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Complete Life Equality, Sufficiency And Efficiency[1]

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I begin by introducing the idea of complete-life egalitarianism, pointing at the need to define it, to justify it, and to specify its implications for age-based practices. I then discuss two points of disagreement with Bidadanure's account of justice between age groups. The first claim is that while it makes sense to add constraints of justice between age groups that are irreducible to complete-life egalitarian concerns, sufficiency constraints should not be as extensive as Bidadanure proposes. I also illustrate the possibility of nonsufficiency constraints, through the idea of revisability. While my first claim accepts the incompleteness of the complete-life view, my second claim defends the potential of the complete-life view itself in relation to efficiency. The idea is that a properly construed complete-life "egalitarian" account is capable of incorporating efficiency considerations without them being an add-on. Such efficiency constraints are essential to the potential justification of some of our key age-based practices. It remains an open question whether such differences in theoretical framing with Bidadanure's own account are likely to make a difference in practice.

Keywords: Age discrimination, age groups, egalitarianism, complete-life view, sufficiency, ageism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite growing concerns about age discrimination, we continue to widely rely on age-based legal or social norms in most domains of our lives: access to health care, political enfranchisement, compulsory education, safety in driving or at work, eligibility to social benefits, immigration rights, access to employment, marital practices, eligibility for adoption, etc. We use age

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criteria in a variety of ways: minimum or maximum age, relative or absolute age, age gaps, age alone or in combination, etc. What is key is that we seem to maintain a more lenient attitude towards age-differentiated practices than towards gender or racial exclusion. Lesser priority in access to intensive-care units for the elderly at the outset of the COVID pandemics or teenager disenfranchisement do not cause the massive outcry that equivalent practices would probably spark if they were gender-based or grounded in skin color.

As philosophers, we want to understand whether such a differential moral assessment is justifiable. Doing so requires trying out different approaches to age from the perspective of theories of justice or from various understandings of what renders discrimination wrong. We work on finding out whether difference-makers obtain that are capable of justifying such folk intuitions about the moral distinctiveness of age-based practices. Among potential difference-makers, there is the "complete-life" understanding of egalitarian or prioritarian demands.[2] The core intuition of the complete-life view (or "lifetimism") is that when we compare how people's lives fare, we ought to compare their *entire existences*, rather than how they are doing at a *given moment* in time.

There are three basic philosophical tasks to accomplish when trying to derive action-guiding claims from the complete-life view. First, we need to define what the view says. It comes in more or less radical versions. One plausible version of lifetimist egalitarianism states that reducing inequalities over entire lives is central to our distributive justice goal *and* should prevail over reducing period-specific inequalities whenever these two goals conflict. Shifting from a concern for equality to a concern for (maximally) improving the situation of the least well-off, we can also propose leximin egalitarian or prioritarian versions of the same view: (maximally) improving the entire life situation of the least well-off (and of the second-least well-off, etc.) is central to our justice goal *and* should prevail over (maximally) improving the situation of the period-specific least well-off (and second-least well-off, etc.) whenever these two goals conflict. In real-life comparisons, this involves both retrospective and prospective efforts to various degrees, as some of us have most of our life ahead of us while others have most of it behind them. Assessing whether a period-specific inequality is objectionable requires seeking information about the entire life situation of the people at stake and relying on rules of thumb grounded in generalizations about the connection between spot inequalities and how people are likely to have fared by the end of their lives. Scarring effects may be relevant in this respect, for instance.

2 On other difference-makers, see Gosseries (2014), and Bognar and Gosseries (2023).

Second, once we have defined *what* a lifetimist view says, we need to provide arguments about *why* we should endorse it. Here, attention ought to be paid to providing arguments capable of justifying assessing egalitarian/prioritarian concerns not merely over long periods of our lives, but even over our *full* lives (Bidadanure 2021: 36-42). For instance, arguments about the value of holding people responsible for the consequences of their actions may not suffice to justify an *entire*-life perspective.

Third, beyond defining the view and justifying its endorsement, we need to find out about its scope and implications for age-based practices. For instance, I have argued elsewhere that the view may be used either for defensive purposes ("this age-based rule *does not increase* inequalities over full lives") or for affirmative purposes ("this age-based rule *reduces* inequalities over full lives"). I have also argued that there is a significant range of age-based practices that need justifications other than the complete-life view. Hence, while it is a philosophically interesting and significant difference-maker, the lifetimist intuition is far from enough for a full account of the distinctiveness of age (Gosseries 2023).

In *Justice Across Ages* (2021), Juliana Uhuru Bidadanure engages with the complete-life view in a critical manner. She stresses its limitations, proposes ways to complement it and explores what her own complex view entails in terms of policy. Her book is sharp, rich and enlightening, finely articulating facts, concepts and norms, carefully linking theory and policy, with a unique focus on what we owe *young adults*. In this paper, I engage with Part I of her book. As she puts it, there are three basic components to her view: "diachronic complete life equality", "diachronic prudential fairness", and "synchronic relational equality" (123). The sets of points that I will make touch on the two first components, leaving her relational concerns aside.

While I have sympathy with a lot of what she writes in her book, there are two points of disagreement that I wish to clarify here. Bidadanure advocates the need to *add* principles of "lifespan sufficiency" and "lifespan efficiency" (123) to the complete-life egalitarian idea. First, I will look at the extent to which *sufficiency* demands should add constraints on top of those of the complete-life view, and sometimes even in tension with it. I will argue that Bidadanure may be going too far down the sufficientarian avenue, and that if we go beyond her first sufficiency threshold—see below—our concerns should instead be phrased in nonsufficientarian terms. Second, I will look at how efficiency constraints can be endogenized in the complete-life view, which challenges Bidadanure's insistence on the need to *add* prudential constraints on top of the complete-life view and to *add* an efficiency principle.

In a nutshell, the worry is that Bidadanure's sufficiency addition to lifetimism might be too extensive, and that her efficiency addition might be unnecessary; the latter reflecting a problematic view that complete-life "egalitarians" —broadly understood—would be unable to derive such concerns from their core principles, *quod non*. Also, the reader will discover that while the discussion on sufficientarianism tends to touch on *entitlements* that go beyond complete-life equality or priority guarantees, the developments on efficiency tend instead to support *restrictions* on the way in which people are supposed to run the chronology of their lives.

2. SUFFICIENCY AND REVISABILITY RIGHTS BEYOND LIFETIMISM

I begin with the role of sufficiency in a theory of justice between age groups. My disagreement with Bidadanure has to do with the need for what she refers to as "lifespan sufficiency". By this, she *does not* refer to a demand of sufficiency applying to people's lives taken as a whole. For instance, the latter could take the form of a "fair innings" interpretation that defines a number of years of life deemed sufficient to life's key accomplishments (see Harris 1970; Wagland 2012; Bognar 2015). Once this age threshold—say 70—is reached, claims to e.g. life-prolonging health care would have significantly less moral weight than similar claims by individuals who have not reached that age yet.

Endorsing the lifetime egalitarian/prioritarian intuition does not necessarily commit us to such a longevity-focused fair-innings view. It might actually enter into conflict with it, in several ways. Things other than longevity matter, and the idea of a longevity threshold is not a necessary component of every sufficientarian view. In that sense, the phrase "complete life" should neither be read as signaling a necessary commitment to the idea of an "accomplished life", nor be understood as implying a specific view about the importance of longevity compared with other features of a person's life.[3] I am not committed to such a fair-innings reading myself. And Bidadanure clearly does not interpret lifespan sufficiency as reducible to such a longevity-focused fair-innings view either.

Instead of implying a fair-innings interpretation, Bidadanure's "lifespan sufficiency" requirement comprises a set of *three* thresholds applying

[3] On differential longevity, see Fleurbaey *et al*. (2014), Gosseries (2022), and Valente (this symposium).

throughout people's life (60). First, the *basic* level is "an absolute threshold defined by appeal to basic human needs and freedom from deprivation" (123). Second, the *normal* range requirement refers to "age-relative threshold set at the level of what counts as a reasonable array of plans for a given age group in a given society at a given time" (123). Third, Bidadanure considers an *ideal* age-relative threshold that "would be age-biased to provide an ideal opportunity range to the young, while only securing a less than normal opportunity range for those older" (60). I think that the age bias of the third threshold is best explained directly by the complete-life egalitarian intuition itself rather than by adding a further threshold. Here, I concentrate on the two first thresholds.

The idea of the first threshold is to ensure that people remain above such a basic threshold *all along* their life, which may generate specific demands of justice between age groups. This may entail allowing for entire life inequalities to increase if required. I leave aside the key issue of how strong the priority of sufficientarian demands should be, i.e. how (in) sensitive it should be to costs that reaching sufficiency may impose on others (see Rawls 2001: sec. 51). I will assume here that defending such a first threshold can be meaningful. I also do not deny that endorsing such a threshold may illustrate the need to go *beyond* a lifetime view, to add exogenous demands to it. My specific disagreement is rather about whether we should go beyond such a first sufficientarian threshold and whether, if we do, we should characterize such extra entitlements as sufficientarian in spirit.

I would resist endorsing Bidadanure's *second sufficientarian* threshold on top of the first one. I would do so out of a liberal concern for respecting the variety of conceptions of the good life. Bidadanure herself is fully aware of this concern (sec. 2.3.3.). Acting upon one's conception of the good life typically impacts one's life trajectory. For instance, depending on whether you want to become a professional football player or to patiently devote your life to planting slow-growing trees, this will impose very different distributions of opportunities along your life. Here, I assume that the distribution of people's material means of existence is already constrained both by some lifetimist egalitarian/prioritarian requirement and by a first sufficientarian requirement thar runs *all along* people's lives. If we grant sufficiency rights beyond that, rights that allow individuals further adjustments in their life trajectories—e.g. in income terms—then the redistributive transfers that they require will constrain the ability of *others* to stick to the life trajectories that render their own lives meaningful, at a level that I find problematic. An ambitious second sufficiency threshold may typically put stronger income generation pressure on the middle-aged. Arguably, all this depends on the level at which the first sufficiency threshold is set, on how much priority the second sufficiency threshold would command, etc. Yet, my core concern has to do with respecting the conception of the good life of others and the trajectories it may require. Hence, while I agree with Bidadanure on the first sufficiency threshold, I would tend to disagree about the justifiability of imposing a second or third one, *as a matter of sufficiency*.

Does this mean that I would oppose any further intra-life entitlements beyond those resulting from the both the complete-life egalitarian and the first sufficiency threshold? I believe that there are alternative ways to capture the intuition of entitlements beyond lifetime equality and beyond Bidadanure's first-threshold sufficientarianism. Here is a possible one, labelled "revisability" (see also Bidadanure 2021: 75). Respecting people's life plans may be mitigated by a concern to avoid systematically forcing people to stick to the consequences of their earlier choices for the rest of their lives. In fact, allowing for *periodic resets* can be in line with leaving room to choose life trajectories that are adjusted to our specific conception of the good life. For if we value the possibility for people to *form* their own view about the good life and to *act upon* it, we may also want to value people's ability to *reform* (or revise) such views. Since allowing people to revise their views need not imply that their earlier choices were mistaken, I label this feature "revisability" rather than "forgiveness" (see Fleurbaey 2005). Revisability may allow for resets at regular intervals, which is different from there being an extra level of sufficiency all along. It does not fix past period-specific inequalities retroactively.

To sum up, I have expressed concern about going beyond Bidadanure's first sufficiency threshold, and I have argued that if we do so, we should do so on grounds that are best characterized in terms that are not sufficientarian. My reluctance has to do with the compatibility of further entitlements with the ability of correlative duty holders to deploy their own conception of the good life and the life trajectory that it requires. Of course, there may also be objections derived from general concerns about sufficientarianism: objections that become more salient as we strengthen its demands, for instance through multiplying thresholds. Now, the reader will note that the "revisability" ground for trajectory adjustment rights that I envisaged may also require significant redistributive transfers, in violation of the entire life view. It may also impose constraints on others and on their ability to translate their conception of the good life into the trajectory that it requires. Point taken. However, I suspect that revisability is likely to infringe less on the liberal and responsibility-sensitive constraint than adding a second sufficiency level, even if this will of course eventually depend on the level of this second threshold, as well as on the periodicity of authorized revisability.

To be concrete, while assessing equality or priority over entire lives should remain a core component of our justice-based assessment, there are at least two further demands of justice that we should leave room for. If someone has made plans such that she ends up in a situation that does not allow her to reach the first sufficiency threshold, then we should make sure that she is able to reach this threshold, even if this entails increasing inequalities over complete lives, or even perhaps not maximizing the situation of the least well-off over complete lives. Also, if a person realizes after a significant period of time that sticking to her initial life plan clashes with her current conception of the good life, then we may have to provide her with the means for a reset as a matter of justice, even if she would find herself above sufficiency in any case.

3. EFFICIENCY-DRIVEN TRAJECTORY CONSTRAINTS *WITHIN* LIFETIMISM

A charitable reading of lifetimism requires us not to downplay its ability to provide us with indications about desirable patterns of intra-life distribution. And efficiency may play an important role in this respect. A proper characterization of the type of "egalitarianism" that we endorse may even allow us to *endogenously* care about efficiency *from within* a complete-life egalitarian view. In short, efficiency need not be understood as a requirement that comes on top of—and sometimes in tension with—lifetimist egalitarianism.

One way in which efficiency may play a role in a theory of justice is through the degree to which its currency is responsibility-sensitive (e.g. "opportunity for welfare" rather than "welfare"). Holding people responsible for the consequences of their choices is defended by some, in part at least, because doing so may be efficient. Another way in which efficiency plays a role has to do with the principle chosen (e.g. "equalizing" vs. "maximally improving the situation of the least well-off" under a given currency). A prioritarian or a leximin egalitarian view is concerned with improving the situation of the least well-off rather than with equality as such. It typically handles efficiency differently from a view that is concerned exclusively with equality. It takes efficiency into account, especially to the extent that efficiency gains can benefit the least well-off, albeit at the cost of larger inequalities. I come back to this below.

How does this connect with Bidadanure's own view? In two ways. First, she claims that we should add some *prudential* considerations to the lifetimist component of our theory of justice between age groups. She claims that "prudential" refers to "veiled prudence" (54) and that it is meant to have "almost nothing to do with" (54) plain prudence, understood as the art of taking our own future—or the future of others—into account. And when she provides a positive account of this, she writes that "prudential" refers to the fact that an unequal treatment by age may "benefit everyone" (52), or to the idea that planners under a veil of ignorance are "asked to maximize intrapersonal diachronic utility" (55).[4] My claim here is that, since prudence does not seem to add extra substance to what seem to be plain efficiency concerns, rather than adding an extra prudential component, we could go straight to working out the efficiency-based implications of our view for the justifiability of age limits.[5]

Hence my first efficiency-related claim here is that the *substance* of Bidadanure's prudential account is reducible to efficiency concerns. My second efficiency-related claim is that efficiency concerns can be read as more endogenous to the lifetime view than what Bidadanure suggests. Efficiency matters to justice between age groups because it potentially constitutes one of the main *positive reasons* for age differentiation in policy.[6] Consider Bidadanure's following claim:

> Institutions should allocate resources earlier rather than later in the lifespan when doing so would increase diachronic returns significantly (hence maximizing lifespan utility). (123)

Bidadanure is not claiming that it is always more efficient to shift more resources to early life.[7] She says that we may have to do so when doing so is efficient. The relationship between efficiency, age and the passage of time is key here. It is often more efficient to devote more education resources to early in life than later in life. Besides brain plasticity, if you teach people something early, they will be able to act on this knowledge for a longer time. Some sequences (doing x before y) may thus tend to be more efficient and may constitute one of the justifications of trajectory constraints such as compulsory early education. Of course, there are complications here about how much weight we grant to efficiency, for instance if we consider

4 See as well: "maximized normal range" (2021: 60) and "maximizing lifespan utility" (64).

5 I am leaving aside here the *procedural* dimension of Daniels's prudential lifespan account, as discussed by Bidadanure.

6 There are reasons other than efficiency as well. The concerns that drive the prohibition on child labor go beyond efficiency. Similarly, a rejection of individualized assessment for political literacy or sexual majority is likely to be driven by concerns that go beyond concerns for informational efficiency too.

7 See e.g. Halliday and Parr's (2022) argument for capped rewards; and Valente (this symposium).

the fact that short-lived people will tend to benefit less from returns on early investment than long-lived people.[8]

Besides *sequence efficiency,* we can also mention *informational efficiency,* as in the case of anti-terrorist age profiling, or when we assume that below a certain age, people do not have sufficient political or sexual maturity. Such informational efficiency derives from the relationship between age, time, and maturation processes, as well as from the fact that such processes are somehow formatted by the age structuration of our societies, such as through compulsory age-based early education. The latter points to the interconnection between age-related policies.

Hence, not only do some patterns of distribution of opportunities across the ages tend to increase inequalities between people over complete lives, while others tend to reduce them. Some patterns of distribution of opportunities also seem to generate efficiency benefits, while others do not. Hence efficiency concerns may justify trajectory constraints that have an impact on synchronic inequalities between age groups in a society in which various generations overlap. My concern is about the way in which Bidadanure articulates such efficiency concerns with the lifetime egalitarian component.

The weight assigned to efficiency and its exact place depends on the principle of justice adopted for this complete-life egalitarian component. If we endorse "classical" egalitarianism over complete lives (i.e. the one subject to levelling down, *and* possibly of an ex post nature),[9] then we need to *add* efficiency as an exogenous requirement. In Bidadanure's account, it could be self-standing or even built into the sufficiency requirement, since some sufficientarians are driven to it from a utilitarian starting point. The idea would then be to *maximize* the degree to which the demands of sufficiency are met, efficiency gains being relevant to that (limited) extent.

Alternatively, one may want to shift altogether to alternative egalitarian principles that have efficiency requirements built in. Principles such as leximin egalitarianism or Gini prioritarianism endogenize efficiency concerns and offer ways of weighing its importance that are perhaps more precise than leaving us with an undefined equality-efficiency trade-off.[10]The issue is of course then about which types of age differentiation can promote lifelong efficiency *in such a manner* that it will be seen, e.g., as necessary to benefit the disadvantaged (leximin), or that it will meet the

[8] There might even be room for further distinguishing *cardinal* from *ordinal* sequence efficiency, i.e. distinguishing the efficiency derived from doing x early, from the efficiency of doing x before y. I am indebted to Manuel Sá Valente for this point.

[9] See Fleurbaey and Peragine (2013).

[10] See, however, Williams's (2004) problem of judgment.

demands of Gini prioritarianism.

The way we understand efficiency both with respect to the lifetime equality principle and with respect to the "sufficiency all along" principle will affect how we address the prima facie tensions that could arise between them. Consider Bidadanure's following quote:

> The principle of approximate cohort equality has *nothing to say on its own* about how we should distribute resources between young and old once diachronic equality is granted. (124, added emphasis)

This may amount to saying that once the demands of a principle are met, the principle has no further demands. But I guess that Bidadanure has something different in mind here.[11] What is of interest is what the requirement of approximate cohort equality *has to say* on fair trajectory and about trajectory constraints. This depends on its principle and on its metrics. As I have just argued, if the *principle* takes efficiency into account to some degree, then it follows that more efficient trajectories will be preferred under certain conditions, such as when the efficiency gains are such that they render the least well-off better off. Similarly, if the *metrics* of this lifetime egalitarian principle takes responsibility into account, then differences in trajectories that lead to lifetime inequalities while not resulting from people's circumstances might not have to be compensated. And such increased differences in trajectories may also entail a more inegalitarian distribution between young and old, given the cumulative effects of choices over time.

Hence, first, efficiency plays a significant role in attempts at defending forms of age-based differentiation. Second, concerning the efficiency-sufficiency nexus, Bidadanure is right to say that her first threshold of sufficiency "all along" can act as a "counterweight" (129) to the types of life trajectories that efficiency alone may command. Yet, third, not only is efficiency better presented in its own right rather than through a prudential label. But if we go one step further and integrate efficiency *within* the lifetime egalitarian component, then efficiency no longer needs to be presented as an "add-on". The lifetime component does not need to be composed of "lifetime equality" and "lifespan efficiency maximization", as two separate principles potentially in tension. Once this is accepted, the lifetime component can regain further centrality. Its ability to justify specific trajectories is reinforced. It is no longer a black box lifetime egalitarianism that disregards how various life trajectories impact on

11 See also Bidadanure's claim that "once birth cohort equity is granted, the complete lives view [of equality] gives us no reasons to object to inequalities between age groups" (48), and that the complete lives approach "tells us *very little* about how to distribute resources between those younger and those older" (48).

efficiency. Thus understood, the lifetime component "on its own" has more to say about trajectories, and therefore about justice between age groups, than what Bidadanure suggests. This is so once we move to principles of justice such as lifetime leximin egalitarianism or lifetime Gini prioritarianism, rather than sticking to a plainer understanding of what an egalitarian principle requires.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have defended two core claims. These are two points where I diverge from Bidadanure's account of justice between age groups. First, while there is plausibility in adding to lifetimism a first sufficientarian threshold applying all along the course of people's lives, I have argued against adding further sufficientarian thresholds, while remaining open to other nonsufficientarian demands of justice that go beyond the complete-life approach. I mentioned one such possible extra source of trajectory adjustment rights, i.e. revisability.

Second, efficiency is one of the positive grounds for trajectory constraints, possibly justifying synchronic inequalities between age groups. I suggested that the substance of Bidadanure's prudential account is reducible to efficiency concerns, which questions its added value as a component of an account of justice between age groups. And I insisted on the fact that once we incorporate efficiency *within* our lifetime "egalitarian" account (at the level of its principle and/or its currency), lifetime egalitarianism has more to say about life trajectories and about synchronic inequalities than what Bidadanure suggests.

Does the alternative account I propose provide more straightforward action guidance when it comes to assessing specific age-based policies? This remains to be shown. Does the view I propose reduce the tensions within the theory? Not necessarily, either. Endogenizing efficiency within the complete-life egalitarian/prioritarian principle shifts them without necessarily reducing them. Dropping the prudential idea clearly reduces them, while adding a principle of revisability potentially increases them. And yet, proposing an alternative account can be valuable *even if* it does not reduce tensions between principles, and *even if* it does not necessarily expect our action to take a different path. Working on the best possible characterization of *why* we ought to act in certain ways matters too, in its own terms (see Swift 2008). And it can be seen as a first necessary step towards discovering alternative practical expectations.

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