

**teorema**

Vol. XLII/1, 2023, pp. 101-121

ISSN 0210-1602

[BIBLID 0210-1602 (2023) 42:1; pp. 101-121

## Rawls's Difference Principle, the Trickle-Down Economy and Climate Change

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### RESUMEN

Los filósofos han distinguido, como mínimo, entre tres interpretaciones distintas del principio de diferencia de Rawls. Dicho principio establece que las desigualdades económicas y sociales deben resultar en el mayor beneficio de los más desfavorecidos. Mi propósito en este artículo es mostrar que, de acuerdo con la interpretación más plausible y atractiva de dicho principio, a la que llamo reciprocidad, el principio de diferencia de Rawls nos permite limitar el crecimiento económico para preservar la naturaleza y proteger los intereses de las generaciones futuras, cumpliendo asimismo con las demandas de justicia de los miembros más desaventajados de la sociedad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *principio de diferencia, eficiencia, desigualdad, reciprocidad, justicia climática.*

### ABSTRACT

Philosophers have distinguished at least three different interpretations of Rawls's difference principle. This principle claims that social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged. My aim in this paper is to show that according to the most attractive and plausible interpretation of that principle, which I call the reciprocity view, Rawls's difference principle allows us to limit economic growth in order to preserve nature and protect the interests of future generations, while still meeting the demands of justice concerning the least advantaged members of society.

KEYWORDS: *The Difference Principle, Efficiency, Inequality, Reciprocity, Climate Justice.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

One of the aims of the difference principle is to justify the inequalities inherent to market capitalism from the point of view of social justice. According to Rawls, Welfare State Capitalism does not comply with his theory of justice, but his well-known two principles of justice could be implemented in a Property-Owning Democracy – which implies a par-

ticular form of market capitalism – or in what he calls Liberal Market Socialism. The difference principle claims that social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged. If this is a standard view of social justice, it is so precisely because of the influence of John Rawls on contemporary political philosophy. It is important to note that there is some debate about how to interpret the difference principle, since Rawls's statements are not always clear and consistent. Some interpretations present the difference principle as requiring the promotion of benefits to the least advantaged, while others see it as merely disfavoring inequalities that come at the expense of the worst-off. First, I will argue that the most attractive and plausible reading of the difference principle is that which I will call the *reciprocity view*, because this view fits better with other parts of Rawls's theory of justice. In particular, I will argue that the reciprocity view of the difference principle fits better with some objections that Rawls raised against inequality and also, it is consistent with the *just savings principle*, his preferred principle of intergenerational justice. Finally, I will argue that the reciprocity view is a green interpretation of Rawls that best serves our duty to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

The article proceeds as follows. In section II, I present Rawls's conception of distributive justice as democratic equality, and in section III his most distinguished principle of social justice: the difference principle. Section IV presents the three different interpretations of that difference principle that philosophers have offered. In section V, I discuss the differing scope of the various interpretations of the difference principle. I argue that *Paretian egalitarian* and *lexical prioritarian* interpretations of the principle are compatible with what I call the trickle-down argument. However, the *reciprocity view* of the difference principle would not require maximizing the benefits of the worst-off, even if the trickle-down argument were empirically valid. According to this latter view, the government, departing from the benchmark of equality, can choose any point between equality and the Pareto efficient point that maximally improves the situation of the least advantaged. However, once everyone enjoys a social minimum, the government is not required to promote their expectations of primary goods, including wealth and income, any further, even if this is permissible. Section VI defends the plausibility of this view in connection with other parts of Rawls's theory of justice, like some of his objections to inequality and his commitment to the just savings principle. Finally, section VI shows the importance of these normative distinctions for climate justice. I will argue that only the reciprocity

view is consistent with our duties of climate justice. Assuming it has secured the social minimum, the government is required only to fairly distribute expectations of primary goods, including wealth and income, to avoid expanding inequality between the well-off and the worse-off in ways that would be detrimental to the latter group. The reciprocity view thus leaves more discretion to take into account goals other than the promotion of expectations of primary goods, like income and wealth, such as the preservation of nature and our duties to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

## II. RAWLS'S CONCEPTION OF DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AS DEMOCRATIC EQUALITY

Let me start with an overview of Rawls's conception of democratic equality and the difference principle. We need to properly understand how this principle works before we can assess whether it is attractive and plausible for solving the problems of consistency in Rawls's theory and its compatibility with climate justice. This work will ground my subsequent discussion of the different interpretations of the difference principle and their compatibility with Rawls's conception of democratic equality.

The design of each society, with its laws, policies, and institutions, results in different distributions of economic benefits and burdens among its members. The resulting economic distributions fundamentally affect people's lives, and to some extent, are predictable and lie within various agents' control. Arguments about the principles that govern the design of such laws, policies, and institutions constitute the debate over "social justice" in the sense that concerns this article. These principles provide moral guidance for the political processes and structures that affect our society's distribution of economic benefits and burdens. Rawls (1999) [1971], pp. 6-10, treats "social justice" as one aspect of distributive justice, which is focused on the design of the basic structure.

One of the simplest principles of distributive justice is that of strict equality, and some of its most recent advocates include Larry Temkin (1997) and G. A. Cohen (2008). This principle is most commonly justified on the grounds that people are morally equal, and that equality in material goods and services is the best way to recognize this moral ideal. The main objection to this solution is that there are likely to be feasible alternative allocations of material goods that make some people better

off than they would be in a strictly equal distribution, without making anybody else worse off. Such allocations are called *Pareto superior* allocations. According to G. A. Cohen (2008), p. 87, a “state A is strongly Pareto-superior to state B if everyone is better off in A than in B, and weakly Pareto-superior if at least one person is better off, and no one is worse off.” State A is *Pareto efficient* if no one can become better off without making someone else worse off. It seems that we have *pro tanto* reasons to promote states of affairs in which some people can be made better off without making anyone else worse off. However, as many philosophers have argued, the desire to promote more efficient states of affairs needs to be consistent with our egalitarian concerns about a fair distribution of the benefits and burdens among the members of society.

The most influential theory of justice in contemporary political philosophy is that of John Rawls and was first formulated at length in *A Theory of Justice* in 1971. The aim of *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls’s theory of justice, is to combine the two principles just presented, the principle of efficiency and the principle of equality, and provide a systematic liberal egalitarian alternative to *utilitarianism* [Rawls (1999) [1971], pp. xi-xii]. The latter theory claims that justice requires maximizing the sum of utility, and so affirms a purely aggregative principle. Rawls criticizes utilitarianism for being a distribution-insensitive form of *welfarism*, although distribution-sensitive forms of welfarism are also possible. Welfarists might also claim that whether institutions are just depends on distributing welfare among individuals. Distribution-sensitive forms of welfarism take welfare as the standard of interpersonal comparison: the “metric” or “currency” of distributive justice, which is used to determine an individual’s level of advantage and decide who is better off or worse off than others. What’s crucial for welfarists is the individual’s level of utility, or their level of preference-satisfaction, or some other set of facts that make a person’s life worth living. Instead of welfare, Rawls’s view focuses on the individual’s lifetime expectations of social primary goods, including, among other things, wealth and income.

The list of social primary goods works as a metric or currency of distributive justice in Rawls, but it is not assumed to provide a plausible account of well-being. Instead, Rawls (1982, 1993) endorses his favored metric on the grounds that it provides a plausible account of how to design political and economic institutions. For Rawls [2001, p. 6], the primary subject of justice is the basic structure of society or, more precisely, how major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties, and determine the division of the advantages that arise from social coop-

eration. The principles of justice for the basic structure are justified by showing that they are the object of a hypothetical agreement in an original position. In this original position, the representatives of society, as free, equal, and rational persons, choose the principles of justice from behind a *veil of ignorance*. They do not know their place in society, class position or social status, their fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, or their conception of the good [Rawls (1999) [1971], p. 11]. Thus the agreements reached in the original position are fair, because they are made from an initial position of equality, defining the fundamental terms of association. Rawls (1999) [1971], p. 243, argues that the parties in the original position have decisive reasons to choose the following two principles of justice from a menu of alternatives, including utilitarianism:

1. Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with similar liberty for all.
2. Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
  - a. Attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (principle of fair equality of opportunity).
  - b. To the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle (the *difference principle*).

The first principle of justice and the principle of fair equality of opportunity (2a) also have economic implications. For example, the former principle protects freedom of occupational choice, which can be implemented through a labor market but, according to Rawls, can in principle be satisfied by certain forms of capitalist and liberal market socialist societies. The latter principle protects individuals from misfortune in the social lottery that shapes individuals' access to positions of authority and influence, and is standardly read as requiring that individuals with the same ambitions and level of fortune in the natural lottery have the same prospects of success in competitions for those positions.

### III. THE DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE

Many philosophers have discussed the complexities involved in understanding the difference principle [see e.g., Williams (1995), Van Parijs

(2003)]. The difference principle (2b) is a distributive principle that rejects any utilitarian-like requirement to maximize the sum of benefits, and instead combines concerns with efficiency and equality. A standard way of stating the principle is to say that, unlike strict equality, the difference principle allows inequalities as long as they maximize the expectations of the least advantaged. Recall that Rawls aims to justify the institutions of the basic structure that profoundly influence the life prospects of citizens. The difference principle, together with the principle of fair equality of opportunity and the basic liberty principle, jointly governs the basic structure of society, and therefore jointly governs the assignment of rights and duties and the division of the advantages that arise from social cooperation.

As mentioned earlier, philosophers have also proposed different standards of interpersonal comparison to measure the difference of advantage between the better-off and the worse-off. Rawls (198) 2b, p. 23, focuses on an index of primary goods such as basic liberties, opportunities to occupy positions of authority and influence, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect. In “Justice as Fairness”, the principles of basic liberty and fair equality of opportunity are lexically prior to the difference principle, so it is not permissible to compromise basic liberties to seek greater welfare [Rawls (1999) [1971], pp. 214-220]. The difference principle is better understood as a requirement for a just distribution of benefits and burdens among the members of society, in a cooperative system among free and equal individuals for the mutual advantage of everyone. Without the difference principle, morally arbitrary factors like the social lottery, variations in genetic endowment, and historical factors would unfairly influence the distribution of primary goods. Thus the difference principle requires that institutions arrange inequalities to ensure that individuals share the effects of luck, in a manner that is maximally beneficial to those with less luck.

Rawls (1993), pp. 281-282, departs from the benchmark of equal distribution, and takes into account economic efficiency, by claiming that it is not required to stop at equal division when economic inequalities improve everyone’s expectations, including those of the least advantaged. Imagine that we have an initial distribution (D1) 100,100,100. Then, according to the difference principle, it is not unreasonable to move to a Pareto superior distribution (D2) 120,150,200, even if we depart from strict equality. However, the difference principle does not permit expansions in inequality when they do not benefit the least advantaged, as in (D3) 90,110,300. Rawls (2001), p. 124, regards democratic equality as an

ideal of *reciprocity* that fits the ideal of citizens as not only free but equal. As a result, his attempt to make efficiency and equality compatible requires that inequalities should not be detrimental to the worst-off.

In distributive ethics, we can distinguish between equality, priority, and sufficiency principles. The *principle of equality* claims that it is bad, or unjust, if some are worse off than others [Temkin (2000), (2003)]. The *priority principle* establishes that the moral value of benefiting individuals diminishes as they become better off [Parfit (2000)]. Finally, the *principle of sufficiency* states that it is bad, or unjust, if any individual has less than enough; in its anti-egalitarian variant it also states if everyone has enough it is not bad that some are worse off than others [Casal (2007)].

Derek Parfit (2000), p. 84 draws a distinction between the principles of equality and priority that is useful for understanding the scope of the difference principle. Parfit employs the well-known leveling-down objection to equality in order to contrast these two principles. We compare the following distributions: (D1) 100,100,100; (D2) 120,150,200. *Egalitarians* claim that it is in at least one respect fairer for everyone to have the same than for some to have more than others due to luck rather than choice. Instead, *prioritarians* claim that it is not good to make everyone worse off to achieve equality. They favor discounting the moral value of a benefit as the absolute level of advantage of the recipient is raised.

To defuse the leveling-down objection, egalitarians may adopt a pluralist view. Thus pluralist egalitarians, like Temkin (2003), concede that D2 is better than D1, at least in the sense that the outcome is beneficial to the individuals involved, but still claim that the value of an outcome depends not only on the absolute level of advantage of the individuals involved, but also on how they compare with each other. D1 is not all things considered better than D2, according to these authors, but they insist that D1 is in one way better than D2, because it is more equal. In contrast, another pluralist view, *Paretian egalitarianism*, tries to accommodate the leveling-down objection and uses the efficiency principle to restrict the scope of egalitarian principles [Martin (1985); Mason, (2001); Holtug, (2007)]. Thus, its advocates favor the most egalitarian member of the set of non-wasteful distributions. For example, imagine choosing between D1, D2, and (D4) 100,150,220. Pareto egalitarians will discard D1 and D4 and choose D2. D1 is Pareto inferior to D2 and D4, while D4, although it is Pareto superior to D1, is less equal than D2.

This short discussion of current debates about distributive justice in political philosophy should allow us to move on to the next section and

interpret the difference principle. I will present three distinct interpretations of the difference principle that philosophers have offered. Finally, I will show that these different interpretations are relevant to assessing the trickle-down argument, that is, the idea that although the inequalities produced by market capitalism benefit the better-off most, they are justified because when the rich get richer, they invest in the productive economy, and at the end of the day, economic growth maximally improves the situation of the worst-off.

#### IV. THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE

As noted earlier, since Rawls's texts are not always clear and consistent, philosophers have offered at least three different interpretations of the difference principle: as a principle of reciprocity, as a Paretian egalitarian principle, and as a lexical prioritarian principle. This section aims to clearly distinguish these three interpretations that arise from Rawls's texts. This classification will help us to understand what the normative distinctiveness of each of these views is, and to help to bring out this point, I will later examine how each of them can respond to the trickle-down argument.

##### IV.1 *The Reciprocity View*

The first of these views is the *reciprocity view*, which claims that when a society chooses a distribution of lifetime expectations of primary goods between its members, any point in the set of feasible distributions is acceptable if its implementation does not expand inequalities across time in any way that is detrimental to the least advantaged. We can find this view of the difference principle in *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls (1999) [1971], p. 68, claims: "A society should try to avoid situations where the marginal contributions of those better off are negative, since, other things equal, this seems a greater fault than falling short of the best scheme when these contributions are positive. The even larger difference between classes violates [...] democratic equality." Williams (2011), p. 399, claims that once everyone enjoys a social minimum, the reciprocity view "does not favor any specific level of wealth maximization but merely prohibits increasing inequality in ways detrimental to the least advantaged." On this view, the difference principle does not require institution designers to maximize the benefits available to the least advantaged; instead, it simply prohibits any inequalities in the distribution of primary goods that would



be detrimental to the least advantaged members of society: a requirement that, as Rawls notes, could be satisfied by a strictly equal distribution.

#### IV.2 *The Paretian Egalitarian View*

In contrast to this ideal of democratic reciprocity, Paretian egalitarian values require eliminating Pareto inefficient allocations of resources and selecting the most egalitarian member of the set of non-wasteful distributions [Rawls (2001), pp. 59-60; see also Martin (1985)]. Granted certain assumptions about expectations being *close-knitted* and *chain-connected*,<sup>1</sup> we should then not choose just any point in the set of feasible distributions, but instead must choose the Pareto efficient point of this set of distributions that maximizes the advantage of the least advantaged members of society. This is how, traditionally, philosophers have understood the difference principle. That is, in a way that requires wealth maximization which favors, on the one hand, making individuals wealthier and, on the other, attaching priority to the least advantaged when conflicts of interest arise. This is the reason why this interpretation of the difference principle requires, first, choosing the Pareto efficient point and, second, amongst the set of Pareto efficient distributions, the one that maximizes the expectations of the least advantaged. The Paretian egalitarian interpretation of the difference principle draws from this passage in Rawls's *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001), pp. 59-60, where he claims that we need to compare schemes of cooperation, and then choose the scheme in which the worse-off are better off than they are in any other scheme.<sup>2</sup> The Paretian egalitarian view allows inequalities that are not detrimental for the least advantaged, and which maximize their benefits. Thus, it requires a broader range of inequality in the distribution of benefits than the reciprocity view, because it requires maximizing the promotion of benefits for the worse-off. Williams (2011) claims that this interpretation of the difference principle sees it as a *maximinimizing* principle, which is opposed to the *non-maximinimizing* interpretation of the alternative difference principle that characterizes the reciprocity view. Recall that the reciprocity view permits but does not require maximizing wealth for the worst-off, and merely prohibits increasing inequality in ways that would be detrimental to the least advantaged.

#### IV.3 *The Lexical Prioritarian View*

Finally, the requirement to maximize the benefits of the least advantaged members of society can be interpreted according to lexical pri-

oritarianism, which makes no reference to equality, but instead requires promoting benefits, and in cases of conflict, attaching priority to benefiting the worse-off members of society (this is what I call the *leximinimizing view*). Parfit (2000), pp. 116-121, distinguishes between different interpretations of the difference principle in Rawls's texts, and argues that the difference principle should be understood as a lexical prioritarian principle by virtue of which "inequality is unjust only if it worsens the position of those who are worse off."<sup>3</sup> On this view, the difference principle requires that in cases of conflict of interest, we prioritize benefiting the worse-off members of society, no matter whether maximizing the benefits of the worst-off implies increasing inequalities between them and the better-off or not. Therefore, according to the leximinizing view, the difference principle requires expanding inequalities and maximizing aggregate wealth if this is necessary to maximize the benefits of the worst-off. I think that the next figure, which uses a very simplified case of two groups in society, may well explain the difference between the three presented views.

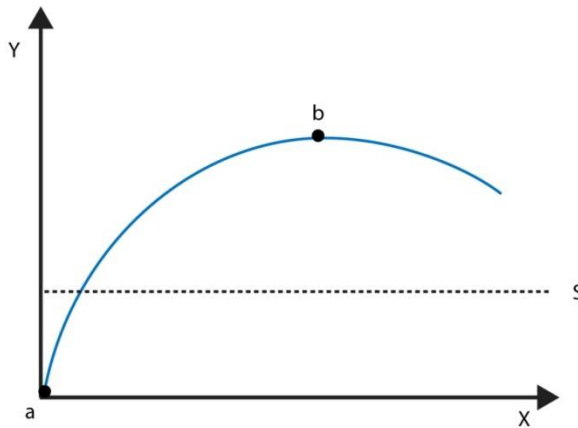


Figure 1

In this figure, the horizontal axis measures the advantage of the wealthier members of society while the vertical axis measures the advantage of the least advantaged members of society. The curve is the set of feasible distributions. Then the difference principle is the principle of distribution of shares that constrains the feasible distributions. Point A is the bench-

mark of equality between these two simplified groups of citizens, while B marks the Pareto efficient distribution in which no one can be made better off without making someone else worse off. Line S sets the level of sufficiency. Any point to the right of B is Pareto incomparable and prohibited according to the difference principle, because it fails to maximally benefit the least advantaged members of society.

Looking at the figure, we can distinguish the three interpretations of the difference principle. Casal (2007) argues that to interpret the difference principle, we should look at its combination with other sets of principles elaborated in Rawls's theory *Justice as Fairness*. She claims that "the difference principle is conjoined to at least three further satiable requirements, concerned with civil liberties, a social minimum, and the sustainability of liberal institutions" [Casal (2007), p. 326]. In the first place, the government has to satisfy the positive principle of sufficiency, which states that it is bad if any individual has less than enough. Thus the principle of sufficiency in Rawls's theory supplements the difference principle. The latter requires the government to maximize the distribution of lifetime expectations of primary goods for the least advantaged. So it is possible that in the absence of the requirement of a social minimum, the worst-off need to temporarily live below a decent minimum, and therefore "Justice as Fairness" needs to satisfy lifetime sufficiency for the worst-off [Casal (2007), p. 324]. Moreover, the principle of basic liberties takes lexical priority over the difference principle and constrains the means available to maximize lifetime expectations for the least advantaged. In Rawls's theory, however, the social minimum is not subordinated to the principle of basic liberties, and so, arguably, more resources should be dispensed to avoid deprivation.

However, once everyone has enough, we must distinguish between the three views. On the reciprocity view, promoting the expectations of the least advantaged does not require maximizing their level of benefits. Instead, it merely requires avoiding any inequalities in expectations that would be detrimental to the least advantaged members of society. Thus the reciprocity view might choose any point between A and B in figure 1 that satisfies the principle of sufficiency (line S), but it is not required to select point B.

In contrast, Paretian egalitarian principles require eliminating Pareto inefficient allocations of resources and choosing from among the set of efficient distributions in a way that minimizes inequality. The Paretian egalitarian interpretation of the difference principle allows inequalities that are not detrimental for the least advantaged and that maximize their

benefits (point B). Thus it allows and even favors a wider range of inequality in the distribution of benefits, because it requires securing an efficient distribution of primary goods. Finally, the requirement to maximize the benefits of the least advantaged members of society can be interpreted according to lexical prioritarianism, which also selects in figure 1 the Pareto efficient point B of the set of feasible distributions. Note that in this simplified world with two groups, the lexical prioritarian and Paretian egalitarian views of the difference principle select the same point B. In examples with three or more groups of individuals, these two views only select the same point when the *chain connection* and *close-knittedness* conditions obtain [Williams (1995), p. 260].

In this section, I've presented the three different interpretations of the difference principle. To understand the consequences of these three views, I will test how they respond to the trickle-down argument in the next section. This argument claims that the inequalities generated by market capitalism benefit the better-off most, but are justified because when the rich get richer, this maximally improves the situation of the worst-off.

## V. THE DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE AND THE TRICKLE-DOWN ARGUMENT

After distinguishing the three interpretations of the difference principle, we may conclude that only the latter two views require promoting wealth for the least advantaged, rather than just ensuring that some given level of wealth is fairly distributed. So one crucial issue, then, is whether a requirement to advance the interests of the least advantaged is a *satiabile* or an *insatiabile* promotional principle.

A principle is satiable if it is possible to completely satisfy it, and insatiable if it is always possible to satisfy it to a higher degree [Raz (1989) pp. 235-236; Williams (1995)]. The promotion of average wealth, which we usually measure in terms of the GDP growth rate, lies in the category of insatiable promotional values. Like classical utilitarianism, aggregative promotional values are insensitive to the distribution of benefits and burdens among individuals, seeking only to maximize the sum of utility. In contrast, distributional values are of a different kind. They guide the distribution of benefits and burdens among the members of society that result from the economic, legal and political structure, understood as a cooperative venture for the mutual advantage of free and equal persons.

Therefore, we can distinguish between (i) a “consumerist” interpretation of Rawls, which requires promoting economic growth indefinitely and expanding inequalities as long as they maximize the expectations of the worst-off, and (ii) a “green” interpretation of Rawls, which, once we have reached a social minimum for everyone, requires us only to avoid any expansions in inequality that would be detrimental to the least advantaged. Tomassi (2012) defends the consumerist view of the difference principle. In his book, *Free Market Fairness*, the author defends that economic growth is materially beneficial for the poor. Thus, Tomassi concludes that “capitalist economies better satisfy the difference principle by virtue of producing greater wealth over time” [Tomassi (2012)]. On the latter view, the green interpretation of the difference principle, we have more discretion to take into account goals other than promoting income and wealth, such as preserving nature. Tomassi calls his interpretation the best interpretation of the difference principle. Still, against it, Rawls (1999), p. 68, defends that he favors a scenario in:

[W]hich the expectations of all those better off at least contribute to the welfare of the more unfortunate. That is, if their expectations were decreased, the prospects of the least fortunate would likewise fall.

Rawls further claims that:

[W]hile the difference principle is, strictly speaking, a maximizing principle, there is a significant difference between the cases that fall short of the best arrangement. A society should try to avoid situations where the marginal contributions of those better off are negative, since, other things equal, this seems a greater fault than falling short of the best scheme when those contributions are positive. The even larger difference between classes violates democratic equality.

Probably, Rawls was aware of the inexistence of Pareto improvements in the real world and that the design of the basic structure always creates winners and losers. In that case, for Rawls, and against Tomassi’s greater wealth thesis, economic inequalities might undermine the social basis of self-respect, and a democratic society must avoid inequalities that are detrimental to the least advantaged and promote values like harmony and reciprocity [Rawls (2001)]. The government may, for example, adopt what I called the reciprocity view. Then, departing from the benchmark of equality, it can choose any point between equality and the Pareto efficient point. Still, once everyone enjoys a social minimum, it is not required to promote their wealth and income any further. Instead,

assuming it has secured the social minimum, the government is required only to fairly distribute expectations of primary goods, including wealth and income, so as to avoid expanding inequality between the well-off and the worse-off in ways that would be detrimental to the latter group.

Finally, we come to the trickle-down argument. Recall that this argument claims that we should favor economic growth because it maximizes the expectations of wealth and income for the least advantaged. Tomassi seems to endorse that view and assumes that the trickle-down argument is true, even though, as far as I know, the author does not provide empirical evidence for that claim. An advocate of the reciprocity view, however, need not accept that argument, *even if it were* empirically sound, because the reciprocity view offers a wider range of options to the government; for example, once it has secured the social minimum it might stop at an equal distribution, or choose any point between A and B above line S, in figure 1.

In contrast, the Paretian egalitarian and lexical interpretations of the difference principle favor maximizing expectations of primary goods for the least advantaged members of society (point B in figure 1). Therefore, they need to favor economic growth *if* the trickle-down argument is empirically valid. These views are thus *fact-sensitive*: they can disfavor promoting economic growth only if it is not the case that this maximizes the benefits of the least advantaged [Cohen (2003)]. The reciprocity view offers a wider range of options to the government, since it provides adequate reasons to choose between equality and Pareto efficiency, assuming the government has secured the social minimum. This view does not require but permits promoting a *stationary state* [Rawls (2001), pp. 63-64].

Appealing to the difference principle to justify a trickle-down economy seems to stand in contradiction with Rawls's letter to Van Parijs, in which he criticizes the European Union and claims:

The large open market including all of Europe is aim of the large banks and the capitalist business class whose main goal is simply larger profit. The idea of economic growth, onwards and upwards, with no specific end in sight, fits this class perfectly. If they speak about distribution, it is [a]lmost always in terms of trickle down. The long-term result of this – which we already have in the United States – is a civil society awash in a meaningless consumerism of some kind. I can't believe that that is what you want.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the reciprocity view is more consistent with Rawls's *non-intrinsic egalitarianism*, which claims that inequality produces outcomes that

are bad for various reasons [O'Neill (2008); Rawls (2001), pp. 130-131]. For example, Rawls argues that inequality can be undesirable because (i) it prevents the satisfaction of people's basic needs, and (ii) it can lead to inequalities in social status that encourage those of lower status to be viewed, both by themselves and by others, as inferior. Rawls further holds that inequality can be bad insofar as (iii) it leads to the domination of one part of society by the rest.

Martin O'Neill (2008) claims that the badness of these outcomes, (ii) and (iii), plus others offered by Scanlon (1996) and Nagel (1979), can best be understood by virtue of the contrasting value of certain kinds of fraternal, egalitarian social relations. O'Neill labels as *non-intrinsic egalitarianism* the view that holds that inequality is not intrinsically bad, but is bad for the sorts of reasons expressed by Rawls, Nagel and Scanlon. This author distinguishes reason (i) from (ii) and (iii), and claims that the latter two are non-intrinsically bad. To the badness of these inegalitarian outcomes, he further adds three others offered by Scanlon and Nagel: (iv) that it weakens self-respect, especially the self-respect of the worst-off; (v) that inequality creates servility; and (vi) that it undermines fraternal social relations.

These concerns (ii)–(vi) about inequality therefore express a concern about how people should live together as free and equals. As Martin O'Neill (2008), p. 130, puts it, “the badness of these outcomes [exploitation, domination, and differences of status] can best be understood by virtue of the contrasting value of certain kinds of fraternal, egalitarian social relations.” Thus *non-intrinsic egalitarianism* offers more reasons for egalitarians who hope to withstand Parfit's levelling-down objection and value equality, even if it does not maximize the worst-off's expectations of income and wealth. Equality is in various ways better for many individuals, since it is more likely to preserve their self-respect and protect relational equality. The sort of fraternal social relations that result from distributive equality enable non-intrinsic egalitarians to claim, without making any reference to the intrinsic value of equality, that we would have adequate reasons to secure an equal distribution, and to limit economic growth, even if the trickle-down argument were true and doing so failed to maximize the income and wealth of the least advantaged members of society. Rawls's non-intrinsic egalitarian values provide us with reasons to choose between any point between A and B in figure 1 that secures sufficiency. The government might choose not to reach point B, because it might want to protect these egalitarian relations among society's members.

## VI. THE RECIPROCITY VIEW, THE JUST SAVINGS PRINCIPLE, AND CLIMATE CHANGE

In order to justify concluding that the reciprocity view is the more plausible view of the difference principle, in this section, I will argue, first, that the reciprocity view is the one that is more consistent with the just savings principle, Rawls's principle for intergenerational justice. Second, I will also argue that this is the view that can make more sense of the difference principle when confronted with our duties to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

In Rawls's theory, the just savings principle requires that each generation saves for future generations, but Rawls distinguishes two stages [Rawls (1999 [1971], pp. 251-258)]. In the first stage, when justice has not yet been achieved, each generation is required to save for the next one, in order for them to be able to uphold just institutions and a fair system of cooperation that protects basic liberties and ensures that inequalities are arranged to maximize the benefits of the worst-off members of that generation. In this sense, we might think that previous generations are required to save resources such as a clean atmosphere for future generations. There is, however, in Rawls's conception of intergenerational justice, a second stage in which society has achieved justice and is therefore not required to save any more for subsequent generations. These fortunate future generations will only be required not to dissave, so the next generation can sustain and uphold just institutions and live in a just society over time [Rawls (1993), p. 7]. Rawls's just savings principle focuses on savings, but we can also take it as a principle for fairly distributing the rights of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions across generations. Presumably, in this second stage, better-off future generations will not be required to save more "clean air," because they will have inherited a more advanced technology that will not require GHG emissions.

One might think that these discussions about the scope of the difference principle and the just savings principle are just theoretical questions, almost esoteric, which have no impact on real-world problems. However, this section will show that this is not the case. By looking at the details of the different implications of principles of justice, I aim to provide a guiding principle for public policy. In the previous section, I distinguished between a maximinimizing consumerist view of the difference principle and a green view of that principle. In this section, I will further push that green view, to argue that only the reciprocity view ren-



ders the difference principle compatible with our duty to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Current climate change is man-made and its potential effects on life on Earth make it one of the most challenging problems facing humanity today. Climate change is anthropogenic; it is caused by our GHG emissions, which have the effect of warming the planet's surface. The IPCC report gives us less than 10 years to reduce our emissions of GHG to avoid an increase of the global temperature beyond 1.5 degrees and avoid further increases of the global temperature. In the worst-case scenarios, however, if climate change is not tackled, it might cause human beings, as well as many other species, to go extinct. Moreover, climate change is one of the most critical problems for intergenerational justice, since the kind of dangerous climate change that we are now facing threatens to harm future generations. The resultant increase of diseases, extreme weather events, droughts and famines, rising sea levels, and disruption in agriculture will likely produce major harms for the planet and those who live on it in the future [McKinnon (2012)].

For intergenerational climate justice, climate change raises two major challenges. First, identify the harms to future people and compare them to other harms, to decide how much we should reduce our GHG emissions to mitigate the effects of climate change on future people. On the other hand, it is also within the scope of ethics and intergenerational climate justice to provide sound reasons to justify the distribution of the costs of mitigating and adapting to climate change between the members of the present generation and across generations [Caney (2018)]. Here, I will only discuss the first of these two issues; that is, I will focus on our duties to reduce GHG emissions and mitigate climate change effects for present and future generations, and these duties' compatibility with the difference principle.

To get a sense of the potential impact costs of climate change, we could make a rough division in this category of costs between (a) those stemming from the increase in the global average temperature, (b) those stemming from extreme weather events, and (c) those stemming from climate catastrophes, such as those that could occur if we were to pass so-called climate "tipping points" and set off a chain of massive and irreversible effects [McKinnon (2012)]. There is therefore an imperative to stop some of these costs from coming about, and furthermore, there is a further set of costs associated with securing this moral imperative. These prevention costs can be divided between mitigation and adaptation costs, where the former are required for limiting the amount of climatic change

that will occur, and the latter for guarding against the effects that do come about.

The investment required to reduce GHG emissions and comply with the IPCC report is usually estimated at 1.5–2% of global gross domestic product (GDP). According to a 2008 study by the International Monetary Fund, the policies needed to reduce emissions by 60% from 2002 would leave the global economy about 2.6% smaller than it would otherwise be in 2040.<sup>5</sup> However, suppose the difference principle required us to maximimize the benefits for the least advantaged members of the present generation, as the trickle-down argument suggests. In that case, the difference principle will enter into contradiction with our duties to reduce GHG emissions and mitigate climate change.

According to Stanczyk (2022), pp. 318-9, the present generation should make more serious sacrifices to avert the final climate catastrophe, and it would be wrong for us to fail to implement the rules immediately necessary to prevent greater sacrifices from being made by future generations to avoid the climate fallout. Since we have a duty to leave enough clean air and biodiversity to future generations, the present generation is required to reduce their emissions of gases produced by burning fossil fuels and sacrifice this 1.5–2% of global GDP. According to the IPCC Report, what I have called Rawls's consumerist view, supported by the Paretian egalitarian and the lexical prioritarian views of the difference principle, is incompatible with the urgency to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Therefore, only the reciprocity view is compatible with our duty to reduce economic growth by 1.5–2% of global GDP and mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change. This might be a decisive reason for favoring what I have called the reciprocity view. In the end, one might conjecture that Rawls realized that the reciprocity view of the difference principle is, all things considered, the only one that is consistent with his theory of justice as a whole, and the just savings principle in particular, as well as being the one that best realizes his conception of democratic equality.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have presented three different views of the difference principle and their implications for applying that principle. I distinguished between consumerist views of the difference principle, the Paretian egalitarian and the lexical prioritarian views, and a green conception of Rawls, which I have called the reciprocity view. I have shown that this latter view is more attractive and plausible than its alternatives,

given Rawls's reasons to oppose inequality; and that it best satisfies the just savings principle. This discussion is essential, for example, because we might have decisive reasons to limit economic growth in order to preserve nature and protect the interests of present and future generations against the effects of climate change, while still being willing to meet the demands of justice concerning society's least advantaged members.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For valuable discussion and comments on this article, I would like to thank Alice Baderin, Paula Casal, Iñigo González, Axel Gosseries, Martin O'Neill, Jahel Queralt and Andrew Williams.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> When levels are close-knit “it is impossible to raise or lower the expectations of any representative man without raising or lowering the expectations of every other representative man, especially that of the least advantaged” [Rawls (1999 [1971]), p. 80] also explains that when “inequalities in expectations are chain-connected [...] if an advantage has the effect of raising the expectations of the lowest, it raises the expectations of all positions in between.” See also Williams (1995), p. 260.

<sup>2</sup> See also his earlier article “A Kantian Conception of Equality” (1975).

<sup>3</sup> See the Appendix “Rawls's View.”

<sup>4</sup> Rawls and Van Parijs (2003), pp. 7-20.

<sup>5</sup> Visit <<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2008/03/tamirisa.htm>> Retrieved July 18, 2013.

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