

The Problem of “Old”

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Individuals become “old” at different ages, so “old” is not a function of age alone. And “old” is not just physical. It is also mental and emotional. Engagement in activities that contribute to the overall quality of life for one's self and for others in the natural and social spheres plays a very significant role in supporting one's mental and emotional state, which in turn influence one's physical health. All of the factors that influence one's happiness quotient play a role in both aging and the evolution of becoming “old.”

Assuming that one is fortunate enough to avoid a premature shift toward “old,” two factors in particular conspire to promote the movement in the “old” direction. The first arises in the retirement period with the loss of career and/or the death of intimate others. Humans are social animals, and the facts of feeling socially isolated and no longer productive contribute greatly to the evolution of “old” at any age.

The second factor is especially insidious because for most individuals it is the result a slow, cumulative process. Exclusive of serious disease, disability, and/or accident, most people in developed countries grow into their mid-20s becoming more capable physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. From the mid-20s to the mid-40s most of these people enjoy the adult plateau of reliable and consistent well-being. “Old” in this period of life is what individuals observe in “others,” including parents. From the mid-40s through the mid-60s, individuals typically encounter the death of their parents which awakens the realization that they are next in line for the exit. In addition, the initial signs of aging appear including an awareness of the gradual down hill slope that characterizes especially one's physical capabilities. By contrast, careers mature and mental and emotional abilities tend to escalate or sustain. So, overall the sense of any movement toward “old” is limited for the most people in this period.

Now we come to the full-on development of “old.” From 65-75 with retirement and the beginning of the loss of siblings and friends to natural causes, one's own aging becomes apparent. In this period when recreation and travel can become a focus, physical capabilities begin to diminish notably with what amount to minor afflictions accumulating and becoming chronic. The acuteness of the senses diminishes and more and more time, money and effort are spent on basic maintenance, leaving less time for the activities that promote happiness. Mental capacity begins to wane and dissatisfaction with one's overall quality of life manifests, especially as one deals with the negative effects

of the loss of spouses and the appearance of potentially terminal diseases. The steepness of the slope decidedly increases for the downhill slide.

Beyond 75 is unpredictable. A few individuals are fully aware and contributing in multiple ways into their later 90s. But for most the downhill slope on all variables evidences an increasing gradient. Assisted living facilities and nursing homes house more and more of the elderly. Contributions of all kinds to society and most social relations – even family – tend to shrink as days are devoted to just existing with the miracles of modern medicine keeping individuals “functioning.” More and more individuals live nearly devoid of having a meaningful purpose in life. In an aging society, more and more private and public resources are devoted to sustaining individuals traveling at the end of the final precipitous slope to death.

Aging is inevitable for a biologically based species like humans. “Old” is a condition for individuals where quality of life has in essence disappeared for the person themselves and where there is little or no contribution being made to society. Most developed societies are currently tolerating the “Old,” but it is a condition to which access is likely to be limited in the relatively near future. It is a fact: while aging and elderly humans can remain productive and offer valuable input, for the most part “old” humans are a drag. Most simpler societies honor productive elders but eliminate the “old.” Modern society faces dealing creatively and compassionately with the challenge of the “Old.”

Or maybe there is no need after all! Let's consider what may be the final phase. Rapid advances in artificial intelligence [AI] and robotics are on the verge of extensive implementation – meaning that humans will be replaced in nearly all tasks/jobs. And super artificial intelligence [when AI exceeds human capability – projected to occur before 2060] will likely result in humans being replaced as Earth's pinnacle species. At that point, an electronic/computerized/robotized species will take over the lead – a species that is much more efficient and better capable of populating the cosmos than biologically limited humans. Worn-out/obsolete will replace “Old” as the final phase in the world of AI species.

In this scheme, biology is merely a phase in the evolutionary process of species development. Humans as a whole, not just “Old” humans, will recede into the position of being a once dominant species continuing to exist at the discretion of an AI species but restricted to the margins of life on Earth. As we literally compose our AI species replacement, we offer evidence for our limitation as a conscious species – for the sake of economic/political gain seemingly unable to stop promoting our own species' demise. At this rate, the “problem” of “Old” for humans may not be with us for more than another generation or two!