delayed or only secretly accepted. A visit to the doctor, medication or an application for a care level could be rejected even though the partner is already overworked.



Often enough, the children or grandchildren experience that the old generation has not made provisions and that the circumstances after death have not been regulated in the will, living will, bank power of attorney or general power of attorney. The Swedish Döstdning, the ordering, segregation and disposal of one's own household, is often not tackled or tackled too late and is thus left to the children. The last transactions such as deregistration's with authorities or contractual partners could also have been planned and noted; as well as the design of the funeral and the funeral service. Even those who are looking for spiritual experience in mindfulness exercises, prayer, conscious breathing, meditation, in a break, perhaps also in artistic expression, should be humble in the face of aging with its new tasks. In this way, humility also helps to achieve a good deal of self-care.

## Old Age Humility and the Courage to Die

Perhaps humility is even the fuel that inspires wisdom, the virtue that according to Plato can never be achieved by man, but which Erik H. Erikson described in his eight-step model of the psychosocial development of the human being as an essential ability or virtue in order to be able to leave life satisfied and loving in the conflict between ego integrity versus despair as the last task of the human phases of life. But we seem to be little prepared for this great task. Dying is far away and death is alien to us, even more "unrealizable" than old age. It is hardly part of life in the Western world today; the distant end is rarely considered and even in old age tends to be repressed, perhaps even taboo. The great social historian Norbert Elias therefore spoke of death as banished "behind the scenes". So the admonition of the Quidquid agis, prudenter agas et respice finem! ("Whatever you do, act wisely and consider the end!") from the late medieval collection gesta romanorum largely unheard. In other cultures, death is sometimes much closer, for example when in Mexico the "día de los muertos" is celebrated three days around All Souls' Day with exuberant death decorations, music and disguises. During dancing and picnics, some people meet happily at the graves of the deceased. For Catholics, for a long time, when the ash cross was drawn on the foreheads of the faithful in churches on Ash Wednesday and worn in public all day long, it was at least considered a holiday after the wild time of carnival, on which one's own finiteness was commemorated. This admonition has almost completely disappeared from the public. Otherwise, the dead are only publicly commemorated on All Souls' Day or brought forward to All Saints' Day – as long as you pay a visit to the graves of those who preceded them. For Germany, the Humboldt Forum in Berlin almost broke a taboo in 2023 with its exhibition "un\_endlich. Living with Death", in which visitors were able to deal with the topic in depth and multimedia. In contrast, doctors and nurses report how relatives sometimes do not want to hear the approaching death of their parents named. Even the use of the terms "death" or "end" is rejected in panic, even by the dying. We are most likely to find a detailed discussion of the courage to die, humility or "recognizing boundaries" in the extensive literature on the subject of mourning, dying or end-of-life care. The literature on euthanasia or dying fasting also deals in detail with the topic of recognizing the last human limit, one's own finiteness, which is often "forgotten" in the models of aging.

## Evolution

It is an evolutionary advantage for humans that they can renew their life, which is constantly threatened from the outside, through reproduction. This process cannot proceed endlessly, at least in higher organisms such as mammals, without limitation by aging and death. Without the ability to reproduce, humans and all higher cellular life would have long since become extinct, as it is subject to inevitable diseases, genetic defects, accidents, murders or death in wars. In this respect, life and death are the meaningful cycle of nature. "For everything that comes into being is worth perishing," the prince of poets Johann Wolfgang von Goethe let Mephistopheles say to Faust in the study.

## Death May Come

Without a strong ethical compass, people run faster, higher, stronger in the hamster wheel of the eternal. But leaving the treadmill of unconditional pursuit of success, they can courageously and wisely explore and accept the limits of age. To accept and to age humbly means, with a sense of one's own worth, to resist slackening, forgetting, losing and resignation. Growing old with dignity also means developing one's own new or buried resources in order to be able to better accept the losses, restrictions and limitations. In this way, people can age successfully in order to be able to say of themselves in a state of inner serenity and contentment: "Now I'm old". The inventor of the German TV cooking shows, Alfred Biolek, seems to have gotten over his ego at the age of 84, after a serious fall and coma, when he said: "I accept that my strength is waning. At my age, death may also come to me."

## Finding Peace

All this change is the great constant of being. "Everything flows" and changes. In human life, we observe a few beacons of processual change such as talking, walking, puberty, pregnancy, illness or menopause. In addition, there are the numerous changes in social status such as a driver's license, a professional position or a school-leaving certificate. The strongest resistance to the humble insight into the finiteness of all existence and thus also the acceptance of one's own death probably lies within ourselves, in our ego, self or me, which is thought to be autonomous. Instead of wise courage to die and peace, many people have the presumption of the ego to negate aging and old age. When fate then categorically says: "You're old!", despair or depressive resignation may break through.

On the other hand, there is the possibility of feeling gratitude, humility and peace, perhaps for a rich life, crises overcome, work done, for a child and a good marriage, an extraordinary relationship, pride in the last well-fought battle, but also forbearance for one's own mistakes and omissions. Finding peace also means having resolved disputes and no longer having to feel remorse or catch up on unfinished business – presumably best of all, to be able to leave the world in a loving environment. To find peace means to close with the eternal circle of life, be it that we imagine behind it a great light, a transmigration of souls, an unchangeable fate or the great nothingness. In Bertolt Brecht's poem, the protagonist wakes up in the morning in the white hospital room of Berlin's Charité hospital and hears the blackbird without fear of death: "Now / I succeeded in rejoicing / All blackbird song after me too." Religious people may feel in the hands of God, Yahweh or Allah and hope for a transition to paradise.

People with near-death experiences, for example, report weightless satisfaction when dying and, as a result, loss of fear of death. It is probably less important whether near-death experiences are interpreted as a hormonal storm or as a look into the afterlife. The result is decisive: comfort and a feeling of security. But dying is a highly intimate and volatile process, if possible even more "unrealizable" than old age. Both the before of death, the dying, and the after are enormously challenging new territory for us. Even though we may reflect on our own dying process and plan ahead for coping with it, perhaps even with the support of others, we will not know what our final reaction will be. We can't know. But that which does not create knowledge may create our trust in and hope in the great unrecognizable unknown, into which we enter new spaces: "Perhaps the hour of death will also send us young towards new spaces..." (Hermann Hesse). But our work and our love remain on earth. Humility, the higher form of love (Rabindranath Tagore), can probably be of great help to us on this path in the courage to die, if we have unearthed the great treasure that lies dormant in it. For this reason alone, humility should not be missing from the strategies of life management in old age.



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