

# John harris's concept of survival lottery

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## **On the Permissibility of the Survival Lottery**

John Harris proposes the implementation of a social lottery where healthy individuals are sacrificed for organ harvest in order to save the lives of individuals with failing organs. This system would allow one healthy individual to save the lives of multiple unhealthy individuals through his or her sacrifice. While Harris provides a powerful argument, this paper will argue that the survival lottery is a discriminatory system that infringes on the rights of the majority to benefit the minority.

Harris's argument can roughly be reconstructed in the following way: (1) if two lives are more valuable than one, then actions ought be performed that benefit the two lives (Utilitarian Argument from Benefit); (2) if actions ought be performed that benefit the two lives, then one life ought be sacrificed to save the lives of the two when necessary; (3) therefore, if two lives have more value than one, then one life ought be spared to save the lives of the two when necessary. This results in Harris proposing a system where individuals are drawn at random to sacrifice their lives to save multiple others with their organ donation.

The argument proposed by Harris is valid as the conclusion follows from the premises in the form of hypothetical syllogism. However, many objections are raised in response to pieces of the argument. The main objection I will focus on arises from the right to life argument. While all individuals involved in the survival lottery have a right to life, the individual who is sacrificed has his or her right to life infringed upon. If the lottery system was not put in place, this individual would go on to live a long and healthy life. The survival

lottery dictates that this life is to be cut short, however, in order to preserve the lives of two unhealthy individuals. Many years of healthful life and experiences are suddenly being stolen from this individual in order to prolong the lives of two individuals who were months or years away from their own death. Some would argue that this re-appropriation of life is therefore impermissible.

Harris anticipated this objection, however, and argues that the two unhealthy individuals have an equal right to life as the organ “ donor” and denying them these organs equates to murder. Based on the utilitarian view, murdering the one healthy individual is the better option than murdering the two unhealthy individuals. Harris goes on to state that if someone were to refuse these sick patients the organs they need, they would be discriminating against these “ unlucky” patients and treating them as if they were a lower class, less worthy of respect and consideration. While his point does have merit, this is where I believe his response fails.

Implementing this lottery system aims to benefit those who are dying from organ failure. It is true that refusing organs to these patients might be slightly discriminatory based on Harris's argument, but implementing the system results in discrimination as well. This vocal minority, those who desire the life-saving organs, are calling for the heads of innocent people because they believe they deserve these organs just as much as those who are already in possession of them. Effectively, those in the minority are the only ones who see the benefit of the lottery. While these dying patients would also be put into the lottery system to be sacrificed, they would have a much higher likelihood of seeing the benefits of the system as opposed to

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being sacrificed because they make up a smaller portion of the population and are the only ones benefitted by the sacrifices made by others. In this way, the cost would lie too heavily on the healthy individuals who see no benefit until they are placed into the minority later in life. While Harris's lottery system does provide immense benefit from a utilitarian stand point, the system does not seem to be as morally sound as he believed it to be. It's for this reason that I believe his proposition is impermissible and doesn't represent a practical solution to the problem he addresses.