

**Lead Paragraph:** Sustainability is not only a matter of justice. Still, any plausible theory of sustainable development needs to be explicit about the philosophical views it necessarily embodies on intergenerational justice. This requires some detailed work on the philosophical side, with potentially unexpected outcomes. One of them is that it may be unjust to transfer *more* to the next generation than what we inherited from the previous one. And another one is that Brundtland's often cited view on the matter may not be as obviously just as it seems.

**Abstract:** At the heart of any concept of sustainable development lies an idea of intergenerational justice. The latter can be understood in various ways, depending on the general theory of justice one considers most defensible. The author spells out six possible philosophical views on the matter. He shows the extent to which differences in logic also translate as significant differences in the intergenerational principles to be followed, using notions of savings and dis-savings. Special attention is being paid to two reasons why the directives of a luck egalitarian theory of intergenerational justice do not necessarily coincide with Brundtland's view on intergenerational justice. Such differences become clear once we understand that, as a matter of principle, luck egalitarians should oppose not only generational dis-savings, but also generational savings, hence stick to a strict "neither less, nor more" rule.

**Keywords:** Intergenerational Justice, Brundtland, Rawls, Growth, Sustainability, Luck egalitarianism, Sufficiency.

## The Egalitarian Case Against Brundtland's Sustainability

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## Introduction

Sustainable development has become a key concept in public discourse. No doubt the idea of intergenerational justice constitutes one of its central components. Still, there are only very few attempts within the sustainability literature to examine precisely what intergenerational justice could mean, given the level of sophistication available in the field of philosophical theories of justice. This paper aims to provide a critical overview of the various philosophical theories of intergenerational justice, and to show that some of them may be more robust than others. Moreover, it aims at indicating the extent to which sustainable development, as defined in the Brundtland report <1> is unable to reject two major intergenerational injustices.

Among the assumptions at play here, let us underline two. On the one hand, we will only look at the *size* of the basket of « goods » (broadly understood) to be transferred by each generation to the next one. The *nature* of the goods to be included in this basket will not be discussed here. It is full of elements that constitute capital, broadly understood, namely a physical component, but also technological, cultural, relational, political... element. Hence, we shall not address here the substitution issue (e.g. can we substitute oil consumption with new technologies, or biodiversity with musical discoveries?). This is of course central to the weak v. strong sustainability debate.

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On the other hand, we shall assume that the global population size remains constant over time. The latter assumption is significant. Due to their internal logic, some theories will arguably tend to be indifferent to population changes (e.g. this would follow from a standard version of the indirect reciprocity view presented below) whereas others will more naturally endorse a *per capita* proviso (e.g. the egalitarian views set out below). Theories of the latter type may thus be especially demanding in a context of growing population. Conversely, it is often overlooked that while population decline may be a problem from the point of view of financing pension and health care systems in aging populations, it also entails that, for such population-sensitive normative theories, a lesser global capital will have to be transferred to the next generation if the latter is less populated.

Moreover, for each of the theories we present, the reader will be provided with a short synoptic table involving the concepts of savings and dis-savings. For present purposes, there is (positive) savings (hereinafter : SAV) whenever a generation is transferring to the next one more capital (broadly understood) than the one it inherited itself from the previous generation. Conversely, there is dis-savings (hereinafter : DIS) whenever a generation transfers to the next one less valuable a capital than the one it inherited itself from the previous generation. Moreover, there will be three modalities: prohibition (hereinafter : PROHIB), authorisation (hereinafter (AUTHO), obligation (hereinafter : OBLI). Hence, if a given theory allows each generation to transfer less to the next one than what it inherited from the previous one, we refer to it as “DIS AUTHO”. If it is expected to transfer more, we signal it as “SAV OBLI”. Let us now examine each of the theories in turn.

### Indirect Reciprocity

DIS PROHIB	SAV AUTHO
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The first theory, formulated and discussed in a very explicit way by authors such as Barry <2> and Masson <3> is called indirect reciprocity. The basic idea behind such a view is that our moral obligations towards other people can only be envisaged within a reciprocity framework. This is for example the case for people who consider in the intragenerational context that only those who have contributed through their work in the past or who will contribute in the future should be granted unemployment benefits if needed. In the intergenerational context, one may suspect that this is actually a widespread view among the public.<sup>2</sup> Two maxims are involved, the former providing us with an explanation as to *why* we would have any obligation towards the next generation, the latter *defining the content* of our intergenerational obligations:

**Maxim 1 :** The current generation owes something to the next one because it received something from the previous one.

**Maxim 2 :** The current generation should transfer to the next one capital at least equivalent to the one it inherited itself from the previous generation.

For all those associating justice with reciprocity, the concept of indirect reciprocity is powerful since it allows us to justify obligations towards people who did not do anything for us so far, and who will perhaps end up having given *us* less than we will have given them. Whereas in the case of *direct* reciprocity, it is the original benefactor who ends up recuperating the equivalent of what he gave in the first place, in the case of *indirect* reciprocity as understood here, it is a third party (here : the next generation) who

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<sup>2</sup> For an empirical study providing indications of the popularity of the « indirect reciprocity » view: <4>

replaces the original benefactor (here : the current generation). To take a family-based example, children (Generation 3) will be provided with generous funding for university studies at will by - or will inherit family photos from - their parents (Generation 2) "in return" for the fact that their grandparents (Generation 1) did the same for their own children (Generation 2).

Notice that this standard view is only one out of three possible models of intergenerational reciprocity. Indeed, one alternative indirect reciprocity model goes in the opposite direction: the current generation owes something to the previous one because of what the previous one did for the one that preceded it. This is the case with "pay-as-you-go" pension schemes. Generation 2 (those who are currently active) owes retirement benefits to the members of Generation 1 (those who are now retiring) on the understanding that Generation 3 (those who did not enter the labour market yet) will do the same for Generation 2 in the future. And there is as well the theoretical if not practical possibility of a model of intergenerational justice built strictly on *direct* reciprocity grounds. This can be illustrated by Cosandey's « double reciprocity » view <5> according to which we owe something to the previous generation in return for what they *have* given us and we owe something to the next one in return for what they *will* give us.

The standard indirect reciprocity view is a rather robust theory that is immune to various possible objections. For example, we can answer the query of those asking why a mere gift could ever give rise to an obligation to give in return. For this objection can be rejected by underlining the fact that such a generation should be regarded as a free rider generation. It takes advantage of the intergenerational train without paying its ticket, hence benefiting without reciprocity from the sacrifices made by earlier generations.

Still, indirect reciprocity as defined above has to face three serious difficulties, the third one being the most general one. *First*, maxim 1 presupposes the idea that we have obligations towards earlier generations, hence towards *dead* people as well. For it is they who are supposed to generate our obligations towards the next generation. Still, for a state to justify its sustainable development policies on the basis of obligations towards dead people seems rather incompatible with the requirement of a minimal neutrality towards the various conceptions of the good life as well as towards the variety of metaphysical views. Indeed, it can be shown that obligations towards the dead only make sense if we can claim that dead people do exist in a morally relevant sense. Such an assumption is probably far from shared by a majority among us. *Second*, Maxim 1 cannot be applied to a hypothetical *first* generation, since the latter would not - by definition - have received anything from any generation preceding it. This theory is therefore unable to tell us what would be wrong in a first generation squandering a significant part of the capital it began with. *Third* - and finally -, there is an even more serious difficulty. The very idea of reciprocity is problematic if one aims at using it as a basis for a full theory of justice. For example, for all those who consider - in the intragenerational context - that a person suffering from a major genetic disability should be granted at least decent social benefits, this could in principle only be done - for those willing to remain within a reciprocity framework - if we can reasonably expect this person to give us the equivalent in return in the future. Once we accept the reasonable assumption that most of us would want society - in the intragenerational context - to grant such a person with social benefits *irrespectively* of her ability to give something in return, we have to ask ourselves why this idea of reciprocity should remain at the heart of our theory of intergenerational justice. Hence, there are good reasons to look for other possible views.

## Collective property

DIS PROHIB	SAV AUTHO
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One alternative to indirect reciprocity rests on the notion of a collective intergenerational property. The Earth - understood in very broad terms as containing both our natural and cultural heritage - belongs here to all the generations, and most significantly to the current and future ones. There are various ways of defending this view. Either we just state it as an assumption. Or, we refer to it as the will of God, as John Locke did.<sup>3</sup> A more interesting way of justifying intergenerational collective property relies on more empirical assumptions and is suggested by Bourgeois <7>. Imagine first that the first generation was fully entitled to waste whatever it wanted from its initial endowment. Still, let us assume as well that at least *some* of the past generations bequeathed what they had inherited *not only* to the benefit of the very next generation, but also for the benefit of all coming generations. This is a plausible assumption from a historical point of view, especially given the large number of generations that followed each other. We can then envisage the following scenario. While having been initially the exclusive property of the first generation(s), as generations started appearing that wanted the whole set of coming generations to be regarded as the owners of the Earth, the Earth progressively acquired the status of an intergenerationally collective property, because of the will of (a few of) the past generations.

Hence, the idea of an intergenerational collective property of what we inherited from the previous generation has various possible roots. It exhibits however a twofold characteristic worth some emphasis. On the one hand, the operational principle derived from this view is *identical* to the one embodied in an indirect reciprocity

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<sup>3</sup> See <6>, at §8

view (prohibition on dis-savings). On the other hand, the underlying logic is clearly *distinct*. For, under an indirect reciprocity logic, the reason why we owe something to the next generation is because we *received* something from the previous one. In contrast, under the collective property model, the reason why we owe our children something is simply because what we have is as much theirs as ours. There is a shift from giving « back » what is ours to giving back what is not (only) ours. Notice however that in the case of a justification « à la Bourgeois », a reference to the past - hence to dead people - is not totally absent. For it is only if one respects the will of the past generations that had a collectivistic view (i.e. that bequeathed the Earth to *all* coming generations, as opposed to the one just following them), that one may then justify the collective property idea.

All this connects moreover with the famous North American Indian say : « Treat the Earth well : it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our children ».<sup>4</sup> This formulation is not totally unambiguous however, for if it were to be interpreted as meaning that no *current* generation could ever *own* the Earth, then it would in a sense always remain no generation's property (*res nullius*). It would always be lent to all generations, whichever it is. In contrast, if it were to be interpreted as a translation of the idea of collective property, then we would not see why the lending and borrowing language should be relied upon, since it does not make sense for a current generation to borrow what is already its own (at least in part).

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<sup>4</sup> Various internet sources

## Utilitarianism

DIS PROHIB	SAV OBLI
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Let us now explore another theory: utilitarianism. It is characterised by its preoccupation with people's welfare (*utilitas* in Latin). More importantly, it also claims that the fairest way of organising society is the one that maximises the *aggregate* welfare of its members. This is the reason why we refer to it as an aggregative theory. There are several unsound reasons to criticise utilitarianism. What is true however, is that it is not primarily concerned with the *distribution* of welfare across members of society. What matters for utilitarians is the aggregate size of the welfare pie from which society as a whole will benefit, not the relative size of the pieces each member will end up with. Therefore, it may well advocate sacrificing the well-being of a few people (entailing e.g. slavery for each of them) whenever this would be necessary for society as a whole to maximize its aggregate welfare (here: each member of a large majority deriving a small amount of extra welfare from the slavery condition of a tiny minority). Hence utilitarianism – because of its aggregativism – is more likely than other theories to lead to sacrificial consequences.

In the intergenerational context, this is a crucial fact. Giving up the consumption of part of our capital today may enable « us » – provided that this capital is invested properly – to consume much more capital in a more or less close future. Think about a bag of seeds, part of which is being used to bake bread today and the rest being sown in order to increase the amount of seeds available during the following year. Hence, savings (in the sense of transferring to the next generation more than what we inherited from the previous one) is not only authorised. It is even *required* by utilitarians, given that the goal is to maximise the size of the intergenerational pie of welfare. This entails that the first

generations in history will have to tighten up their belts in order to allow for investments that will only benefit the next generations.

This is a worrying result once we consider an *indefinite* number of generations. For one way of interpreting utilitarianism would then consist in asking each and every generation to sacrifice itself without ever knowing if any significant number of generations will follow and be able to benefit from such sacrifice. A sacrifice to no one's benefit (given the permanent uncertainty as to how many generations will follow) is certainly a very problematic outcome. Utilitarians are of course aware of this kind of result. They have proposed to introduce a *discounting factor* (e.g. about the importance to be given to the respective welfare units of each generation). However, such an *ad hoc* approach has not so far been developed in a convincing manner, able to avoid the symmetric problem of systematically disadvantaging the coming generations.

Hence, the conjunction of the (potentially) productive nature of capital investment and of the indefinite nature of the number of coming generations, is such that in the intergenerational context, utilitarianism will tend to lead to especially sacrificial outcomes. For all those who find the latter unacceptable, justice may then require a distributive rather than aggregative approach.

## Rawlsian Egalitarianism

Phase 1	DIS PROHIB	SAV OBLI
Phase 2	DIS PROHIB	SAV AUTHO

Rawls, in his masterpiece *A Theory of Justice* <8>, is aware of this major weakness of utilitarianism. Still, he considers that moving away from the initial condition of prehistoric men is necessary for

reasons of justice. In order to accommodate both concerns, he ends up with a two-stage model in which a steady state stage follows an accumulation phase. During the accumulation period, the intergenerational principle is identical to the utilitarian one (compulsory savings). This stage is supposed to have a limited duration though. And the goal underlying such a need for accumulation has nothing to do with maximizing the size of the intergenerational utility pie. Rather, for Rawls, the accumulation stage aims at allowing for economic wealth to be such that a minimum stability of just institutions is guaranteed. As soon as this point is reached, accumulation ceases being compulsory. We then enter the steady-state stage in which the Rawlsian principle is identical this time to the one defended by theories of indirect reciprocity or collective property.

With Rawls, we believe that such a « two stage » model is needed. And we also think that he is right in defending compulsory savings during the accumulation phase. The legitimacy of the latter view is not self-evident however. What is potentially shocking for an egalitarian like Rawls is to propose – for the accumulation phase – a principle of compulsory savings that clearly violates a concern for the least well off. As a matter of fact, it is clearly unfair, from an egalitarian viewpoint, to require savings from the first generations. For such a requirement brings about an intergenerational world in which the least well off (generation) is not in the best possible situation (since if it did not have to save, it would end up being much better off). Limiting ourselves to a prohibition on dis-savings would not have such consequences. Again, Rawls is aware of this problem. And still, he sticks to compulsory savings during that stage. Let us provide here a short defence of his view along Rawlsian lines.

His theory is not only egalitarian. He is also a liberal, in the sense that pursuing the improvement of the least well off's situation has to be done within the constraints we refer to as « basic liberties ». In other words, there is a priority of guaranteeing basic liberties such as physical integrity or freedom of expression, over the goal of improving the socio-economic situation of the least well off. We could thus say that if violating the egalitarian goal is acceptable during the accumulation phase, it is only so as long as we need to set up institutions capable of defending people's basic liberties, this latter objective being granted priority over the egalitarian one. Moreover, if we can show empirically that the richer a democratic state is (in terms of GDP) the longer its democratic nature is likely to last, we then have an empirical element able to support the claim that setting up just institutions requires wealth to have reached a sufficient level.

**Luck Egalitarianism**

Phase 1	DIS PROHIB	SAV OBLI
Phase 2	DIS PROHIB unless...	SAV PROHIB unless...

While agreeing with the idea of a « two stages » theory and with the principle Rawls defends for the accumulation phase, we disagree with the principle he proposes for the steady-state stage. For we think egalitarians should defend a different principle at that stage. Which one? Rather than just prohibiting dissavings, egalitarians should also call for a *prohibition* on savings. This position may seem absurd at first. For what would be morally wrong with a generation of parents voluntarily tightening up their belts in order to guarantee their children a better existence than the one they have been able to benefit from. Towards whom would that be unfair? Here is the

answer: towards the least well off members of these parents' generation.

For let us envisage the case of a generation anticipating that, at the end of its existence, it may end up having transferred a surplus to the next generation, i.e. more (per head) than what it inherited from the previous one. The point here is that such a surplus should benefit the least well off members of the current generation rather than the next generation as a whole. Transferring more to the future will sacrifice as much for today's least well off people. And it is only as long as each generation sticks to a prohibition on both (intergenerational) dissavings and savings that the intergenerational world we are bringing about will be the one in which the least well off, whatever the generation they belong to, are less disadvantaged than they could ever be in a world differently organised. Admittedly, were such a surplus to be transferred to the next generation, it could very well benefit its least advantaged members. We need to make sure however that the least well off members of our own generation do not then end up with a situation worse than the one of those least advantaged members of the next generation. Hence, our closed principle (neither savings, nor dis-savings)

It will not be possible to discuss here the details of this proposal.<sup>5</sup> What needs to be stressed however is that if long term growth is only possible if at least some generations will have transferred to the next ones more than they had themselves inherited, the idea of prohibition on savings also entails that *growth* should in principle be regarded as intergenerationally unjust. This is one among several possible « anti-growth » arguments.<sup>6</sup> It is important to see how distinctive it is. Let us mention four such « anti-growth »

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<sup>5</sup> For further developments : <9>, chap. 4

<sup>6</sup> See *Ibidem* , pp. 224-225

arguments, each of them being different from the one defended here. According to the first one, insofar as growth would increase intragenerational *inequalities* (both domestically and internationally), it would have to be rejected for that (strict egalitarian) reason. According to a second argument, found in Bonin <10>, a state taking measures to boost growth would violate the *neutrality* constraint, according to which public authorities should remain as neutral as possible towards people's various conceptions of the good life. As to the third argument, it says that growth is *vain*, if not counter-productive, from the point of view of conceptions of the good life that are really worth it. We would not need so much material wealth per head to be able to lead a happy life. Finally, a fourth argument considers growth, insofar as it mobilizes large amounts of physical resources, as *unsustainable* at the current rate. Each of these arguments would deserve closer scrutiny, both on their normative assumptions and on their empirical plausibility. Notice moreover that only the two first ones are justice-based ones, as is our intergenerational anti-growth argument here. Still, it is now clear that the « anti-growth » argument we are defending differs from the four ones we have just presented.

What is also worth stressing is that we end up with an egalitarian theory whose implications for the steady-state stage *do not converge* with the ones of the indirect reciprocity or of the collective property views. Moreover, there is another angle from which the proposed theory is different from those two views. Let us consider the case of a future natural phenomenon such as an Earthquake, adversely affecting the situation of the next generation. From an intra-generational perspective, an Earthquake is generally expected to give rise to compensatory measures funded by society as a whole to the benefit of those unlucky people who are especially affected, due to no fault of their own. For luck egalitarians consider that any

disadvantage resulting from someone's circumstances (as opposed to her choices) should be fully compensated by the rest of society. Why would this not be the case in the intergenerational context as well ?

If we were able to predict – by extraordinary means – the occurrence and importance of such future Earthquakes and if we could show that the next generation is especially likely to be negatively affected, to a much larger extent than us who – ex hypothesi – would not have to suffer any Earthquake, then we would have to switch from a prohibition on savings (the principle) to an obligation to save (one of the exceptions to this principle). And we would have to save to such an extent that the next generation would not end up with circumstances worse than the ones we will end up having come across. Such compulsory savings in case of anticipatable future adverse circumstances affecting the next generation correspond with a rationale very different from the utilitarian one or from the one Rawlsians could provide for the accumulation phase. Moreover, it does not seem that indirect reciprocity theory would ever be able to justify such an obligation to save (in the intergenerational sense again) for that clearly entails that we should transfer *more* to the next generation than what we received from the previous one. The same remark holds as well towards the idea of intergenerational collective property.

**Brundtland's Sufficiencyarianism**

DIS AUTHO unless...	SAV AUTHO unless...
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Having surveyed different theories of intergenerational justice and having indicated the reasons why we believe the luck egalitarian one supports principles that are both clearly distinct and defensible,

let us now turn to Brundtland's definition of sustainable development. Our claim is that such a definition is insufficient in two respects if we adopt a luck egalitarian point of view. A word of caution however : neither do we claim that the Brundtland report provides us with the only possible definition of sustainability,<sup>7</sup> nor do we claim that the Brundtlandian principle as stated hereinafter does full justice to the complexity of her views. The only point here is that this principle as so often mobilized in the scientific literature and in political discourse falls short for two reasons based on what luck egalitarians believe would be the right view of intergenerational justice.

Let us state then Brundtland's principle of sustainability : « Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs ».<sup>8</sup> The concept of needs can of course be understood in a more or less broad sense. Even if we do not consider it as necessarily equivalent to the idea of « basic need », there remains certainly an idea that the scope of our needs could not meaningfully be taken in an extremely broad way, and that once coverage for each one's needs is being provided for, justice will not require any further redistribution. This becomes clear once we stick to a concept of basic needs and ask – to take an intragenerational example again - whether someone with one finger missing due to genetic malformation would deserve any compensation on grounds of justice, knowing that she would be perfectly capable of leading a minimally flourishing life without such a compensation. Sufficiencyarians (i.e. those claiming that once coverage for needs is provided for, no further redistribution is required) will claim that no compensation should be expected. Luck egalitarians will

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. <11>

<sup>8</sup> <1>, at p. 43

certainly disagree - at least in some cases - insofar as the handicap at stake is strictly the result of this person's circumstances. This illustrates the central difference between both views. If we adopt, e.g., a welfarist metric, for sufficientarians, as long as each of us is able to reach a given threshold of well-being, justice does not require any further redistribution. In contrast, luck egalitarians will only stop calling for further redistribution once all disadvantages due to brute bad luck will have been compensated for by society as a whole.

Hence, for luck egalitarians, Brundtland's sufficientarianism is unable to exclude two types of behaviours that should be regarded as unfair. First, it *allows* a possibly significant degree of dissavings as long as there remains a significant margin once we have ensured for the capacity of the next generation to provide for its own (basic) needs. Such dis-savings would not be deemed acceptable by Rawlsian or luck egalitarians. Second, by allowing (intergenerational) savings as long as this does not jeopardize the ability of the current generation to provide for its own needs, such sufficientarianism would violate the egalitarian principle of prohibition on savings. Hence, all those who generally take seriously the intuitions of luck egalitarianism should not abandon them once they are dealing with intergenerational issues. And if they don't, they should see that such a view certainly advocates principles that are in two important respects very different from Brundtland's sufficientarianism.

## Conclusion

This short paper was based on a set of simplifying assumptions. Population was assumed to remain constant. The composition of the basket of goods to be transferred to the next generation was left undiscussed. Uncertainty problems were left aside as well. We just

looked at intergenerational transfers from a purely quantitative point of view, using two categories (savings/dissavings) and three modalities (prohibition, authorisation and obligation). Still, with such assumptions in mind, it is fascinating to see that, based on some of our standard theories of justice, we can uncover very different logics of intergenerational justice and separate out clearly distinct operational principles corresponding to such logics. Such an analysis also helps us to see that for a luck egalitarian, Brundtland's sufficientarian principle does not allow us to exclude what can be seen as two major intergenerational injustices.

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