

**Review of Juliana Bidadanure's *Justice Across Ages: Treating Young and Old as Equals*. Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, xi + 238 pp.**

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Inequalities between old and young seem different from inequalities between other social groups. This is because the old used to be the young, and the young will mostly live to become old. This contrasts with other types of groups (race, gender, social class, etc.), where a change of membership tends to be difficult or costly, if not impossible. The inevitability of aging suggests that inequalities between age groups are offset as people move from one age group to another: if the young lack access to benefits enjoyed by the old, then they may gain these benefits once they are older themselves. And if certain opportunities are harder to access at an older age, it may be that older people were given these opportunities earlier in life. Generalising, inequalities between age groups might be tolerable so long as there is “complete life” equality (37), this being the absence of inequality given people’s lives as a whole, even if there is some inequality between age groups.

Here, two questions can be posed that play a central role in Juliana Bidadanure’s excellent book. These are (1) how the idea of complete lives equality should be analysed, and (2) whether complete lives inequality is, under examination, enough to render age group inequalities morally unproblematic. In short, Bidadanure’s view is that complete lives equality is both plausible and yet not exhaustive as a principle of justice across ages. While complete lives equality represents a plausible *distributive* conception of equality, some age group inequalities have a *relational* character whose significance endures even when complete lives equality obtains. The first part of the book (chapters 1 to 4) develops a general account of age justice, engaging with foundational questions around complete lives equality and age group equality. The second part (chapters 5 to 7) applies this general approach to some specific examples of age group inequality.

Chapter 1 reviews the way in which age is unlike gender and race (etc.) and establishes some important conceptual points, such as the difference between birth cohorts and age groups. Chapter 2 clarifies and defends

the idea of complete lives inequality. Importantly, complete lives equality leaves much open as to how to distribute resources within a person's life. Building on some influential work by Norman Daniels, Bidadanure seeks to defend principles of "lifespan" prudence (51). Here there are two principles that work together. First, the Lifespan *Sufficiency* Principle, on which "institutions must ensure that all age groups have enough to enjoy a normal range of opportunities at each and every stage of their lives" (56, 59-60) and the Lifespan *Efficiency* Principle: "Institutions should allocate resources earlier rather than later in the lifespan when doing so would increase diachronic returns significantly (hence maximising lifespan utility)" (64). Bidadanure works through some examples, such as healthcare and education spending, to illustrate how these principles work in practice. The chapter concludes by defending the more basic idea of complete lives equality from some objections not met in Daniels' work.

Chapter 3 then makes the case for why we might still care about age-group inequalities. Bidadanure relies partly on hypotheticals, like the married couple who alternate between positions of master and slave in a way that balances out over the duration of their relationship (87). But she also draws on significant real-world cases. Principal among these are cases of "infantilization by age" (105), both of elderly persons and of young adults. Bidadanure concedes that *some* age group inequalities might be addressed by proper implementation of the lifespan prudence principles. For example, much treatment of the elderly, particularly in residential care facilities, may violate the lifespan sufficiency principle. Nevertheless, she argues, failure of young and old to *interact as equals* remains a core feature of some age group inequalities.

Chapter 4 concludes the book's more foundational section by summarising points made in the preceding chapters and expands on some points regarding ways in which complete lives equality may not in fact obtain. Here the focus is on ways in which today's young adults, the millennial birth cohort, are worse off than today's post-retirement birth cohort—the baby boomers. Age group inequalities like these shape the agenda of the book's second, more applied part. In chapter 5, Bidadanure defends "the youth job guarantee" (154), whereby young adults receive a degree of prioritisation with respect to policies aimed at assisting the unemployed. This is accompanied by a discussion of mandatory retirement. Chapter 6 compares basic income proposals with the alternative of basic capital (or stakeholder grant). The riskier nature of basic capital likely means that UBI is preferred by the lifespan sufficiency principle. On the other hand,

basic capital does more to address inequalities in longevity, by ensuring that those who die young do not miss out as much as they do under UBI, which favours those already fortunate enough to live longer (196–197). In the end, Bidanure considers some hybrid proposals, including one where young adults have the option to ‘mortgage’ some of their future UBI payments so as to access a lump sum earlier in life (206–208). Chapter 7, the last, defends the case for youth quotas in parliaments. While much legislation stands to impact disproportionately on the young, the composition of legislative bodies is subject to an overrepresentation of older people (212). According to Bidanure, a requirement that some members of parliament come from younger age groups would do much to enhance cognitive diversity in legislative decision making, and might increase youth participation in elections in jurisdictions where voting is not compulsory.

Upon finishing this book, one is struck by how much ground Bidanure manages to cover, both with respect to the foundational issues discussed and their various applications. Despite the huge amount of writing in recent decades on the value of equality and how it should fit into a theory of justice, Bidanure finds room to develop new ideas and avoids sacrificing excessive space to mapping the copious internal disagreements of contemporary egalitarian political philosophy. A further strength is the thoroughness with which Bidanure anticipates interesting objections to the positions she endorses, and her ability to find often ingenious ways to address them. Bidanure has provided an impressive analysis of justice across age groups, one that is comprehensive in scope while maintaining a high standard of argument and attention to detail at each stage. The book’s moderate length (under 250 pages) makes this a remarkable achievement.

Nonetheless, I want to make some critical points on relational equality between age groups, and particularly Bidanure’s concerns about what she calls “prolonged parental dependency” (136). Here, I think at least two dimensions of dependency risk being insufficiently distinguished. One is financial dependency, and the other is involuntary cohabitation, as when young adults unable to leave the parental home are denied “spatial independence” (137). It is not obvious that these are equally problematic, or problematic in the same way, from the perspective of relational equality. Bidanure speaks quite generally of the idea that young adults might “live under the authority and control of their parents” (140). This can occur when parents retain an objectionable degree of oversight concerning

an adult offspring's lifestyle, and retain authority over the way in which the physical living space is managed. I agree with Bidadanure that involuntary cohabitation will tend to delay important milestones in life, such as having one's own children (137). But the dependency associated with cohabitation might contrast, normatively, with narrower forms of financial dependency, as when parents help with the down payment on an offspring's home purchase, or higher education costs. These may still count as forms of dependency, at least if there will be a considerable cost to the offspring if such support were to be withdrawn, and perhaps especially where parental support comes with stipulations, say, about what (not) to study at university. But in other cases, parental support might be profoundly enabling of an adult offspring's pursuit of their own life plans. I should stress that I do not take Bidadanure to be committed to an implausibly one-dimensional view of parental dependency. But greater attention to the differences here might be instructive as to exactly when relational equality between parents and adult offspring is undermined.

It may also be that the proper understanding of relational equality can be illuminated by Bidadanure's focus on cases involving how adult children relate to their parents. As Bidadanure notes, the concern with strongly distributive conceptions of equality has largely been with their (alleged) inability to take oppression and social hierarchy sufficiently seriously (96). It bears emphasising here that standard accounts of social hierarchy typically place considerable emphasis on the idea of *group* difference rather than on isolated relationships between individuals. A core feature of hierarchies of race and gender is the tendency for the treatment of individuals to track perceived group membership. Stereotyping, for example, is largely understood in terms of apparent group membership being used to explain and/or predict an individual's behaviour. I am not sure that we should think of inequalities between age groups as really between entire *groups*. An adult offspring who remains housed by controlling parents is arguably stuck in a problematic relationship *with their parents*. But even when this sort of relationship is replicated in many families, we might still see it as a recurring case of a relationship between similarly situated individuals, rather than a genuinely inter-group relationship. One reason we might say this is that the mechanisms by which group-based oppression can emerge may not be present: I find it hard to see how an increased tendency for young adults to endure involuntary parental cohabitation is something that can lead them to be negatively stereotyped by members of the wider population. Again, no substantive

criticism of Bidadanure here, who I think does not take an explicit position on whether we should think of relational inequalities between age groups as irreducibly or paradigmatically group-based. The tendency for relational egalitarians to think in terms of inter-group rather than (isolated) inter-personal relationships may be due to age having got less attention than gender or race. But whatever one's view of the significance of racial and gender inequality, it is not obvious why age-based inequalities should be seen as conceptually subordinate to analyses of other relational inequalities, even if one thinks that inequalities of race and gender are often more morally urgent or troubling.

I have not said anything about the later, more practical chapters. But I will make a few observations about the role of young people in politics. In her closing chapter, Bidadanure's focus is on elected members of parliament. There is no discussion of youth quotas in other branches of government. Bidadanure is right, of course, to note that legislation often dramatically impacts the young. But recent acts by other branches of government should remind us that legislating is not everything when it comes to government's use of power. Bidadanure's book was published shortly before the US Supreme Court repealed *Roe v. Wade* and shortly before many central banks moved to dramatically raise interest rates in a bid to combat inflation. Both decisions create costs that fall largely on the young. (A rise in interest rates will also benefit older people, who tend to be net savers and with their mortgages paid off, while younger people will now further struggle to access enough credit to buy homes.) It is not obvious whether the answer is greater youth representation: non-legislative roles in the judicial and technocratic institutions of government are ones that arguably should be held by people who have accumulated years of expertise, rather than simply life experience as such. But these examples reinforce Bidadanure's important observation that "our political communities are [...] very age-unequal in terms of access to, and exercise of, political power, and the young are systematically worse off in that respect" (210).

Once again, Bidadanure's book is excellent, and probably the best piece of philosophy on its subject matter. Anyone remotely interested in how we should understand justice between the old and the young will benefit from a careful reading of this book.

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