

How should we allocate scarce life- saving interventions? Prioritarianism vs. “fair innings”

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1. Context: life-saving interventions

Life-saving interventions (LSIs) and the issue of scarcity

- Examples of scarce LSIs:



- Also: limits to *collective resources* available to cover some LSIs (esp. public healthcare resources).

2. Does fairness require giving priority to the young in the allocation of LSIs?

Core idea in favour of positive answer:

- All else being equal, it is unfair that a younger person should be denied a LSI in favour of an elderly person, because the latter can be said to be “better off” than the younger one by way of having accumulated more life years.
- Exception: people who have not yet reached full adulthood (e.g. under 20/25s)

1st justification: the “fair innings” (FI) view

- Starts from the notion of a “fair share of life” (Harris), “natural life span” (Callahan), or complete/full life (Persad et al., 2009)
- Threshold set around 70-80 years old
- We are obligated to help people secure a fair share of life, but not to help them get more than that
- Implication: when allocating scarce LSIs, people who have not yet lived a complete life should be given absolute priority over those who have

The concept of a “natural life span”

- “The achievement of a life long enough to accomplish for the most part those opportunities that life typically affords people and which we ordinarily take to be the prime benefits of enjoying a life at all – that of loving and living, of raising a family, of finding and carrying out work that is satisfying, of reading and thinking, and of cherishing our friends and families.” (Callahan, 1988)
- *Normative* notion, not just current average life expectancy

2nd possible justification: prioritarianism

- As a general rule, younger people tend to be worse off than older people in that they have enjoyed fewer life years and therefore less well-being (or had fewer opportunities to do so)
- We should give *some* priority to the worst off by granting less ethical value to each life-year, at least past a certain age (e.g. 25): e.g. 25=1, 26=0.99, 27=0.98, etc.
- No threshold set at any specific age indicating absolute priority to those below it in the allocation of scarce LSIs

3. Fair innings and the problem of arbitrariness

The problem of arbitrariness

- Assuming FI threshold set at 70:
- (1) If we must choose between extending the life of two 69-year olds by one year, and extending the life of three (or more) 70-year olds by 10 years, the FI view tells us to choose the former.
- (2) On the other hand, the view can't justify giving priority to extending the life of a 20-year old, rather than that of a 65-year old, by 5 years. (On some interpretations, it even justifies prioritizing the older person!)

A possible defense of FI

- FI threshold not arbitrary, but based on conception of what is reasonable amount of time to complete most life plans/narratives
- Analogy: fair to prioritize people who have yet to satisfy their basic needs over those who have already done so, when it comes to social assistance
- Any specific limit for policy purposes will seem arbitrary to some degree; what matters is to get it right enough
- Possible to combine prioritarian ordering below the FI threshold and absolute priority above it

Response to the defense

- Satisfaction of basic needs is plausible ethical threshold, but enjoyment of natural lifespan isn't
- 70-80 years may be lifespan evolution allows lucky humans to enjoy without modern medicine/living
- But Callahan's list of life opportunities can and has been completed within much shorter time frame
- Plausible to assume our sense of a complete life/bio is shaped by current typical lifespan
- Absent further argument, unclear why we should not allow it to keep evolving in the future

4. Is prioritarianism on stronger ground?

Difficulties for prioritarianism

- (1) Might be accused of “tyranny of aggregation” : e.g. favours extending the life of an 80-year old by 14 years rather than that of a 20 year-old by 5 years.
- Is it really unacceptable?
- (2) Seems to entail that extra life years stop having ethical weight beyond a certain number (e.g. 124)
- True, though practically irrelevant if, in current state of things, life can't be extended beyond that limit

Prioritarianism and age cutoffs

- Prioritarianism is in principle compatible with *de facto* age cutoffs
- However, such a cutoff would only be dictated by current circumstances: including resources currently available, weighting of life years, and current cost of LSIs
- Age of cutoff not pre-determined and set in stone, but would vary in accordance with circumstances (could even disappear completely)
- “Affordable life span” rather than natural one

5. Conclusions

Conclusions

- Idea that fairness requires giving some priority to younger people when allocating LSIs has plausibility
- FI view and prioritarianism are two possible ways of developing that idea
- Both have merits and problems, but prioritarianism seems preferable on balance
- Main advantage: avoids singling out particular age threshold as marking key difference in ethical status compared with previous ages, based on questionable conception of a “reasonable” life span

Thank you!

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