

How the past matters for the future: A luck egalitarian sustainability principle for healthcare resource allocation

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Abstract

While it is plausible that we should take the possible negative dynamics of healthcare allocation decisions into account, we may not need a principle of sustainability for this. Munthe, Furmagelli, and Malmqvist are correct that luck egalitarianism focuses on the past, however, this prominent theory of distributive justice can still take into account the interests of those who will be affected by our allocation decisions. This is the case because present allocation may unjustly affect people in the future. Indeed luck egalitarianism may plausibly consider it unjust if we do not take future people's interests into account.

Introduction

Christian Munthe, David Furmagelli, and Erik Malmqvist argue that well-known healthcare resource allocation principles, such as need, prognosis, equal treatment, and cost-effectiveness, should be supplemented with a principle of sustainability.[1] Employing such a principle would entail that the allocation of healthcare resources should take into account whether a specific allocation causes negative dynamics, which would limit the amount of resources available in the future. As examples of allocation decisions, which may have such negative dynamics, they mention those who cause a lack of vaccines, anti-bioethics resistance, and drug shortages. Thus, the overall thought is that we can spend and allocate healthcare resources in a certain way at t1, which means that we will have fewer resources available at a later point, t2. The authors argue that we should include a principle of sustainability to justify allocations, which avoids or diminishes the negative dynamics. The authors argue that existing principles cannot sufficiently include proper regard for how our current decisions affect future allocation decisions and, therefore, the people who need health care resources in the future.

I am sympathetic to the developed argument and believe that the authors are correct that negative dynamics provide reasons to take our ability to meet future health needs into account when we allocate healthcare resources. I am less convinced, however, that we do need a novel principle. I am not persuaded that existing principles are as unable as the authors suggest to consider the potential negative dynamics of specific allocation. Even if I am right, the authors' work remains very important because it clearly brings to the fore that we need to interpret existing principles with sustainability in mind. Here I argue that luck egalitarianism, one of the principles Munthe, Furmagelli, and Malmqvist rejects, can, in fact, show proper regard for those affected by future allocation and thus include a concern for whether a specific allocation at t1 introduces negative dynamics.

Luck egalitarian sustainability

The authors list luck egalitarianism among those theories, which are not future-oriented (or not future-oriented in the right way). Luck egalitarianism is a prominent theory of distributive justice. The authors dismiss luck egalitarianism alongside desert-based theories, which claim resources should be distributed according to people's past moral actions or character. Luck egalitarianism need not (but can) be interpreted as a theory about desert. Others interpret it as a theory about

prudence, which cares about how people have exercised their responsibility without assessing the moral value of the choice they have made.

On such prudence based formulations, luck egalitarianism holds that distributions are just, if and only if, they reflect people's relative exercises of responsibility.[2–4] Recently, such interpretations of luck egalitarianism have been applied to healthcare allocation [5–7]. Munthe, Furmagelli and Malmqvist argue that luck egalitarianism is not in the appropriate sense future-oriented. The main reason offered for this is that luck egalitarianism is backward-looking because distribution luck egalitarianism recommends 'depends entirely on facts about the past'. [1] For this reason, the authors argue that the 'future interests that the sustainability principle is meant to care for are not recognised as valid grounds for justifying any distribution of any kind of goods.' [1]

The authors are indeed correct that luck egalitarianism looks to the past, but, as I will show, it does not follow from this that luck egalitarianism cannot take future people's interests into account. There are several reasons for this. Luck egalitarianism considers as unjust distributions where people are differentially affected by luck.[8] If the allocation decision made at t1 differentially affects people living at t2, this provides a luck egalitarian reason for concern. Couto has convincingly argued, luck egalitarianism could and should also be committed to preventing injustices.[9] We would then have luck egalitarian reasons to consider how our decisions made at t1 affect the resources available at t2. Decisions at t1 could cause people at t2 to be unjustly unequal. The examples offered as paradigmatic examples of negative dynamics, lack of vaccines, anti-bioethics resistance, and drug shortages, are all be captured by a luck egalitarian commitment to avoid making someone living in the future (i.e., those in need of the resources) worse off than some of their contemporaries.

These examples, however, might not be exhaustive for how negative dynamics could affect future allocation decisions. The luck egalitarian fairness intuition employed above is one where those affected by future decisions will be unjustly unequal because of decisions made at t1. But what about negative dynamics, which makes everyone in the future worse off, simply through depleting the resources available? At least assuming, perhaps unrealistically, that people are equally affected by this, would it be true that no inequality flowing from this decision at t1 is problematic from the luck egalitarian perspective? This would motivate the need for an independent sustainability principle. It is, however, not the case that this scenario does not create unjust inequalities just because it does not create inequalities at t2. There is no need to assume that luck egalitarians are only interested in inequalities between those with competing needs at either t1 or t2. Many contemporary luck egalitarians believe that inequalities should also be evaluated across time.[4,10] Therefore, we may readily understand a decision at t1, which means that less can be done for all people at t2, as one, which creates a luck egalitarian injustice towards those at t2, who we cannot help. It makes them unjustly unequal when compared to those with a similar need at t1. Thus, luck egalitarianism provides reasons for considering how allocation decisions made now affect those in the future.

I do not envision that the above will be discouraging for the author's important project. It shows that more principles than they initially thought may support that we consider

how current decisions affect the resources available in future allocation decisions. The above furthermore suggest that not doing so would conflict with both distributive justice and the principle of sustainability.

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