The receiver has just been put back on the phone after a conversation with one of the wisest and most humane philosophers I have ever known. His name is withheld because he would be genuinely embarrassed by the fine things I have to say about him. It has been my unpleasant duty to deliver a negative message to my colleague and friend. A few weeks ago he had been invited to present a college seminar series in his area of specialty. In my innocence I was unaware that Yale University has a cutoff at age 70 for members of the faculty serving in any capacity. The rule is absolute—it even applies to the limited 12-week seminar series—and no individual beyond the allotted threescore and ten is permitted to teach. Having been informed of the existence of the rule and the firmness of its application, I was required to withdraw with chagrin that which had been happily proffered a few weeks previously.

Thoughts about age restrictions naturally lead to musing about the accomplishments of older people. This university would have denied playwright George Bernard Shaw the opportunity to teach theater for the last 24 years of his life. Bernard Baruch would have been unable to instruct us in finance during the last 25 years of his career. Robert Frost could not have expounded on poetry for 19 years, and for that same period Carl Sandburg would have been denied a class in literature or biography. Will Durant, who died at 96, would have been barred from the seminar room since before the birth of today's college students. Philosopher Susanne Langer would have been in retirement for the past 19 years. Why, this very day we would reject Ronald Reagan's course on government or cinema arts.

Efforts to change this policy did not meet with much sympathy. When the mandatory retirement age changed from 68 to 70, the Yale administration decided that this figure would also serve as the upper limit for all activities connected with teaching. It is not difficult to find reasons for this inflexibility. Many professors reach mandatory retirement in full vigor and high productivity and strive to stay on and exert their influence. As an independent source of power, such teachers are a threat to administrators, especially those whose professional accomplishments are overshadowed by the eminence of their older colleagues. Rather than handling each case on its merits and having the problem of saying no, it is easier to employ rigid rules. We protect some weak officials by providing general procedures for avoiding hard decisions.

Three major issues emerge from this experience: the structuring of organizations to avoid individual responsibility; the willingness to deny our young the wisdom of scholars who have spent a lifetime pursuing demanding disciplines; our attitudes about old age.

The question of responsibility is seen in the tendency, evolved during the post-World War II period, to shift that burden from identifiable managers to committees or other vague, impersonal groups. The change in policy may be associated with the era of the anti-hero in literature, drama, and film. In collective actions individuals are not fully accountable—as in the case of a firing squad, where no one knows who has the blank. The prime example of this mode of operation is seen in the meeting. If you phone an administrator, at least half of the time you will be told he's in a meeting. Such gatherings are devices for spreading liabil-
A group sits around a table and the onus is passed from hand to hand or mouth to mouth, like a contagion. It is not entirely clear why organizations have moved from private accountability to this more public assignment of responsibility. The practice counters traditional values of Western culture and pushes individualism into the background. It could be the result of the complexity of modern society, or it could just be a loss of guts.

Given this attitude, however, rules are invaluable devices for those who prefer to administer without personal risk. Regulations are always promulgated by a vague “they,” on whom blame can be heaped. The administrator is an enforcer, simply playing an assigned role. If you detect shades of Adolf Eichmann’s defense, you are right: his was the limiting case of unthinkingly administering rules set by higher levels in the organizational structure. Questioning at every level would seem a reasonable price to pay to avoid the potential amorality of yes-men.

The second issue may be termed the artificial generation gap. Given our very mobile society, with the nuclear family or nuclear half-family, children tend not to know their grandparents. There is thus a gap: Culture is, at most, passed on for one generation and almost never has two chances to impose its values. In cutting off young students from their teachers’ teachers, the same type of one-generation structure is imposed in the transfer of intellectual traditions. Since each age sees reality in its own light, we withhold from the young a broader perspective. The staff of the seminar series under discussion has on occasion involved young, mediocre instructors, while a reservoir of fine minds went untapped.

Today’s society is oriented toward disposable products. Items are consigned to the trash rather than being repaired and placed back in service. I suppose we sometimes look at people as if they had a built-in obsolescence and must be taken out of service when the warranty expires after 70 years. This is questionable from both humanistic and scientific perspectives. Treating organisms as mechanical devices is sometimes reasonable for physiological theory but does not address values. From a biological point of view, aging in Homo sapiens is subject to as much variation as most physiological parameters, so that a rigid classification referring solely to sidereal time is hardly a recommended procedure.

It’s not necessary to be doctrinaire about this subject. Some age categories are demanded as guides for the orderly conduct of institutions. The problem arises when we rigidly extend these rules to situations that could be handled perfectly well on an individual basis. In human social organizations there is a delicate balance between anarchy and the tyranny of rules. Establishing balance requires an ongoing search for wisdom. It’s a quest that, like many others, calls for the knowledge and experience of all, including our over-70-year-olds, who must not be excluded by fiat from participation in civilization’s progress. Youth means believing in the future, an attitude shared by many who have watched the earth orbit the sun for 70 or more times.

During the writing of this piece I had a wonderful phone conversation with another philosopher, a 90-year-old sage who is negotiating a contract for a four-volume series. Institutions aren’t stopping people like this man, and I guess they shouldn’t get me down either. After all, old age is something that even the most recalcitrant administrators aspire to.