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Compliance in the climate change context: A Kantian support for Rawls's intergenerational sense of justice

El cumplimiento en el contexto del cambio climático: un apoyo kantiano al sentido de justicia intergeneracional rawlsiano

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Resumen: La teoría del contrato social de John Rawls, articulada en la década de 1970, da primacía a la justicia intergeneracional, pero no da cuenta de la urgencia del cambio climático en la actualidad. A pesar de que Rawls articula el principio del ahorro justo, su marco no aborda adecuadamente las dificultades de cumplimiento inherentes a la dimensión intertemporal de la justicia intergeneracional. Dado que el cumplimiento es un asunto crítico, proponemos una enmienda a la teoría ideal rawlsiana para reforzar el mismo y, a su vez, tender un puente entre los principios de justicia intergeneracional y las obligaciones reales hacia las generaciones futuras. En concreto, proponemos mejorar el sentido de justicia de Rawls recurriendo al respeto kantiano.

Palabras clave: Cambio climático, cumplimiento, sentimiento de respeto, justicia intergeneracional, sentido de justicia

Abstract: John Rawls's social contract theory, articulated in the 1970s, gives primacy to intergenerational justice but does not account for the heightened urgency of climate change in contemporary discourse. Despite Rawls's operationalization of the just savings principle, his framework does not adequately address the compliance difficulties inherent in the intertemporal dimension of intergenerational justice. Since compliance is nowadays a critical matter, we propose an amendment to Rawls's ideal theory to reinforce compliance and bridge principles of intergenerational justice with actual obligations towards future generations. Specifically, we propose enhancing Rawls's sense of justice by drawing on Kantian respect.

Keywords: Climate change, Compliance, Feeling of respect, Intergenerational justice, Sense of justice

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1. Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville was aware of the complexities of keeping liberalism and justice towards future generations within the same discourse. According to Tocqueville, the emancipating potential of liberal democracies, paired with the progressive abandonment of religion, have led people to become shortsighted about the long-term consequences of their actions, thus fostering generational individualism (Hourdequin, 2025):

[...] as the light of faith grows dim, the range of man's sight is circumscribed, as if the end and aim of human actions appeared every day to be more within his reach. When men have once allowed themselves to think no more of what is to befall them after life, they readily lapse into that complete and brutal indifference to futurity. (Tocqueville, 1864: 304-305, own translation).

In general, liberal thinkers have been too concerned about the tyranny of the majority and individual rights and too focused on the idea of unlimited progress to think about the « tyranny of the present over future generations » as an overriding issue. This « full and brutal indifference to the futurity » inevitably affected liberal contractualism as well (Deneen 2018), making it difficult to adequately include the destiny of future generations into the social contract that shapes our institutions (Dobson, 1999).

In the 1970s, one of the main liberal and contractualist theorists, John Rawls (1999), gave a new boost in this direction and systematically connected the two discourses by designing a social contract theory that embedded justice between generations as paramount. This despite « the question of justice between generations [...] subjects any ethical theory to severe if not impossible tests » (Rawls, 1999: 251). Specifically, he added the just savings principle (intergenerational perspective) as a provision (i.e., a constraint) applied to the so-called difference principle (intragenerational perspective).

Among many possible shortcomings that we might potentially attribute to Rawls's theory of justice¹ there is one that has specifically emerged within the climate change context: compliance with principles of intergenerational justice. With this we do not mean that this shortcoming was not there from the very beginning and that climate change provoked a crack in the theory, but simply that the context of climate change brought to light an originally existing fragility. In other words, the intergenerational compliance framework may be considered as a manufacturing defect of Rawls's theory of justice and climate change as a litmus test.

¹ Mandle (2012) and Pogge (2004) account for different types of criticisms of the Rawlsian theory of justice.

Thus, despite on the one hand resolving the prescriptive issue through the just savings principle, on the other hand Rawls failed to realize that the system of compliance (i.e., the sense of justice) with intergenerational principles (especially because of their intertemporal nature) needs a targeted approach because of the many differences existing between intra- and intergenerational justice (Gabor, 2013). Instead, as originally conceived, the Rawlsian compliance framework based on the sense of justice (i.e., a disposition to comply) did not recognize these dissimilarities and was uniformly applied across the two-time dimensions: a linear extension of the compliance framework from the intragenerational sphere to the intergenerational one was operated and assumed to be equally effective.

For many decades, there has been no clue that the mentioned analogism between the two-time spheres was inappropriate. However, through the raising concern of climate change, we have gradually witnessed how humankind has not always been able to act justly towards future generations, despite many guiding principles indicating us to do so. The compliance issue became especially visible when we have repeatedly observed that, even though dozens of International Environmental Agreements (IEAs) setting limits to greenhouse gas emissions (Gardiner and Weisbach, 2016), global emissions and temperatures have incessantly kept rising over time (WMO, 2024) with human activities being the direct cause of this increase (IPCC, 2019)². This clear empirical evidence on the perpetual failure to comply with the prescriptions of several IEAs (which encapsulate principles of intergenerational justice) raises doubts about the Rawlsian compliance framework (Barndstedt, 2019) and makes Greta Thunberg's cry, shared by many young generations around the world, ubiquitous: « You are stealing our future! » (Pickard, 2021).

Therefore, we suggest that a separate and specific approach is required when it comes to the issue of compliance with intergenerational principles (Caney, 2006). This is because it is compliance (so neither the normative content of intergenerational principles of justice (Gosseries, 2008; Huseby, 2013; Kim, 2019) nor the duties of noncompliers (Brandstedt, 2019; Caney, 2016a; Karnein, 2018)) the major modern ethical challenge for environmental sustainability and fairness towards future generations.

Moving from these considerations and operating within the boundaries of the Rawlsian ideal theory, in our article we contribute to the debate on climate ethics suggesting that a

² This mainly happens because « the people who benefit the most [from today's greenhouse gas emissions] are not the same set of people who pay the most costs! » (Ponte et al. 2017: 1444; but also Clements, 2015; Corvino, 2023; Mintz-Woo and Leroux, 2021)

strengthened sense of justice is needed when it comes to compliance with principles of justice acting across generations. To that effect, we suggest an amendment of Rawls's social contract theory (Gardiner, 2011; Steffen et al. 2015) that considers the asymmetries between intra- and intergenerational justice.

Specifically, we propose to integrate the Rawlsian intergenerational ideal theory by rationally grounding the sense of justice on the Kantian feeling of respect. We show that with this refoundation the sense of justice can become effective in the intergenerational domain as well, guaranteeing compliance with a just savings principle. This novel justification of compliance can support an even stronger symbiosis between liberal contractualism and intergenerational justice. Moreover, it may also potentially contribute to closing the motivational gap when we move from ideal theories to acting justly towards future generations in the real world by reducing global greenhouse gas emissions and temperatures.

Before proceeding, we want to highlight three important points. First, we believe that we are legitimized to amend the Rawlsian ideal theory because Rawls himself, when developing the just savings principle, already did so once (see the next section).

Second, we are neither belittling the real circumstances of climate change justice and politics (Brandstedt, 2015; Gardiner, 2011; Kalfagianni and Young, 2022; Waldron 2016) nor claiming that partial compliance (Caney 2016b) or non-ideal approaches to compliance in a world actually burdened by climate change are superfluous (Brandstedt, 2019; Caney, 2016a; Paden, 1997). Instead, we position our contribution in a complementary perspective to these approaches suggesting that, before investigating the motivational gap at the basis of the lack of compliance with IEAs and intergenerational principles in the real world, it is first necessary to take a step back, questioning and strengthening the justificatory framework in the ideal setting³. In turn, this might contribute to just action in a non-ideal world (Birnbacher, 2017).

Third, our approach is different from the one of Clements and Formosa (2021) who adopt Kant to develop a (Rawlsian) partial compliance theory based on the two moral capacities of the reasonable and the rational.

³ There are at least two relevant functions that an ideal theory can provide to the way we think about our real world. First, it provides a target for the non-ideal situations (Sayegh, 2016; Sen, 2009). Second, it can act as a constraining body of normative thinking on what we can expect from non-ideal individuals (Moen, 2022).

2. The just saving(s)⁴ principle in Rawls's social contract theory

When John Rawls (1999) published *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 the very first UN environmental conference had not taken place yet. The conference happened only one year later in Stockholm⁵ and was a meeting mainly devoted to chemical pollution, atomic bombs and whaling. Therefore, not framed within the climate change discourse as we are currently experiencing it (Ord, 2020). In the same way, at that time, green parties were nonexistent or marginally developed in liberal democracies (Kaelberer, 1993). Only towards the end of the 1980s the concerns about environmental sustainability and future generations became increasingly relevant (Brundtland, 1987) and from the end of the twentieth century they started to be part of our daily lives (Boykoff and Yulsman, 2013).

Given the above mentioned historical context, Rawls should be considered as a pioneer (Brandstedt, 2021). Although he did not devote much attention to environmental sustainability just as conceived nowadays⁶ (Hourdequin, 2025), Rawls was among the first philosophers to give a formal structure to intergenerational justice within a contractualist theory. Indeed, conceiving society as « a scheme of cooperation spread out in historical time »⁷ (Rawls, 1999: 257), Rawls designed a social contract model that incorporated justice between generations as paramount. He condensed this concern into the just savings principle (1999: 251–258), which was not a mere addendum to the main set of intragenerational principles. Instead, according to Rawls, « the complete statement of the difference principle includes the savings principle as a constraint » (Rawls, 1999: 254). This lexicographic relationship, established by Rawls himself, between the intragenerational sphere and the intergenerational one proves the extraordinary importance of the latter in his theory.

⁴ In his works Rawls interchangeably uses both « just saving » (in singular) and « just savings » (in plural). To avoid potential confusion and ensure consistency across the article we have chosen to use « just savings » exclusively, while acknowledging the variation in Rawls's original terminology.

⁵ UN Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment.

⁶ For instance, Rawls did not include rights towards nature in his theory of justice because his framework focused on the distribution of social and economic goods produced through the cooperation among human beings rather than on extending moral duties to non-human entities (Rawls, 1999: 448–49). However, there seems to be enough evidence to claim that Rawls was concerned about a sustainable future, although not phrased in the modern wording (Bell, 2004; Huseby, 2013; Kim, 2019; Manning, 1981; Singer, 1988; Thero, 1995).

⁷ As a scheme of indirect reciprocity (Heath, 2013) or virtual cooperation between generations (Karnein, 2022).

In the following subsections we briefly trace the evolution of the justification given to the just savings principle by Rawls across his three major contributions⁸: *A Theory of Justice* (TJ, Rawls 1999), *Political Liberalism* (PL, Rawls, 2005), and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (JFR, Rawls, 2001). We do so for two complementary reasons. First, together with other stylistic changes (Igersheim, 2022), over time Rawls significantly, but exceptionally, amended the justificatory scheme of his theory of intergenerational justice, paving the way for further changes. Second, it helps to understand how, despite more than thirty years occurring between the first (TJ) and the last book (JFR), there is a discrepancy wherein Rawls updated the justificatory framework of the principle but did not acknowledge the need to do the same with the compliance framework while in the meantime humankind started to experience and acknowledge climate change and its detrimental effects.

2.1. TJ justification

Despite being based on the veil of ignorance device⁹, the justification of the just savings principle in TJ did not follow the same justificatory scheme as for the other principles of intragenerational justice. By first acknowledging that the difference principle was not suitable for regulating redistribution of resources between generations, Rawls proposed an alternative route. This is because of its undesirable consequences, that is zero net savings for future generations: « [...] thus the difference principle does not hold for the question of justice between generations and the problem of savings must be treated in some other manner » (Rawls 1999: 254). Starting from these premise Rawls proposed the « family lines » assumption.

Specifically, Rawls abandoned the mutual disinterest axiom characterizing the individuals involved in the original position and decided to ground the concern for future generations on a sentiment of altruistic care for direct descendants: « to achieve a reasonable result, we assume first, that the parties represent family lines, say, who care at least about their more immediate descendants » (1999: 254). « Thus imagining themselves to be fathers, say, they are to ascertain how much they should set aside for their sons and grandsons » (1999: 255), that is their closest subsequent generations.

⁸ For a more detailed examination of this evolution we refer to Finneron-Burns (2017) and MacClellan (2013).

⁹ « The persons in the original position have no information as to which generation they belong » (Rawls, 1999: 118).

2.2. PL justification

However, the other-regarding motivation at the basis of TJ version of the just savings principle was considered problematic by Rawls himself¹⁰ since it implied a modification of the ontological characteristics of the parties involved in the agreement behind the veil of ignorance (Pontin, 2019). Specifically, the additional assumption of altruistic care for the closest family members contrasted with the narrow conceptualization of individuals as presented in TJ. Therefore, in PL, Rawls dropped the initial « family lines » assumption.

The PL justification of the just savings principle relied instead on a more general and ideal reasoning, consistent with mutually disinterested individuals. In this revised version the (ideal) past application of the principle becomes the basis of the whole justificatory framework:

[t]he parties can be required to agree to a savings principle subject to the further condition that they must want all previous generations to have followed it. Thus the correct principle is that which the members of any generation (and so all generations) would adopt as the one their generation is to follow and as the principle they would want preceding generations to have followed (and later generations to follow) (Rawls, 2005: 274).

In synthesis, in PL Rawls decided to ground the choice of the just savings principle on a full compliance assumption.

2.3 JFR justification

In JFR Rawls basically confirmed the newly, but at the same time more consistent with the TJ original framework, adopted perspective in PL. First, Rawls remarked how « [...] the principle of just savings holds between generations, while, the difference principle holds within generations » (Rawls, 2001a: 159). Second, he ultimately confirmed our intergenerational duties on the full compliance assumption:

[...] the correct principle, then, is one the members of any generation (and so all generations) would adopt as the principle they would want preceding generations to have followed [and] this implies that all later generations, including the present one, are to follow it. In this way we arrive at a savings principle that grounds our duties to other generations (Rawls, 2001a, p. 160).

¹⁰ This doubt was promptly remarked by some peers of Rawls as well, with Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, and Jane English among others (Rawls, 2001a:160, footnote 39).

3. Intergenerational justice: from normative principles to the compliance problem

Notwithstanding Rawls's intellectual effort to correct the justificatory scheme of the just savings principle, ideal justification does not imply real motivation. Beyond the expedient of the ideal full compliance assumption, the real compliance mechanism with intergenerational principles of justice remained largely unexplored by Rawls. However, this issue has become increasingly pressing in light of failed IEAs and persistent climate inaction.

Over the past four decades, humankind has become increasingly aware of the potentially disastrous effects of unsustainable behaviors on future generations. Philosophers have theorized intergenerational principles and nations have established numerous IEAs to encapsulate them. Nevertheless, a profound lack of sense of justice with principles of intergenerational justice remains evident, with intentions and actions constantly pointing in opposite directions.

This ongoing failure suggests the need for alternative approaches to compliance, such as non-ideal theories (Brandstedt, 2019; Caney, 2016a; Paden, 1997). However, we must also reconsider the ideal compliance framework (of Rawls's intergenerational theory). To contextualize this discussion, and before proposing a Kantian reinforcement to the Rawlsian sense of justice, we examine compliance to principles of justice among generations in the light of climate change inaction.

Human-made greenhouse gas emissions are the primary drivers of global warming. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021) has warned that without immediate, large-scale reductions, surpassing the 1.5°C threshold will be inevitable, with catastrophic consequences. Moreover « [...] the window for preventing these dreary outcomes is rapidly closing » (Mittiga, 2021:1006). Yet, current efforts remain insufficient, with the present generation borrowing from them rather than saving for future generations.

The nasty climate records and the repeated messages of climate disasters that we are witnessing daily are likely to erode the circumstances of justice at the basis of social cooperation (Brandstedt, 2015), ultimately necessary to address solutions to climate change usually represented as a collective action problem. Indeed, when potentially fatal events become more concrete scenarios, escaping social cooperation becomes an increasingly adopted solution¹¹ (Hirschmann, 1970).

¹¹ The fiction chapters of the French TV show *L'Effondrement* (Collapse) show how Western industrialized populations might react to catastrophic events related to climate change, such as hard energy and food shortages.

These circumstances make evident vulnerability of Rawls's compliance framework regarding intergenerational justice and calls for a reassessment of his approach. Climate action cannot be framed solely in normative terms. Instead, concrete steps consistent with intergenerational principles must be prioritized across philosophical, political, and economic debates (Brandstedt, 2019; Caney 2016a; Karnein, 2018; Kim, 2019).

Scientific evidence highlights our continued failure to uphold intergenerational justice within IEAs. Despite widespread agreements to limit emissions, compliance has been minimal, thereby endangering both the environment and the well-ordered society Rawls sought to preserve with the just savings principle. Addressing this challenge requires a deeper focus on compliance mechanisms and the motivational gap in acting according to intergenerational principles. It is essential to investigate how normative agreements, such as intergenerational principles within IEAs, can translate into genuine motivation to act upon them.

Two key considerations emerge. First, the full compliance assumption in Rawls's (ideal) intragenerational theory functions because it presumes reciprocal adherence among contemporaries. However, in the (ideal) intergenerational case, compliance relies on past generations, a distinct dynamic requiring separate treatment. Second, while Rawls developed a framework for partial compliance with intragenerational principles (Rawls, 1963), this model does not extend effectively to intergenerational contexts (Sacconi and Faillo, 2010). Rawls overlooked key differences, which significantly impact compliance with principles that extend across time (Caney, 2006). Intergenerational justice demands actions toward absent third parties, creating an asymmetry that weakens the sense of justice toward future generations (Klaser et al., 2021). Rawls did not fully account for these structural dissimilarities, treating intra- and intergenerational compliance through a uniform approach across ideal and non-ideal domains.

This asymmetry is now evident within the context of climate change and the related IEAs, with compliance becoming increasingly problematic. Since this deadlock is creating permanent injustices towards future generations, we propose a reset and a revision of the Rawlsian ideal compliance framework that takes properly into account the intertemporal dimension of the

In a reflection of non-fictional realities, in almost every chapter there is a clear trend towards forms of « escaping » cooperation schemes through fortified islands, isolated self-governments, and wealthy isolated resorts (Diamond, 2005).

problem. Specifically, operating within the boundaries of the ideal theory, we propose a Kantian reinforcement to the intergenerational sense of justice.

4. Complementing the Rawlsian compliance framework with Kant

Rawls's model based on the properties of the veil of ignorance remains a powerful device to ground our duties towards future generations. Indeed, his approach does not require any eccentric framework to derive principles of justice acting between generations¹² (Dierksmeier, 2006) and at the same time it leaves the responsibility on the currently existing people¹³. Therefore, it is representative of the setting at the basis of the structure of the modern IEAs (Klaser et al., 2021). However, the compliance framework needs to be revised in the light of climate change¹⁴. From an internalist perspective, according to which accepting a moral principle also gives a reason to act accordingly, we indicate the Kantian moral feeling of respect (Kant, 1788/2000) as a necessary condition for triggering the sense of justice in support of intergenerational principles.

The problem of compliance represents a central issue in moral philosophy. Namely, whether moral principles are not only capable of stating what one ought to do in each circumstance but also of providing a reason, that is a motivation, to act. It is a central question because it asks to what extent moral judgments are effective, being able to motivate people to comply with them (Mordacci, 1999).

In the case of intergenerational justice the problem of compliance, already present in the intragenerational scenario, becomes even more thorny especially because the temporal dimension of climate change « gives the impression that it is possible to delay action indefinitely » (Corvino, 2021: 1). Suppose, for instance, that a principle of intergenerational justice has been justified and accepted as just, what mechanism would make that principle motivating for action? The Rawlsian answer to this question relies on the sense of justice.

¹² Rawls avoided odd approaches that could too high level of abstraction: « the original position is not to be thought of as a general assembly which includes at one moment everyone who will live at some time [...] It is not a gathering of all actual or possible persons » (Rawls, 1999: 120).

¹³ The pivotal role (Shue, 2022) of the current generation of humans inhabiting the planet is clear at this point: their actions will deeply affect future generations, up to the point of threatening the capacity of humankind to inhabit this planet.

¹⁴ Again, we do not argue that climate change *causes* the inadequacy of Rawls's compliance framework.

The sense of justice is defined by Rawls as « an effective desire to comply with the existing rules and to give one another that to which they are entitled » (1999: 274-75) and it is directly related to the well-ordered society that should facilitate the pursuit of diverse rational plans by individuals.

While Rawls resolves the compliance issue between ex-ante principles and ex-post behaviour through the introduction of the sense of justice, his approach appears to fall short when addressing intergenerational justice. We have seen how principles of justice acting between generations (typically embedded in IEAs) appear to be poorly effective in developing an intergenerational sense of justice among contemporaries: many people do not do anything because they are trapped in cognitive obstacles that hinder their action (Nefsky, 2019).

For Rawls, ultimately, having a morality implies impartial and reciprocal recognition of the implementation of the principles of justice. This recognition also implies the need to give explanations when someone acts against them, as well as the rise of feelings of guilt, shame, and remorse (Westwood, 2020).

As anticipated, here the problem seems to be the following: since different generations do not coexist in time, no mutual recognition is possible (Heat, 2013; Karnein, 2022). This raises a fundamental challenge for the motivational role of the sense of justice in intergenerational contexts: if those to whom principles of justice are directed are temporally « distant » or absent (Greene, 2003), how can the sense of justice effectively motivate the present generation to adhere to intergenerational principles?

Within Rawls's ideal theory, the assumption of full compliance presumes that individuals are disposed to act justly under just institutions. However, this assumption, as we have seen, becomes problematic in the intergenerational case, where compliance relies on the moral disposition of past generations rather than reciprocal enforcement among contemporaries. If mutual recognition is absent across generations (a feature inherent to the temporal nature of the problem) and Rawls's (ideal) full compliance cannot be presumed, how can intergenerational justice be upheld?

We suggest a rational (ideal) re-foundation of the Rawlsian sense of justice based on the Kantian feeling of respect, which is « not of empirical origin and cognized *a priori* » (Zinkin, 2006: 31), which is another way to say it has no subsumed content. Therefore, we follow a Kantian interpretation as suggested by Barry, an account in which « we can express our nature as free and equal rational beings only to the extent that we commit ourselves unconditionally

to give our sense of justice precedence over our other interests » (Barry, 1995: 886), in our case applying a feeling of respect to the intergenerational framework.

Indeed, given the complexity of achieving mutual recognition in adherence to principles of intergenerational justice, there seems to be no alternative than grounding moral actions towards future generations in the use of reason, intrinsic to willing: once we internalize the knowledge that a certain course of action is imperative, we are motivated in acting in alignment with it¹⁵. We will try to show the extent to which the feeling of respect might represent a direct motive to choose justice over injustice and a *conditio sine qua non* to trigger the sense of justice not only to accept a specific (moral) principle that spans between generations, but also to act accordingly.

Nevertheless, before grounding the sense of justice on the feeling of respect, we must briefly present how Rawls describes the former. In his view, the sense of justice is characterized in two ways: as a psychological disposition that enables individuals to select the just principles and as a precondition for human interdependent action. Indeed, without a natural inclination to do what is right, it would be challenging to establish and acknowledge how just institutions should shape our lives. Thus, the sense of justice « is a settled disposition to adopt and to want to act from the moral point of view insofar at least as the principles of justice define it » (Rawls, 1999: 430). It essentially serves as a prerequisite for ensuring the stability of just institutions within present society and their continued extension into the future.

While aware of the problematic nature of intergenerational justice, Rawls's assumptions about human beings as moral agents have not changed within his thinking. Rawls assumes that human beings, as rational and reasonable agents, would be capable not only of constructing just moral principles, but also of adopting them ex-post, since it would be paradoxical to decide and agree on some moral principles by assuming that they are not applicable *de facto*.

Yet, it should be noted that there is a substantial difference between the ex-ante choice in the original position and the ex-post action among real agents. Under the veil of ignorance, the decision's moral component is guaranteed by features specific to the original position (i.e., full compliance assumption), not by parties' motivations. However, once the veil is lifted, real agents, despite being equipped with a sense of justice, may not always act based on publicly

¹⁵ This course of action can be represented as a process divided into two steps. First, we discern what ought to be done for future generations through the use of our practical reason, determining whether our subjective maxims can be broadened into moral laws. Second, if our subjective maxim passes the universality test, there is a reason for our sense of justice to develop and intervene in our decision-making.

acceptable reasons. In other words, their actions may be influenced by their own interests rather than adhering to agreed-upon principles of justice (De Grandis, 2003).

Although there is no shortage of criticisms directed at Rawls's theory of motivation, the sense of justice appears to be the attempt to keep two fundamental aspects of practical reason together: normative reasons and psychological motivations (Birnbacher, 2017). Rawls, as well as Kant, is well aware that human beings can act driven by both moral principles and/or by heteronomous motivations (personal interests, fears, cognitive biases, etc.). The sense of justice is sufficiently effective among contemporaries because it is influenced by social dynamics, such as reciprocity, cooperation, publicity condition and the theory of the good. In other words, prudential reasons would have a more direct effect on this human tendency towards justice, because, among contemporaries, people's actions are observed, judged, punished, and rewarded. On the contrary, in the context of justice between generations, these external and prudential reasons to act make the sense of justice much weaker: future generations are absent and so are the concerns of being observed and judged, the fear of being punished and the social recognition of being praised (Gabor, 2013).

In the absence of these heteronomous (external and prudential) reasons, how could an intergenerational sense of justice become effective? It is to answer this question that we propose to restore the Kantian feeling of respect as a support of moral action (Walschots, 2022). Through the artifact of the veil of ignorance and the original position, Rawls had already guaranteed the validity and legitimacy of the moral point of view. However, it is not clear why contemporaries should do the right thing towards those who do not exist yet.

The main point here is that doing the right thing towards those who will come implies acting unreservedly, that is doing what is our duty, regardless of any kind of external motives. In other words, it means acting according to what the practical reason prescribes. It is no coincidence that Kant decides to fill the motivational gap with the feeling of respect: aware of the rational limitation of human beings, he introduces a feeling (a direct motive with no content) able to lead us towards the right action, because it makes us feel what we *ought* to do. Kant articulated this point explicitly in his university lectures during the mid-1770s:

« [...] the moral feeling is a capacity for being affected by a moral judgement. When I judge by understanding that the action is morally good, I am still very far from doing this action of which I have so judged. But if this judgement moves me to do the action, that is the moral feeling. (Kolomý, 2023: 107-108) ».

Thus, by demonstrating the extent to which even principles of intergenerational justice are moral, hence universalizable, the feeling of respect can act directly on our sense of justice, giving us a reason to act accordingly (Marcon and Klaser, 2022).

Although this Kantian « aid » could be potentially extended to intragenerational justice as well, the main purpose of this section is to underline the theoretical urgency of re-founding the sense of intergenerational justice on the Kantian feeling of respect. This urgency is due to the structural flaw of the Rawlsian sense of justice in the case of temporal asymmetries: the sense of justice has some structural limits, that make it weaker precisely because it is also a psychological (hence heteronomous) tendency. The first formulation of the categorical imperative¹⁶, instead, is built around the possibility that maxims of the will, namely subjective volitional principles, can be universalized, precisely because « a principle that governs *any* rational will is an *objective* principle of volition, which Kant refers to as a practical law » (Johnson and Cureton, 2022).

In Kant, the question of moral motivation is centred on how pure reason can also be practical, that is, how an objective moral rule can constitute a subjective principle of determination. For Kant, this point is crucial because it allows him to identify freedom as the condition of the moral law: men and women, endowed with free will, can decide to self-determine themselves, therefore they can act in conformity with the moral rule they have accepted *in foro interno*, and decide to elude the mechanistic laws of nature. The feeling of respect is the only pure moral sentiment since it is the effect we perceive when we face the moral law: « [...] this feeling (which we call the moral feeling) is therefore produced simply by reason. It does not serve for the estimation of actions nor for the foundation of the objective moral law itself, but merely as a motive to make this of itself a maxim » (Kant, 1785/2002, book 1, chapter 3, para. 5).

By demonstrating that respect is not a prerequisite for the moral law, but reveals itself with it, Kant remarks how it is possible to keep together objective determination of the will and subjective choice (McCarty, 1993). This is relevant exactly because as free and autonomous beings we can choose to do the right thing, even if this implies to forego needs and desires that we would like to satisfy here and now as present generation. Indeed, choosing to do the right thing is the ultimate expression of human dignity and freedom.

¹⁶ « Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law » (Kant, 1797/2017).

The Kantian feeling of respect is therefore a good candidate to fill the Rawlsian lacuna in the intergenerational theory and to substitute the full compliance hypothesis because it acts in an abstract and impersonal way (as a pure feeling) but also on a personal and subjective level, by triggering our psychological sense of justice. This feeling not only makes us aware of which principle we should apply in a given circumstance, but it also awakens our natural disposition to behave in accordance with it, therefore choosing justice over injustice. The dual nature of respect allows us to consider it a *conditio sine qua non*, awakening the sense of justice and enabling us to discern what is right to do towards future generations, serving as a direct motivator and triggering a full intergenerational sense of justice.

While Rawls presents the just savings principle as a fundamental requirement of intergenerational justice, the present analysis does not aim to justify this principle itself. Rather, it examines the broader conditions necessary for ensuring (ideal) full compliance with any intergenerational principle that satisfies the criterion of universalizability. The Kantian feeling of respect plays a crucial role in this regard, not as a justification for a specific principle, but as a moral mechanism that can motivate adherence to any such principle. This suggests that we need not assume axiomatically that the just savings principle is the correct one. Instead, the feeling of respect enables individuals to recognize their moral agency and act in accordance with ethical imperatives, even when doing so requires short-term personal sacrifices.

As a prescriptive and universally applicable moral sentiment it serves as a necessary condition, at least within the ideal theory framework, for achieving full intergenerational compliance. This is particularly evident in cases such as IEAs and efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, where commitment to ethical imperatives extends beyond immediate personal advantage. Although both Rawls and Kant recognize the influence of self-interest in human decision-making and its significant role in shaping individual choices, the feeling of respect can serve as a counterbalance. It reinforces individuals' status as moral agents, reminding them of their capacity to make the right decisions even when doing so entails immediate costs and benefits future generations.

Applying this Kantian lens to the Rawlsian sense of justice allows to go beyond immediate circumstances and temporal boundaries, encouraging the consideration of future generations as equally deserving of justice and fairness. By acknowledging not only mutual adherence to principles of justice but also the enduring value of individuals across time, this

approach would prompt a sense of intergenerational justice to ensure that decisions made today do not compromise the opportunities of future generations.

	Rawls		Our proposal
Time dimension	Intragenerational	Intergenerational	Intergenerational amendment
Assumptions in the ideal theory	Full compliance	Full compliance	Kantian feeling of respect
Non-ideal theory framework	Sense of justice	Sense of justice	Strengthened sense of justice

Table 1 – Proposed amendment to Rawls’s intergenerational ideal theory.

In Table 1 we summarize our proposal. Rawls introduces the sense of justice to guarantee compliance with the principles of justice. This « desire to act in accordance with its principles » may diminish when principles of justice seek to guide our actions towards a society of which we may not likely be a part (i.e., future generations). Indeed, as a psychological disposition, the sense of justice also relies on heteronomous reasons to become effective. Knowing that I can benefit from living in a just society serves as a prudential reason and an indirect motive to act morally. However, when we move from the intra- to the intergenerational dimension, we need to make this « desire to act » effective not only for our society but also for those that will come, even if this can imply making some sacrifices during our current life.

In this context, the Kantian feeling of respect is not just an indirect « desire to act » but it is a spark for moral action, and it represents a direct motive to choose justice over injustice. It is the capacity of reason to induce moral feeling, otherwise man and woman could not act morally (Kolomy, 2023). The Kantian feeling of respect must be considered as the subjective effect that the moral law exercises on the will. This is crucial: by recognizing what are our duties towards future generations, we have an incentive to act morally, namely, to willingly decide to use our sense of justice to effectively do the right thing.

To ethical justification provided by Rawls on why we should comply with intergenerational principles and care for future generations is weak because there are no tangible rewards at stake, nor is there mutual recognition of people’s actions. While indirect motives can significantly impact compliance with intergenerational principles (Birnbacher, 2017), we tried to explain why the sense of justice needs to be rationally re-founded on the Kantian feeling of respect. According to Kant, we do not need to look outside ourselves to recognize what we ought to do

but we can make our sense of justice effective by drawing directly from what our reason universally prescribes.

5. Conclusions

Holding contractualism and intergenerational justice together is difficult at the outset, and even more difficult in the context of climate change. The constant failure to comply with the prescriptions of International Environmental Agreements (IEAs) shows us that compliance with intergenerational principles of justice is a topic that requires a deeper enquiry. In a complementary perspective to non-ideal approaches to compliance, in this article we took the lens of Rawls and Kant to scrutinize the problem in the ideal theory setting, proposing to amend the former with the latter.

Specifically, while resolving the prescriptive issue of intergenerational justice (introducing the just savings principle), Rawls did not realize that the system of compliance with intergenerational principles needs to be revised in the face of the many asymmetries that distinguish the inter- and intragenerational justice systems. In the light of climate change and its detrimental effects, the Rawlsian (ideal) compliance scheme has to be reinforced and made more demanding towards the present generation.

Compliance requires a motivational structure that sustains adherence to moral imperatives over time. Therefore, we proposed a revision of the sense of justice by reinforcing it with the Kantian moral sense of respect, suggesting in this way also a greater symbiosis between contractualism and intergenerational justice. The Kantian feeling of respect provides precisely this function, making moral obligations salient across temporal boundaries and strengthening the sense of justice by ensuring that principles of intergenerational fairness are not only acknowledged but also (ideally) followed.

We also acknowledge some limitations of our approach. Specifically, we moved from the compliance issue in the real world related to climate change to the issue of compliance in Rawls's ideal theory. However, we did not travel in the opposite direction – from the ideal to the real. We invite future research to explore this route, also because changing the full compliance assumption in the Rawlsian ideal theory might have repercussions on the justificatory framework and therefore the design of the just saving principles.

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