Every person is old compared to another individual or by reference to a particular standard. For example, you might be not old enough to qualify for the girls’ soccer team, or just old enough to be legally eligible to vote. At twenty you are probably already too old to become a concert violinist or a world-class baseball player (Mothersill 1999, 19). Even a cryopreserved embryo can be “old” if, for example, it is created in the lab and then frozen for ten years.

But the archetypal use of “old” is in application to human beings near the end of their lives. “How old is ‘old’?” is fundamentally a philosophical question. It invites us to consider what we mean by the word “old” in its application to human beings and human aging, and how that meaning (or meanings) may be similar to or different from the meaning of “old” with respect to non-human beings. Is there a viable objective sense of “old,” independent of social perceptions and expectations? Or is oldness always a cultural product?

In this paper I present and evaluate four potential answers to the question, “How old is ‘old’?,” showing that although each tells us something important about “old,” they also generate
problems for empirical or conceptual reasons. I then put forward an ethico/political proposal as a partial response to the stigma of human oldness and the ageism associated with it.

**Just a Number?**

Without the quotation marks around the word “old,” the question “How old is old?” would be linguistically and conceptually odd. If one were to assert that “Old is old,” the statement would appear to be an obvious tautology. But of course it would be a tautology only if “old” is used in the same sense in each of its two occurrences. In order for the question “How old is ‘old’?” to have content and to be worth asking, it is necessary to interpret the two occurrences of “old” as having different meanings. What might these two meanings be?

In English the word “old” has at least one objective sense, a sense that is not always imbued with negative connotations. When we ask of someone, “How old are you?” we are simply inquiring about the number of years the individual has lived. In the dominant North American culture, custom and etiquette tend to dictate that one be cautious about asking this question of individuals—particularly women (because aging, like virtually all aspects of human life, is gendered1)—past their third decade. Presumably the grounds for this custom are that no longer being a youth is considered a liability or even something of which to be ashamed. Yet “How old are you?” is a question that can logically be asked of anyone, at any age. So, the question “How old is ‘old’?” is best interpreted with the first occurrence of “old” being about chronological age, the number of years lived.

But oldness is not just about chronological age. It is appropriate to be skeptical of the often-voiced idea that “age is just a number.” This cliché is most frequently used not in regard to children, adolescents, or twenty- or thirty-somethings, but in regard to those who are considered
at least middle-aged or, more often, old. Age becomes the special focus of individual and social concern late in life. Horace Kallen points out that “Aging is another word for living on, from conception to death, which prevailing usage today applies to a late stage of this process. … Our culture reserves ‘aging’ for the lives we live some time after we have ‘come of age’” (Kallen 1972, 4, my emphasis).

“Age is just a number” is presumably meant to be encouraging, but it suggests that one can be what one wants independent of the ageism of the culture in which one lives. Because of the valorization of youth, those who are old are encouraged and even expected to be, feel, and act “young at heart”; they are required to strive to “age well”; they are told (contrary to fact) that they are “only as old as they feel.” Notice that these phrases presuppose that being old is bad, and that one can somehow combat oldness partly by changing how one feels. And as Betty Friedan point out, the more people attempt to pass as young, the more they lend credibility to the stigma of being old (Friedan 1993, 64).

Nonetheless, as Simone de Beauvoir observes, it is “a complete misunderstanding of the complex truth of old age” to say that provided you feel young, you are young (Beauvoir 1972, 284). Contrary to the cheery Pollyanna-ish rhetoric of developed societies, oldness cannot merely be individually defined or subjectively chosen. It is largely imposed by objective material and social conditions.

Old age is materially constructed through a variety of different social and material forces, including environmental depredations, workplace conditions, lack of access to health care, and inadequate financial resources. Oldness is also an expression of social policies, both intra-national and international. Policies may, for example, influence what kinds of health care are provided to people who have lived a long time, what kinds of living arrangements are available
to them, how accessible the transit system is, what kinds of work (paid or unpaid) they are allowed or expected to do, and how they are treated by younger people, in public or in private. Being old is, therefore, not a condition that one can easily alter or postpone simply by making judicious and virtuous choices about one’s nutrition, exercise, drinking, smoking, and drug habits. Instead, being old is determined largely by social forces that may or may not make good food available, healthy work possible, adequate medical care accessible, and “lifestyle” habits a matter of real choice.  

What is the meaning of the second occurrence of “old”? Beauvoir points out that “chronological and biological ages do not always coincide” (Beauvoir 1972, 30), and the World Health Organization observes, “Although there are commonly used definitions of old age, there is no general agreement on the age at which a person becomes old. The common use of a calendar age to mark the threshold of old age assumes equivalence with biological age, yet at the same time, it is generally accepted that these two are not necessarily synonymous” (WHO). Nonetheless, “How old is ‘old’?” could be a question about the ways in which chronological age and biological age are related. If so, then “old” could be defined by (1) proximity to death, or (2) the bodily conditions that often accompany aging. I will consider (1) and (2) separately.

**Proximity to Death?**

Oldness can be conventionally interpreted in terms of proximity to death. As Mary Mothersill observes, it may be that the only “distinctive feature of old age is that, for the subject it presages death” (Mothersill 1999, 20, her emphasis). Geoffrey Scarre writes, “I remember once reading about an old man, well past his hundredth year, who woke up each morning with the thought, ‘still here?’ When one reaches extreme old age, it is obviously foolish to bank on
having many more days of life” (Scarre 2007, 27). One strong motivation for the question, “How old is ‘old’?” is a concern about the shrinking of one’s future and the closeness of death. Interpreted this way, “How old is ‘old’?” is concerned with objective facts about the probable age of death.

In this sense, the answers to “How old is ‘old’?” will of course vary depending on the species to which individuals belong. For example, a nineteen-year-old cat is likely to be close to death, but a human being who is nineteen is (usually) not. Thus, the oldness of an individual in this sense is not just a function of number of years lived, but also a function of the number of years lived in comparison to the number of years an individual of that species can be expected to live.

The maximum life span for members of a particular species is the greatest number of years that a member of that species has lived (Hayflick 2002, 417). For human beings, the maximum life span was famously set by Frenchwoman Jeanne Calment, who—based on verified dates of her birth and death—is known to have lived to 122 (Whitney 1997).

More important for our purposes than maximum life span is life expectancy, the average amount of time a person is predicted to live. Whereas the maximum human life span has remained constant since Calment’s death in 1997—no one has outlived her—life expectancy is highly variable. First, it varies by nation. Life expectancy has been increasing steadily over the last century, especially in developed nations. In 2012, life expectancy at birth was 79 in the United States and 81 in Canada. It is highest in Japan, where it was 83 years in 2012, but much lower in impoverished, disadvantaged, or war-ravaged nations dealing with endemic diseases and weak and inadequate health care systems. For example, in the Democratic Republic of
Congo, life expectancy at birth in 2012 was 50, while in Swaziland it was only 49 (World Bank 2015, “Life Expectancy at Birth, Total (Years)”).

Within nations, life expectancy also varies by factors related to social status, privileges, and oppression, such as sex/gender and race. For example, life expectancy for females in the United States was 81 in 2012 (World Bank 2015, “Life Expectancy at Birth, Female (years)”), whereas for males it was only 76 (World Bank 2015, “Life Expectancy at Birth, Male (years)”). In the USA in 2013, the average life expectancy for white people was 79.1, but for African Americans it was 75.5 (CDC 2014). There are also significant life expectancy differences by race in Canada. For example, “In 2017 the life expectancy for the total Canadian population is projected to be 79 years for men and 83 years for women. Among the Aboriginal population the Inuit have the lowest projected life expectancy in 2017, of 64 years for men and 73 years for women. The Métis and First Nations populations have similar life expectancies, at 73-74 years for men and 78-80 years for women” (Statistics Canada 2016).

Information about life expectancy and maximum life span provides a way to answer the question, How old is “old”? First, it is surely uncontroversial to say that Jeanne Calment—along with other outliers who live past 100—was objectively very old by human standards. But it also seems reasonable to say that persons who are beyond, at, or closely approaching the typical life expectancy for their nation and their particular demographic category are old. Thus, it is plausible to say that in North America, 80 is old.

However, basing oldness on life expectancy has an interesting implication. If average life expectancy for one’s nation and demographic is the criterion, then being old will vary from one nation to another and even from one group to another. For example, by this criterion, 83 is old in
Japan, but in Swaziland one may be old at 49. What constitutes old age, then, is not a function of years lived, but is dependent on one’s geographical and demographic locations.

Of course, life expectancy is, by definition, an *average*, a sum of all the various ages of people who die within a particular jurisdiction or group divided by the total number of deaths. There will be plenty of people who outlive it. Moreover, historically in developed nations, and to this day within poorer nations and impoverished segments of developed nations, the figures for life expectancy are heavily influenced by maternal, infant, and child mortality. High rates of any or all of them will lower life expectancy, because if large numbers of children die in infancy and large numbers of women die during their childbearing years, a substantial chunk of the population has no chance of living for many decades. In nations with high rates of child and maternal mortality, individuals who survive childhood (and in the case of women, survive childbearing) might very well live well past the standard life expectancy for their society. In a nation where the life expectancy is 49, although persons over the age of 50 will be far rarer than they are in societies with higher life expectancies, individuals might not be close to their own death until they reach their sixties or seventies.

**Bodily Conditions?**

Thus, life expectancy is at best an imperfect measure of oldness. People who have lived only a few years or decades do die, while people who have lived a long time are not necessarily and inevitably on the verge of death. Hence, it might seem better to define “old” in terms of the bodily conditions that often occur in concert with living a long time.

Aging itself is not a disease or collection of diseases (Hayflick 2002, 419), but it is often accompanied by deterioration, diseases, and losses of function. Microbiologist and gerontologist
Leonard Hayflick says that “aging processes by definition are losses in function or physiological capacity” (Hayflick 2002, 420) and “the aging process is the leading risk factor for all age-associated diseases” (Hayflick 2002, 421). Philosopher Helen Small defines “old age” as “the later years of a long life, when there is an inevitable and irreversible deterioration in the organism as a consequence of its age” (Small 2007, 3, my emphasis). Philosopher Anita Silvers defines “old age” as “a stage of life when individuals are at higher than species-typical risk of encountering impediments to their usual modes of functioning” (Silvers 2012, 11, my emphasis). Thus, “How old is ‘old’?” could mean, “What is the chronological age of deterioration and decline in function?”

Of course, it cannot be assumed that all persons who have lived many decades are naturally infirm and debilitated. Despite the fairly homogeneous negativity with which oldness is perceived, it is striking just how heterogeneous people who have lived a long time are. Silvers points out, “In regard to other biological changes associated with old age, not every individual undergoes these changes at the same time in life. Nor is every biological decrement associated with aging equally debilitating for everyone” (Silvers 2012, 9). People do not acquire the physical, psychological, and intellectual markers of aging at the same rates, and the rate of aging is strongly reflective of social context.

Unfortunately, ableism conspires with ageism in a way that makes both worse. Both those who are considered old and those who are considered impaired are assumed, globally, to be inactive, to not contribute in crucial ways to the wellbeing of the polis. On the one hand, features that are regarded as impairments are stigmatized because they are associated, stereotypically, with the loss of what is seen as youthful vigor and capacity. On the other hand, a large number of years lived is stigmatized at least in part because people associate many years lived with the
supposedly inevitable development of features regarded as impairments. Moreover, as Friedan argues, when oldness is *defined* in terms of sickness and debility, it may become harder for health care workers, employers, and policymakers to recognize and respond to the real needs and abilities of people who are in the last decades of their lives (Friedan 1993, 67). She points to the pervasiveness of what she calls “compassionate ageism,” which she defines as “the aged-as-sick-dependent approach” to oldness. “If age itself is defined as ‘problem,’ then those over sixty-five who can no longer ‘pass’ as young are its carriers” (Friedan 1993, 50).

**Not an Age but a Stage?**

Oldness might also be defined in terms of proximity to events and life landmarks that are considered to be significant. In Western nations life stages are changing, and how they are conceptualized is becoming ever more complex. As Andreas Göttlich notes, “[D]ifferences can be found concerning the number of phases into which life is partitioned, the strictness of the borderlines between them, the features and traits a typical representative of an age group is supposed to have, his/her rights and duties, the rites that mark the passage between phases of life, and also the question of when one switches over to the next age group” (Göttlich 2013, 231).

Beauvoir remarks that there are no “initiation ceremonies” that mark the entering of old age; a person considered old still has the same political rights and duties, and the liability for upholding the law, as a person half his age (Beauvoir 1972, 20-3). Nonetheless, becoming old can mean the shedding of some roles and entitlements (by choice or not) and perhaps the acquisition of others (by choice or not). These roles and entitlements may be related to familial relationships (whether, for example, one becomes a grandparent, or loses a spouse or life partner); social and civic rights (such as whether one is eligible to retire from paid work, is
forced to retire, or is entitled to a pension or state support); responsibilities and burdens
(whether, for example, one is expected to give up authority, defer to one’s adult children, or care
for an elderly spouse); and eligibility for membership in groups or institutions (such as special
groups for “senior citizens,” pensioners, or retired persons). Silvers remarks, “[F]eeling old or
being treated as old seems to happen when people age out of productive social roles. … Where
work roles demand youthful capacity for great physical exertion and stamina, people are likely to
be considered old at an earlier age. Also, and especially for women, being viewed as no longer
executing a reproductive role often prompts being designated as old” (Silvers 2012, 9).

According to the World Health Organization, ideas about the end of paid work and the
start of pension payments dominate Western understandings of oldness: “Most developed world
countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition of ‘elderly’ or older
person…. While this definition is somewhat arbitrary, it is many times associated with the age at
which one can begin to receive pension benefits” (WHO). If pension eligibility is taken to be the
standard for oldness then it is not surprising that, according to Jan Baars, the lowering of the
retirement age in Europe has redefined 55 as “aged,” and people over 40 may be spoken of as
“older workers” (Baars 2007, 18). Baars refers to this phenomenon as “the paradoxical
acceleration of ascribed aging in a situation of rising life expectancies” (Baars 2007, 19).

Some people conceptualize oldness more generally in terms of its relationship to the
narrative of individuals’ lives (Velleman 1993) and its place in giving life its meaning.
According to one common line of thought, one is old when life’s main events and
accomplishments either have already been achieved or are no longer attainable. To be old is to
experience events that no longer contribute as much value to one’s life because they are near the
end of it, and so they have less effect on one’s life as a whole. In old age, Göttlich writes,
The future, understood as the undisclosed open horizon of the present, shrinks bit by bit, and the implementation of certain projects is no longer realistic. In other words, the idealizations of ‘And so on’ and ‘I can do it again’ are called into question. This consequence is intensified by the decline of the human body. … [T]his means that the domain of our free motivational relevances—of our in order-to-motives … —is constricted (Göttlich 2013, 226).

From this point of view, one is old when one’s perspective is, legitimately and inevitably, less and less on the future, and more and more on what has already happened.

But this view of oldness is not the only possible narrative account of old age. There is, at least, a potential problem with seeing old age as a stage at which an individual has lived long enough to have had a complete and full life. For, on the one hand, some people may manage to live long and fully and yet not be old by any biological or even chronological measure. And on the other hand, some people may live a very long time and yet not have had sufficient education, opportunities, or social support to be able to live a complete and full life (Overall 2003, 47-51).

Moreover, the idea of oldness as the culmination and endpoint of a long and full life may rest on a particular normative notion of personhood. James Lindemann Nelson points to a distinction between two ways of being a person: the career self (an idea introduced by Margaret Urban Walker) and the seriatim self (an idea introduced by Hilde Lindemann). The career self sees his life as a “unified field,” organized by a life plan, a quest, or a project (Nelson 1999, 122). Walker speaks of the concept of career self as “the idea of an individual’s life as a self-consciously controlled career.” This, she says, is a form of “horizontal integration”: the “achievement of continuity in which the individual’s unidirectional stream of life is seen as adding up to ‘a life career’” (Walker 1999, 106). By contrast, “[t]he seriatim self may see her life
as made up of many jobs, lots of them quite big enough, thank you, but none necessarily life-defining, nor especially valued for the particular role they play in contributing to the achievement of a ‘rational plan’ for the whole” (Nelson 1999, 123). The seriatim self “may live a life both more shaped by contingencies than by the expression of personal agency and more involved in relationships prized intrinsically, not because they are instrumental to achieving the agent’s quest. … Seriatim selves may, then, place a greater importance on the goods of relationship, rather than the goods of agency and experience.” (Nelson 1999, 123-124). From Walker’s point of view, the seriatim self leads a life of “vertical integration,” which “stresses ‘timeless transcendent recognition’ that endures and does not pass away, what has been called at different times: epiphany, moments of being, revelation, satori, transcendence” (Walker 1999, 106).

For the career self, then, life stages depend on achievements accomplished and landmarks reached, and old age is the point where one’s life plan or quest or “career” is almost complete—or, in the less desirable case, there is no longer hope of completing it. Perhaps, then, for the committed career self, oldness may seem to be a stage of non-productivity, and for those who value career selves, oldness may look like a stage of dependence and even burdensomeness. But for those who live as a seriatim self, old age may not be so very different from other stages of life, all of them being devoted to in-the-present activities and relationships. For the seriatim self, being old is not a dénouement or a point where nothing more lies ahead; it is simply another opportunity to experience the rewards and challenges of living one’s life. For the seriatim self, and for those who value seriatim selves, it may be easier to see the last part of life as a time for ongoing life experiences and the enjoyment of relationships.
The Normative Question

In exploring the question “How old is ‘old’?” I have so far offered four possible answers, based on observations both of how the word “old” is used, and how social and material circumstances affect aging and perceptions of oldness. But the question “How old is ‘old’?” can also be interpreted normatively, as a question about when it is appropriate, fair, or justified to regard someone as old. “How old is ‘old’?” then becomes the question at what chronological age individuals are justifiably classed as belonging to the category of old people. At what point in a person’s life should we apply the term “old”?

People disagree about how to answer the question. Unsurprisingly, perceptions of oldness may be relative to one’s chronological placement vis-à-vis other human beings. Consider how old 20 looks when one is 10, and how old 40 looks when one is 20. It’s likely that people’s implicit ideas of what is old change as they live longer, and that our perceptions of oldness are related to what we anticipate and understand to happen at each chronological age. For example, in a 2009 survey, the average response of 3000 Americans to the question when old age begins was 68. But survey respondents over 65 said that old age begins at 75, whereas those who were under 30 said that it begins at 60 (Arnquist 2009).

The immediacy of asking when it is justified to classify a person as old can be experienced viscerally if you ask yourself when you would find it appropriate to call a colleague, a friend, or a beloved family member old. Or even more directly, when, if ever, would you consider yourself to be old?

Although maximum life span provides an objective answer to the question whether someone is old, and life expectancy may seem to, labelling a person “old” is not likely to be free of value judgment. Consider how negative the connotations of “old” can be: for example, “worn
out,” “used,” “outmoded,” “hoary,” “timeworn,” “archaic,” “dated,” “outdated,” “out of date,” “antiquated,” “old-fashioned,” “outmoded,” “past its prime,” “over the hill,” and “on its last legs.” It might be objected that the words in this latter group principally apply to objects, time periods, buildings, monuments, styles, ideas, and art forms. But it is hardly controversial to suggest that in a culture obsessed with what is new, novel, up-to-date, current, fresh, innovative, and futuristic, being old might be perceived as a shortcoming not just of things and themes but also of human beings.

When a word denotes an entity or a concept that is regarded as unpleasant, frightening, or problematic, the threat borne by the denotation may be reduced via the substitution of a euphemism in place of the more direct word. A website for an event in my own city proudly proclaims, “You can’t help getting older, but you don’t have to get old” (Kingston Seniors Expo 2016). Indeed, as Gullette remarks, “‘Old age’ is so unsayable it needs a euphemism; ‘aging’ was and still is used in its place, so ‘aging’ too has come implicitly to signify decline” (Gullette 2004, 181). Ben Yagoda points out the frequent and growing use of the term “older people,” rather than “old people,” whose function is to soften the negative value burden of oldness (Yagoda 2015). Presumably the covert assumption is that one can be older (than another person or persons) without being elderly, so “older” is a euphemism that attempts to disguise the reality of being old.

Contemporary English-language usage offers many euphemisms to avoid the use of the word “old” in application to human beings. For example, old people are conventionally referred to as “senior citizens” or merely “seniors”—terms that are odd not least because no one refers to young people as “junior citizens” or “juniors” (the latter being used only, if ever, in the context of sports teams, clubs, or schools). The concept of seniority can suggest the possession of greater
experience, and it often references authority. While old people certainly have more experience than younger ones, whether they have (or are recognized or allowed to have) authority is a separate issue. Indeed, although lip service is often paid to the greater experience and supposed wisdom of old people, in a youth-oriented culture it is unlikely that most old people—and especially old people who are not white, and old women of any race—are perceived as having authority. Hence, the terms “senior citizens” and “seniors” not only are euphemistic in their function but also possess a covert irony, given the reality of the social position of many old people.

Perhaps, then, given the negative connotations of “old” and the social stigma that ageism attaches to being an old person, calling a colleague, a friend, or family member—let alone oneself—“old” is too demeaning and insulting ever to be justified. Perhaps there is no point when we should be willing to consign someone else—or ourselves—to the social abjection of being classified as old. It might therefore be contended that no one should be called “old” no matter what their age. In an article entitled “Who Are You Calling Old? Let’s Ditch Ageist Stereotypes,” Ros Altmann argues,

It’s time to shed the labels. Describing someone by their age should be as unacceptable as describing them by their gender, race, religion or skin colour. These characteristics do not necessarily signify fitness for work, recruitment for a particular position, or training for certain skills (Altmann 2015).

According to this view, a person’s age—the number of years she has lived—should make no difference to what opportunities or responsibilities she is accorded, how she is treated, or whether she is respected. What matters is not her age but her physical, psychological, and cognitive abilities, her social situation, and her personal needs.
The intention behind this proposal is commendable. It is true that one’s age—whatever it might be—does not necessarily represent one’s abilities or needs. If “age” simply means years lived, then it is an objective fact about individuals, and surely nothing to be ashamed of, no matter what ageism and ableism might suggest. But if this proposal is also meant to disguise or deny many years lived, then it capitulates to ageism. Liberation from stigma is not won by denying or obscuring facets of one’s reality. And refusing to call anyone “old” may simply be a concession to the very ageist stereotypes that anti-ageists hope to avoid. At some point, refusing to identify oneself as old is also an expression of internalized oppression: “You make people so ashamed of being old that they disassociate themselves from the different reality of their own aging in false self-hatred” (Erdman Pallmore, quoted in Friedan 1993, 118, her emphasis).

Instead, I want to call for a more thoughtful approach to the use of the concept of oldness. First, of course, I would hope those who have lived a long time will feel safer to “come out” as old, rather than trying to pass as young. But, in order to support that coming out there is a need among the not-quite-old for solidarity with respect to old people. One form that solidarity could take is claiming the use of the word “old” for oneself. Instead of distancing themselves from old age, people could welcome it.

Since second-wave feminism, some feminists have already initiated this process by reclaiming terms like “crone” and “hag,” which have become words of disapprobation for old women. I am therefore advocating that all of us who have lived a long time, or will soon have lived a long time, should consider claiming to be old. Doing so might be too much to expect from people who are in their 40s. But it would be legitimate to expect from people in their 70s, 60s, and even 50s. The value and effectiveness of the claim would be enhanced through its use by people who engage in a wide variety of activities and forms of life, thus creating a strong
mode of resistance to stereotyping and stigma: “This is what being old looks like.” Claiming the label “old” would then be based not on ageist compulsion, but on political convictions and moral values.

Calling oneself “old” even before society pastes the label on oneself is a way of reclaiming the term. It is a pre-emptive move against ageism, in which one defies the relegation of old people to the margins by proclaiming loudly and proudly, “I am old.” Oldness will begin to have different and better meanings when being old is regarded as an identity worth asserting rather than a characteristic to be denied or concealed.

**Conclusion**

As I have noted elsewhere (Overall 2006), age theorists usually assume that those who are (considered) old suffer from a social disadvantage that is superimposed upon a naturally-given old age. The decline that is associated with old age is simultaneously seen as a very personal and individual experience, and yet at the same time (in Gullette’s words) “a *universal* biological process (an effect that erases economics, other group vulnerabilities, and one’s latent power to describe one’s own age identities differently)” (Gullette 2004, 134, her emphasis). But this idea is mistaken, for the supposedly naturally-given old age is, itself, socially constructed. Cultures pick out certain ages—defined by years lived—interpret them as biologically given, define them as significant in a particular way (usually in a positive way for younger ages and a negative way for older ages) and regard them as fundamental to, and constitutive of, individuals who arrive at those ages. Whether we see “old” as “just a number,” as proximity to death, as a set of bodily conditions, or as a stage of life, in all cases the supposedly naturally given oldness is, itself, a product of material and ideological forces.
I am not, however, arguing that oldness is merely a function of perception, or that it is unanchored in material realities. To be old is not just whatever we want to make it or whatever we happen to “feel.” It is plausible to understand oldness in terms of maximum life span and perhaps in terms of life expectancy, even though the latter varies from nation to nation and from group to group. There are good pragmatic and moral reasons to recognize an objective foundation for oldness. First, most people’s health and capacities really do change and usually decline after many decades lived. Second, in terms of social justice, it is significant that people’s needs for services and support tend to be greater near the end of life than at any time other than, perhaps, infancy and childhood.

In reaction to the negative connotations of oldness, it is sometimes asserted that old people have special qualities, abilities, and virtues that are less commonly found among young people (e.g., Friedan 1993). I have not made that claim here. While it is indubitable that old people have lived longer than younger ones, and hence are likely to have had a greater variety of experiences, old people are just as diverse as those of any other age. The way to encourage greater respect for oldness, along with fairness to and better treatment of old people, is not by making claims about old people’s supposed special qualities, but by asserting their humanity and their entitlement not to be marginalized.

Oldness is a universal possibility, and if we are fortunate, we will all get old. There is therefore all the more reason not to stigmatize it, but instead to (re)claim oldness as a valued identity.
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Endnotes

I am grateful to Geoffrey Scarre for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1 Concepts of oldness can also be highly gendered. For discussion of this theme, see the papers in Pearsall 1997.

2 Betty Friedan suggests that “age is defined as the absence of youth. Age is assessed not by what it is, but by what it is not” (Friedan 1993, 104).

3 As Margaret Morganroth Gullette notes, “Many people are systematically disadvantaged throughout their lives. Their midlife wage-peak is low. Old age—if by that ugly shorthand we
mean, as so many do, income declines and physical ailments—for them starts young” (Gullette 2011, 74).

4 Gullette goes so far as to say that before the decline in infant mortality in the USA around 1900, old people seemed the healthiest group precisely “because they had survived so much. Death occurred so frequently to newborns and children under five that they seemed heavy with it, heavier perhaps than all other categories but the enfeebled” (Gullette 2004, 108, her emphasis).

5 Indeed, the American Heritage Dictionary says that “old” “suggests at least a degree of physical infirmity and age-related restrictions” (quoted in Yagoda 2015, my emphasis).

6 Sometimes “old” carries positive connotations, for example when we speak of old wine, old masters, or old institutions. But the positive connotations are more usual in application to things than to people, and there are fewer of these than of cases where “old” has a negative connotation.

7 It’s significant that there are at least two main classes of antonyms of ‘old’: An entity that is not old either may be young or it may be new. Some of the negative connotations in Western culture of ‘old’ as applied to people may come from the fact that the word is also the antonym of ‘new.’

8 It might also contribute to the fiction that one can still be youthful in one’s late 70s or 80s, or that the last years of life require no special social or medical support.