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Justice Across Generations: Rethinking Reciprocity Under Conditions of Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

This introduction investigates the role of justice as reciprocity in intergenerational settings. It argues that the growing prominence of intergenerational framing in contemporary policy agendas is best understood in light of distinct questions emerging within the normative debate on intergenerational justice. Thus, a proper understanding of this subject requires a fine-grained analysis of three key dimensions, namely: analytical units (age groups vs. birth cohorts), temporal perspectives (lifetime vs. contemporaneous life stages), and scope (overlapping vs. nonoverlapping generations). The article then critically examines reciprocity as a foundational principle in liberal egalitarian thought, with particular reference to Rawlsian scholarship, highlighting both its enduring appeal and its limitations in intergenerational settings. The very idea of reciprocity is therefore disaggregated into comparative and noncomparative conceptions: Each account responds differently to the challenges posed by both overlapping and nonoverlapping generations. By situating the contributions to this Special Section within this framework, the article shows that the relationship between reciprocity and intergenerational justice is more complex and contested than commonly assumed.

Public debate and policy concerns on intergenerational justice have intensified in recent years, reflecting growing moral and political anxiety around the tension between present-oriented distributive concerns and long-term obligations toward future generations. Indeed, these concerns have become the object of key policy initiatives, including efforts to address the climate crisis through, for example, prioritizing sustainable transport; tackling inequality and age-based disparities; and protecting the interests of future generations. These initiatives also encompass a focus on long-term health, food security, and the creation of a nurturing and skilled workforce.¹ Along with these policy efforts, institutional innovations have been introduced, including the establishment of Future Generations Commissioners,² jurisprudential developments shaping climate governance and intergenerational justice,³ and the development of legal frameworks in related policy areas, particularly pension reform.⁴ These developments, occurring primarily at the domestic level, have been paralleled by important intergovernmental initiatives,

such as those pursued under the auspices of the United Nations, including the UN Declaration on Future Generations (United Nations 2024, Annex II, 52–56),⁵ and the recently adopted European Commission's Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness (European Commission 2026).

These developments illustrate the growing prominence of the intergenerational framing in contemporary policy agendas, stemming from the pressing challenges related to environmental degradation and demographic imbalances, especially evident in Western societies. On the one hand, the fairness of the distribution of burdens and benefits of social cooperation across age groups is increasingly questioned, in a context of heightened concern about disparities in life prospects between younger and older cohorts. On the other hand, further questions arise concerning the material, environmental, and institutional conditions we are handing down to future generations. These concerns fall under the broader idea commonly known in political

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philosophy literature under the label of “intergenerational justice.”⁶ Yet, as we will seek to show in this Special Section, these worries call for a reconsideration of both the scope and the normative grounds of justice when different intergenerational claims are at stake.

Before entering the theoretical debate, however, it is important to clarify the analytical framing of this discussion. This Special Section relies on empirical insights drawn from climate and demographic transformations that are simultaneously affecting contemporary societies. Although the effects of these dynamics are often concentrated in specific regions of the world, the present discussion is primarily normative, focusing on the implications of these developments for conceptions of justice. The arguments suggested by our contributors and in this introduction therefore extend beyond the strictly empirical contexts from which they emerge. More specifically, although demographic trends, as we have noted, are unevenly distributed across regions, the analytical frameworks and normative categories discussed in this Special Section are not limited to Western contexts. Rather, they are intended to apply more broadly to societies facing different forms of age-structure imbalances, whether characterized by aging populations or youth bulges. Moreover, although questions concerning responsibility for climate change mitigation may be particularly salient for historically high-emitting Western societies, many of the underlying theoretical issues discussed here are similarly generalizable, insofar as they concern what present generations owe to future, as-yet nonexistent, persons.

In this introduction, we critically reassess the notion of reciprocity within the intergenerational context. This notion plays a central role in contemporary policy debates and institutional frameworks aimed at regulating the distribution of burdens and benefits of real-world systems of social cooperation, as well as justifying policies oriented toward the future.⁷ The ideal of reciprocity is however, first and foremost, a philosophical concept that characterizes a strand of liberal egalitarian contractualism, developed most prominently in John Rawls' (1999) theory of justice as fairness, and subsequently elaborated in the post-Rawlsian literature.⁸ In Rawls's view, reciprocity is a principle that regulates the fair terms of social cooperation, standing between impartiality and mutual advantage, and allowing such terms to be reasonably accepted and sustained by citizens over time. The guiding assumption of this Special Section is that conditions marked by climate and demographic transformations require us to rethink reciprocity as a plausible grounding for justice. Our aim is neither to defend nor to abandon reciprocity, but rather to reconsider its scope and limits in light of these challenges.

To this end, we proceed in three steps. In Section 1, we unpack intergenerational justice, offering a more precise map of three key distinctions within the normative debate, namely, analytical units, temporal perspectives, and scope. This shows that what is often treated as a single problem in fact involves a plurality of analytically distinct questions, depending on how these dimensions are specified. In Section 2, we explore the notion of reciprocity in the intergenerational context, starting from Rawls's original formulation and then examining subsequent developments in the post-Rawlsian literature, with particular

attention to David Heyd's (2009) internal critique and to Joseph Heath's (2013) and Anja Karnein's (2022) restatements of Rawls's account. Finally, in Section 3, we distinguish two understandings of reciprocity, which we label “comparative” and “noncomparative,” derived from this view of justice. Here, we also regroup the distinctions introduced in Section 1 into two clusters, corresponding to overlapping and nonoverlapping dimensions. In doing so, we provide a framework that brings together variants of reciprocity and the two clusters. We then situate the four contributions included in this Special Section within this framework, with the aim of capturing the implications of the reciprocity–intergenerational justice nexus. As we argue, once the interplay between these dimensions is taken into account, this nexus appears more complex and contested than is often assumed.

1 | Unpacking Intergenerational Justice: Units, Time, and Scope

In this section, we identify three key dimensions, namely, analytical units, temporal perspectives, and scope, of intergenerational justice that structure contemporary debates. All the contributions in this Special Section engage with these dimensions, albeit to different extents and from distinct theoretical perspectives. For instance, Elisabetta Galeotti's and Axel Gosseries's contributions cannot be fully appreciated without reference to the debates related to the first two dimensions, whereas Christie Hartley's and Tiziana Andina's contributions are best situated within the third. The first dimension concerns the identification of the relevant analytical units—and specifically, whether fairness across generations should be assessed in terms of age groups or birth cohorts. The second dimension concerns the temporal perspective to adopt—namely, whether assessments should consider entire lives or comparable age segments—when evaluating whether certain egalitarian standards are met. As we shall illustrate later in this introduction, these two dimensions are particularly relevant when conceptualizing the notion of reciprocity. The third dimension instead is directly tied to the scope of intergenerational justice, and it is concerned with the distinction between overlapping and nonoverlapping generations. In this context, we typically ask what is owed to future, not-yet-existent generations.

Hence, a first important step consists in disambiguating the very notion of a generation. In ordinary usage, the term “generation” typically combines at least two elements. First, it may imply a reference to a specific age group at a given moment in time—for instance, at present, Generation Z refers to individuals who are currently young. Second, it also refers to a birth cohort that remains identifiable over time, independently of its members' aging. Thus, in the case of Generation Z, the latter term designates the cohort of people born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s. This dualism is reflected in the normative literature on intergenerational justice through the distinction between age groups and birth cohorts (see, e.g., Daniels 1983, 1988; McKerlie 2001; Bidadanure 2016, 2021). Age groups refer to the age ranges individuals pass through over the course of their lives, whereas birth cohorts refer to groups of individuals born within a specific range of time. This further implies that, although distinct age groups can

be identified, individuals' membership in a given group is not fixed but evolves over time as they transition from earlier to later stages of life. By contrast, as noted above, membership in a birth cohort is fixed, as individuals remain in the same cohort throughout their lives.

The difference between these two categories is widely recognized within the social sciences and, notably, in demography; still, it has become increasingly relevant in normative political philosophy as well. Political philosophers have traditionally considered differences between age groups as of limited relevance from the viewpoint of justice, on the grounds that institutions that treat the young and the old differently might, over time, still treat all people equally (e.g., Nagel 1991; Daniels 1983, 1988). This does not hold, however, in the case of birth cohorts, as unequal treatment based on cohort membership cannot, in general, be justified (e.g., Daniels 1983).

This intuition echoes Rawls's concern with justice as an intergenerational ideal (Rawls 1999) and has been further developed by egalitarians, who emphasize the importance of addressing intergenerational justice either for prudential reasons (Daniels 1983, 1988) or as a matter of insurance against brute luck (Dworkin 2000). Yet, these views have been increasingly challenged in more recent work, as scholars have argued that considerations of equality remain relevant when comparing individuals of different ages (e.g., McKerlie 2001; and in some respect, Bidadanure 2016, 2021). Dennis McKerlie (2001, 158), for example, has argued that there can be injustice between age groups conceived as a form of "interpersonal injustice." In particular, he has criticized the reduction in intergenerational equality to a matter of prudence or rationality—a move that he describes as a "trick"—insofar as it obscures morally relevant inequalities among contemporaries (Ibid.). Instead, he argued that comparisons among age groups must be treated as a matter of justice, as they may reveal forms of unjustifiable domination that require urgent moral attention.

These considerations regarding age groups and birth cohorts are underpinned by a second dimension: the temporal perspective used to evaluate these analytical units. More specifically, this dimension introduces a further distinction between the "Lifetime view"⁹ and the "Simultaneous Life Segments view."¹⁰ The former evaluates intergenerational justice by considering the overall distribution of advantages and disadvantages across individuals' entire lives; accordingly, fairness is assessed over the full life course. Famously, Nagel (1991, 69) argued that "the subject of an egalitarian principle is not the distribution of particular rewards to individuals at some time, but the prospective quality of their lives as a whole, from birth to death." By contrast, the latter view focuses more directly on how benefits and burdens are distributed across specific stages of life. Operationally, scholars who adopt this view—such as McKerlie (2001, 1992, 2012) and Bidadanure (2016, 2021)—tend to focus primarily on age-group differences, shifting the analytical lens from a diachronic (whole-life) perspective to a synchronic (segmented) one.¹¹ An important implication follows from this distinction. Under a Lifetime view, inequalities arising at particular stages of life may appear less problematic, provided that they contribute to a fair overall distribution across the lifespan, whether through compensation at other

stages or by helping to reduce inequalities over the life course (see Gosseries 2023a). The Simultaneous Life Segments view, instead, is more sensitive to inequalities that arise at specific stages of life—such as childhood, youth, or old age—regardless of later compensation.¹²

Overall, these distinctions help to map the literature on intergenerational justice by identifying different egalitarian responses to age-related inequalities. These accounts provide different answers to the question regarding which age-related disparities require moral consideration as a matter of interpersonal justice (McKerlie 2001; Bidadanure 2016) and which may be regarded as less morally problematic because they are ultimately compensated over a complete life (Rawls 1999; Nagel 1991; Daniels 1988). Importantly, both distinctions offer analytical lenses through which it is possible to grasp the complexity of issues at stake when articulating discourses on intergenerational fairness. This is crucial not only from a normative perspective; rather, the complexity associated with age groups/birth cohorts and Lifetime/Simultaneous Life Segments view distinctions appears to be implicitly or explicitly reflected also across ongoing policy endeavors and institutional mechanisms related to intergenerational fairness both at domestic and international levels. Thus, disentangling these different dimensions enables a more nuanced understanding of how to make comparisons between generations both at the normative and at the empirical levels.

It is worth noting that the preceding distinctions help to understand the complexity of intergenerational justice among coexisting, overlapping generations, a concern that is becoming increasingly pressing, particularly in light of current demographic decline. However, another problem has been traditionally central to the philosophical debate on intergenerational justice, namely, the question of what is owed to future, non-overlapping generations. Although generations evidently overlap in a linear sequence, it is also true that some generations never overlap with others. Thus, when we speak of nonoverlapping generations, we refer to the potentially indefinite set of generations with which we do not overlap either now or in the future—a category that broadly corresponds to what we call future generations.

This further distinction concerning overlapping and non-overlapping generations (see Meijers 2018), introduces further normative questions. In the case of future, not-yet-existing generations, the analytical tools discussed above become less relevant because the very existence of these people is in question. Traditional liberal morality assumes that an action is wrong if it harms someone, but how can we harm people who are merely possible? Famously, Parfit's (1984) nonidentity problem highlights that it is difficult to speak about harming when the allegedly harmful action is a condition of the very existence of possible future individuals. Yet, if this is true, does it follow that there can be no obligations toward future generations consisting of possible people? Contractualist scholars, and notably Scanlon, have tried to provide an answer to this question avoiding the non-identity problem, assuming that it holds only if we assume that the very notion of injustice is strictly related to an idea of harm (Kumar 2025, 80, 85–87). Furthermore, Heyd (2014) directly refers to Rawls's view of justice as an intrinsic value to explain our

moral concerns about the future. On his view, Rawlsian justice must be understood on an assumption that there will be people in the future (Heyd 2014, 17–18).

These considerations lead to a further problem concerning the scope of intergenerational justice. The distinction between overlapping and nonoverlapping generations in fact raises the issue of whether the conditions for intergenerational justice hold exclusively among overlapping generations or whether they do encompass nonoverlapping generations as well. This problem is particularly acute for egalitarian perspectives that ground justice in reciprocity. Here, the unidirectionality of time prevents nonoverlapping generations not only from engaging in the mutual exchange but also from sustaining the symmetry in vulnerability implied in the “circumstances of justice” (Rawls 1999, 121). In what follows, we will anchor the above-mentioned concerns about intergenerational justice in one specific egalitarian account grounded on reciprocity. This view, central to Rawls’s justice as fairness, serves in this Special Section as theoretical bedrock on which we assess different responses to the challenges raised by intergenerational justice.

2 | Grounding Intergenerational Justice in Reciprocity

The notion of reciprocity plays a central role in contemporary political philosophy, particularly in the work of the philosopher John Rawls. Rawls (2005, 16–17) famously describes reciprocity as an intermediate ideal placed in between impartiality, which is altruistic as it is oriented toward the common good, and mutual advantage, understood as the improvement of everyone’s position relative to the starting point. On this account, a system of social cooperation satisfies reciprocity when it is organized so that citizens can reasonably accept the terms as fair, on the assumption that others are similarly motivated to comply with them. Rawls holds that humans have a natural tendency to reciprocate from childhood (Rawls 1999, 429–434); under favorable conditions, this psychological predisposition develops into a mature moral motivation to sustain a system of social cooperation grounded in reciprocity (Rawls 1999, 433). Although this assumption remains contested, Rawls argues that the ideal of reciprocity provides the most plausible basis for his conception of justice—namely, justice as fairness—precisely because it does not rely on more demanding motivational assumptions, such as sympathy (as in utilitarianism) or strong appeals to virtue (Rawls 1999, 438).

Rawls’s emphasis on reciprocity, understood as a motivational basis for social cooperation, is compelling and continues to shape both philosophical and public discourses. Beyond academic debates, the notion of reciprocity is often invoked as a primary justification for taxation and redistributive mechanisms, which rest on the assumption that individuals contribute to existing schemes of cooperation because they can expect to benefit from them over time. However, this model relies on an increasingly fragile premise that successive generations will enjoy conditions at least as good as, if not better than, those of their predecessors. Although reciprocity does not strictly require such a condition, its plausibility as a stable basis for

cooperation depends on sufficiently favorable—indeed, reasonably just—background conditions. In contexts marked by demographic imbalances and new forms of age-related disadvantage, these conditions are increasingly undermined. Climate change intensifies concerns about future generations while also generating new risks for existing ones, and demographic shifts, marked by declining birth rates and increasing longevity, are reshaping the balance of social cooperation. These developments raise two distinct but related challenges for reciprocity-based accounts of justice. On the one hand, they call into question whether reciprocity can extend to future, nonoverlapping generations, with whom reciprocal relations appear, by definition, impossible. On the other hand, they undermine the empirical conditions under which reciprocity operates even among overlapping generations, as younger cohorts increasingly face the risk of systematic disadvantage. In this Special Section, we aim to examine both challenges from the perspective of justice as reciprocity: first, the problem of justice between nonoverlapping generations, and second, the potential limits of reciprocity within overlapping generations under changing demographic conditions.

Addressing these questions requires returning to Rawls’s view briefly reconstructing how this account of justice deals with the intergenerational dimension. Indeed, Rawls was among the first to formulate a conception of justice that explicitly and systematically incorporated cooperation between generations over time through the introduction of the well-known principle of just savings (Rawls 2005, 274; see also Meyer 2021)—as Heyd (2009, 170) notes, Rawls has been “the major pioneer” in this. Most importantly, however, the intergenerational dimension is structurally necessary to Rawls’s broader project: Without a credible account of justice across time, justice as fairness cannot satisfy its own requirement of stability over time.

The problem of intergenerational justice is, for Rawls, essentially a problem which regards future people, and this for intuitive reasons: Although we can reciprocate among contemporaries, an ideal of reciprocity among nonoverlapping generations is difficult to conceptualize. Yet, Rawls believes that a theory of justice must ensure adequate savings of economic resources and the conservation of natural resources and the environment (Rawls 1999, 118–119), as the continuity of just institutions depends on the responsible transmission of material and social capital across generations (Rawls 1999, 239). Famously, Rawls introduced the device of the original position to represent an ideal situation of choice in which equally positioned parties, ignoring their personal attributes and positions, would agree on the principles of justice regulating the basic structure of society. A principle of just savings should be part of this agreement as well. One problem, however, is that the original position so conceived does not seem to capture such an intergenerational dimension, as the parties cannot realistically represent the interests of past or future people (Rawls 1999, 121). Furthermore, Rawls assumes a realistic account of presentism in describing the original position,¹³ in his words the “present time entry interpretation” (Rawls 2005, 274). Yet, it is within these constraints that we need to derive a fair rate of savings for the future without compromising actual generations’ needs (Rawls 1999, 243).

Rawls originally proposed to reinforce agents' motivation to agree on a fair rate of savings in the original position, via introducing a "motivational assumption" in the "circumstances of justice" (Rawls 1999, 111). He therefore suggested that it would be reasonable to assume that the parties in the original position are motivated to care about the interests of their descendants, imagining themselves as "heads of families" (Ibid.). This device was meant to ensure that a concern for future generations would be built into the choice situation itself, thereby grounding the just savings principle in the motivational structure of the contractors (Rawls 1999, 121). However, this move proved controversial. Barry (1989, 192), for instance, famously argued that the principle of just savings could not plausibly depend on natural parental inclinations. If the justification of intergenerational justice relies on contingent psychological attachments, its status as a principle of justice becomes fragile. In his later writings, Rawls (2005, 274, fn. 12) comes to abandon the motivational assumption, acknowledging that it was not required under conditions of strict compliance. Although an interest in one's descendants may remain a reasonable expectation, Rawls (2005, 274) now adopts a "nonhistorical" formulation of the original position: Each generation is to choose a savings principle that it would have wanted previous generations to follow. The just savings principle is thus no longer grounded in parental concerns, but in a hypothetical symmetry across generations.

Yet, this modification does not fully resolve an underlying difficulty: If one generation fails to comply with the principle, there is nothing that future generations can do to correct the injustice (Heyd 2009, 182). The structure remains asymmetrical: The future cannot reciprocate, enforce, or withdraw cooperation. For some readers, therefore, abandoning the motivational assumption does not lead to a genuinely reciprocity-based account of intergenerational justice. Different responses have been proposed in the literature. Some, like Heyd (2009), argue that intergenerational duties cannot be grounded in reciprocity and instead appeal to a weaker ideal of future-oriented solidarity, rooted in contingent forms of identification rather than of reciprocity. Others have sought to defend an intergenerational form of reciprocity. Heath (2013), for instance, proposes an account of indirect reciprocity, whereby successive generations are linked through a chain of cooperation extending over time. Similarly, Karnein's (2022) view allows for a diachronic understanding of reciprocity, whereby members participate in a temporally extended cooperative project in which earlier and later generations contribute to the realization of shared goals.

In the previous section, we have outlined three key dimensions—analytical unit, temporal perspectives, and scope—of intergenerational justice, each structured around a specific distinction. In light of this, it is possible to identify two clusters of normative questions addressing the relation between intergenerational justice and reciprocity. The first cluster refers to the implications of including nonoverlapping generations in the scope of justice. It corresponds to the debate on the possibility of grounding intergenerational obligations in reciprocity, given the absence of reciprocal relations between present and future individuals. The second cluster, instead, focuses on overlapping generations and is closely tied to the distinctions between age groups and birth cohorts, as well as between the Lifetime and

the Simultaneous Life Segments perspectives. In this latter case, the question is not whether reciprocity is possible, but rather to what extent it can adequately account for inequalities among co-existing generations that are differently positioned across time. In the next section, we revisit these two clusters from the perspective of justice as reciprocity, first focusing on the challenges posed by nonoverlapping generations and then turning the attention to the tensions arising within overlapping generations under contemporary demographic and social circumstances. In doing so, we show how the contributions in this Special Section can be situated within the broader debate on reciprocity and intergenerational justice.

3 | Mapping the Debate: Comparative versus Noncomparative Reciprocity and Intergenerational Dimensions

The contributions in this Special Section relate to the challenges raised by the nexus between reciprocity and intergenerational justice, both from nonoverlapping (Hartley and Andina) and overlapping generational perspectives (Galeotti and Gosseries). Yet, to understand how these authors respond to these challenges, it is important to distinguish between two ways in which reciprocity can be understood in theorizing justice. Drawing on Rawls, it is possible to derive two distinct understandings of reciprocity: One is comparative and strictly distributive, closely connected to the idea of actual mutual exchange (Rawls 1999, 4, 252). Most readers in this debate tend to understand reciprocity in this first, stronger sense. A second, less common view of reciprocity is instead noncomparative in nature, as it refers to the ways in which our political institutions promote the conditions necessary for realizing political and social equality (Rawls 1999, 511; Rawls 2005, 16–17, 428–429). This account is not necessarily linked to mutual benefit, but rather to the specification of the political relation as one of "civic friendship" and mutual respect among free and equal citizens (Rawls 2005, xlii, xlix). Both understandings of reciprocity find resonance in Rawls's work, as he attempts to balance the fair distribution of goods with the public affirmation of persons' status and inviolability (Rawls 1999, 178–179; Rawls 2005, 17).

Building on this latter noncomparative understanding of reciprocity, Christie Hartley proposes that although nonoverlapping generations cannot literally "work together" or share a project in a cooperative sense, intergenerational obligations may still be grounded in reciprocity—specifically, in the reciprocity owed to contemporaries. Recalling Rawls, Hartley maintains that the shared project of a liberal democratic society is to create and sustain a community of mutual respect among free and equal citizens, grounded in the recognition of each person's "inviolability founded on justice." Although present citizens do not, strictly speaking, share this project with future generations, they do understand themselves as engaged in a project that future persons are expected to inherit and continue. Crucially, present citizens also recognize that future individuals will possess the same kind of inviolability founded on justice that they attribute to one another in the present. This implies that as present actions and policies shape the conditions under which future people will live, they directly affect those future persons' ability to carry forward this shared project. Accordingly, to remain faithful

to their commitment to the project—namely, the creation and sustainment of a community of mutual respect among free and equal citizens—contemporary members of society must take into account the effects of their actions on future generations. Hence, Hartley's proposal extends the scope of justice to the future not through direct or indirect interaction with posterity, but as a requirement of the “inviolability founded on justice” that present individuals acknowledge will belong to future persons when they come into existence.

Tiziana Andina is instead more skeptical about the possibility of grounding intergenerational justice in reciprocity. Like other authors in this Special Section, she treats reciprocity primarily as a comparative and distributive ideal regulating horizontal, synchronic cooperation among contemporaries. Thus, in her view, reciprocity fails to address the structural asymmetries of those actions—that she terms “transgenerational acts”—that exclude future people from participation. She therefore proposes an account of “vertical justice” grounded in the idea of the “transgenerational civitas.” Through this articulation, Andina reconceives the political community as temporally extended, encompassing past, present, and future generations as parts of a single, unified political subject. Within this framework, “vertical justice” assigns a distinct form of agency to each temporal segment of the civitas. Past generations act through the institutional, cultural, and legal legacies they leave behind. Present generations exercise direct decision-making power. Importantly, future generations, while lacking agency in the usual sense, function as regulative ideals. Hence, although they cannot act, they provide a normative point of reference that guides present decision-making by supplying a standard against which current actions are evaluated and justified.

Beyond this traditional set of questions, contemporary demographic shifts also challenge the other dimension of justice as reciprocity, namely, that concerning overlapping generations. In this Special Section, this matter is raised by Gosseries and Galeotti, who show that existing egalitarian frameworks based on reciprocity appear to presuppose that both available resources and demographic conditions remain roughly constant across overlapping birth cohorts. In this respect, Gosseries highlights that an abstract assumption of fixed population growth risks neglecting many of the current distributive unbalances emerging among overlapping generations. Indeed, such an assumption appears to underlie Rawls's account (Rawls 2005, 64). In this context, a strictly comparative account of reciprocity is called into question. Gosseries suggests that we should abandon the idea of reciprocity among age groups and proposes a longitudinal, cohort-based articulation of reciprocity that can account for demographic fluctuations. Indeed, he notes that what is often described as “reciprocity between age groups” can be more accurately understood as reciprocity between individuals over the course of their lives. As individuals move across age groups as they age, reciprocity between age groups is only apparent (e.g., between the young, the working-age, and the elderly) as it in fact results in reciprocal relations between the same persons at different life stages. On Gosseries's view, thus, reciprocity can still be preserved among contemporaries, but only either as a longitudinal, cohort-based perspective or as a relation between individuals situated in different age groups at a given time. Gosseries therefore shows

that reciprocity retains both limits and potential at the level of relations among contemporaries, whether conceived as age groups or birth cohorts.

Conversely, Galeotti highlights that demographic instabilities make comparative reciprocity unfeasible. She argues that, under such conditions, a principle of age-specific sufficiency better addresses the needs of justice, the latter understood in terms of relational and political equality as well as distributive fairness. This principle aims to protect the dignity and political agency of individuals at every stage of life, ensuring that citizens can pursue life plans appropriate to their specific developmental circumstances regardless of shifting demographic ratios. Furthermore, Galeotti emphasizes the importance of providing more generous support to early life stages to prevent what she terms “scarring effects,” whereby insufficient resources in childhood or youth generate persistent inequalities throughout adulthood. In doing so, her age-specific sufficiency principle provides a framework that preserves fairness in relational, political, and distributive terms, while directly responding to the challenges posed by demographic fluctuations.

Thus, the contributions included in this Special Section can be systematically mapped along two analytical dimensions: namely, overlapping and nonoverlapping generations, and comparative and noncomparative reciprocity. This framework allows us to situate different theoretical strategies for addressing both the limits and the possibilities of justice as reciprocity in intergenerational contexts. Contributions focusing on overlapping generations tend to revise or reject reciprocity as a distributive principle. As mentioned, Gosseries refines a comparative understanding of reciprocity through a longitudinal, cohort-based approach. Galeotti, instead, is best understood as challenging the adequacy of a strictly comparative and distributive conception of reciprocity even within overlapping generations. By emphasizing relational equality and sufficiency across different stages of life, her account moves beyond reciprocity—conceived here as mutual exchange—thereby questioning its adequacy as a metric of justice in this domain.

In the case of nonoverlapping generations, however, the challenge becomes more fundamental, as reciprocity appears structurally difficult to sustain. Hartley addresses this difficulty by developing a noncomparative account of reciprocity grounded in mutual respect among contemporaries, thereby extending its implications to future persons. By contrast, Andina's position is best understood as diagnosing the limits of strictly comparative, distributive reciprocity when extended to nonoverlapping generations. Precisely because she interprets reciprocity as an inherently horizontal feature—chiefly concerned with relations among contemporaries—she argues that this view is unable to ground justice in a vertical sense, namely, with respect to nonoverlapping generations. Thus, “vertical justice” must be understood as an alternative framework to reciprocity.

In some cases (e.g., Galeotti and Andina), therefore, the limits of reciprocity are such that they motivate a shift toward different normative frameworks beyond either comparative or noncomparative reciprocity. Galeotti's and Andina's contributions show that the limits of reciprocity emerge both within overlapping

TABLE 1 | Overlapping vs. nonoverlapping generations and the conceptual interpretations of reciprocity (comparative, noncomparative) and beyond reciprocity. The table shows how the contributions in this Special Section address reciprocity across these dimensions.

	Comparative reciprocity	Noncomparative reciprocity	Beyond reciprocity
Overlapping generations	Gosseries—refinement via a longitudinal, cohort-based account	—	Galeotti—critique of comparative reciprocity; shift to a relational/sufficiency-based account
Nonoverlapping generations	—	Hartley—extension via obligations among contemporaries	Andina—critique of comparative reciprocity; shift to vertical justice

and nonoverlapping generations, albeit for different reasons. Although some accounts seek to refine or extend reciprocity, others expose its structural constraints and motivate a shift toward alternative normative frameworks. These positions illustrate that the plausibility and function of reciprocity vary depending on both the temporal structure of intergenerational relations and the conceptual interpretation of reciprocity itself (Table 1).

4 | Concluding Remarks

The above discussion clarifies the specific contribution of this Special Section. By reconsidering the intergenerational justice and reciprocity nexus in light of climate and demographic transformations, we identify two distinct clusters of issues that a theory of justice must address systematically. The first corresponds to the well-established foundational concern with justice among nonoverlapping generations, where the absence of reciprocal relations challenges the possibility of grounding intergenerational obligations in reciprocity. The second, more methodological in nature, concerns the assessment of just arrangements among overlapping generations under conditions of demographic fluctuation, where reciprocity remains operative, but its application becomes increasingly complex and contested. At the same time, this analysis highlights the importance of disaggregating the idea of reciprocity itself. As the contributions in this Special Section show, reciprocity can be understood either in a comparative, strictly distributive sense, grounded in mutual exchange, or in a noncomparative sense, as structuring the institutional conditions is necessary for realizing relations of political equality. Bringing these dimensions together allows us to better capture both the limits and the potential of reciprocity in grounding intergenerational justice and to situate the contributions of this Special Section within a more accurate analytical framework.

A final remark highlights what the theoretical framework presented in this Special Section, including different conceptions of reciprocity in overlapping and nonoverlapping generational contexts, can suggest to policymakers and policy scholars. As we mentioned in the introduction, the intergenerational framing has been increasingly gaining prominence in contemporary policy agendas, giving impetus to institutional efforts as well as policy endeavors aimed at evaluating and advancing intergenerational fairness—such as through future generations commissioners, policy impact assessments, and future-oriented policy

design frameworks.¹⁴ In this scenario, a clearer understanding of the complexity of reciprocity and of its different forms can be valuable not only from a normative perspective but also for informing policy analysis and design. Comparative and noncomparative reciprocity provide critical resources for clarifying the theoretical and normative underpinnings of future-oriented decision-making and institutional design, and their implications for fairness across generations. Regarding nonoverlapping generations, the contrast between comparative and noncomparative accounts helps to clarify whether obligations toward future persons are framed in terms of expressions of respect owed to prospective participants in a long-lasting shared political project, or as requiring a move beyond reciprocity altogether. As for overlapping generations, instead, the key question is whether reciprocity can still function as a distributive principle, under conditions of demographic fluctuation, or whether it needs to be reformulated, complemented, or even abandoned. Making these commitments more explicit may not resolve such disagreements, but it can clarify what is at stake in policy choices directly addressing intergenerational fairness or in future-oriented policymaking. Furthermore, these insights leave the space open for policymakers and policy scholars, as much as political theorists and philosophers, to explore possible integrations of comparative and noncomparative accounts, and hence of overlapping and nonoverlapping perspectives. This could be done both at the theoretical and empirical levels, by respectively addressing the theoretical underpinnings of reciprocity in the intergenerational context and examining how different conceptualizations of reciprocity operate within public policy and policy processes more broadly. Attending to these differences and challenges may support greater normative clarity in policy endeavors concerned with intergenerational fairness, thereby informing more reflective approaches to policymaking, institutional design, and normative theorizing.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹ Such policy efforts are reflected in post-COVID recovery plans across European countries (e.g., Spain, Italy, and France), which increasingly link the green transition to youth employment and skills development.

² An interesting example is provided by Wales, where a special commissioner was established in 2026. For an interesting discussion about the role and the political legitimacy of officers for future generations providing a comparison between the case of Wales with other cases, see Smith (2020). For a broader discussion on future oriented institutional mechanisms, see Gonzáles-Ricoy and Gosseries (2017).

³ Two landmark court cases—Urgenda v. Netherlands and Neubauer v. Germany—are often cited as illustrating the growing influence of climate litigation within European domestic legal systems. See, for instance (Kotzé et al. 2024; de Augustinis 2023).

⁴ Of particular interest in this respect is the recent introduction of the UK Pension Schemes Bill (UK Parliament 2025). The new bill aims at strengthening private pension investment through a focus on value for members. This case illustrates how policy interventions simultaneously seek to pursue improved outcomes for current beneficiaries while also enhancing the long-term sustainability of pension systems, notably by enabling pension schemes to invest in a broader range of assets, including long-term and potentially sustainable investments. In this sense, such reforms highlight the tension between present-oriented welfare objectives and longer term intergenerational considerations.

⁵ The Declaration on Future Generations, first proposed by the General Assembly in decision 77/568, was finally adopted by the United Nation at the Summit of the Future in September 2024.

⁶ Following Meijers (2018), in this Special Section we adopt here the label “intergenerational justice” as to include questions of justice connected to both overlapping and nonoverlapping generations.

⁷ Bowles and Gintis (2000) have argued that, for example, modern welfare-state support is grounded in citizens’ reciprocitarian dispositions, which structure judgments about fair exchange in systems of social cooperation. In particular, they show that support for redistribution and social insurance is shaped less by egalitarian ideals or

pure self-interest than by concerns about whether policies preserve a fairness among contributions and rewards, supporting assistance to those seen as disadvantaged while resisting benefits perceived as rewarding noncontribution. This logic underpins acceptance of institutions such as social insurance and progressive taxation insofar as they are viewed as fairly allocating burdens and protecting individuals against risks beyond their control (Bowles and Gintis 2000, 35).

⁸ Although Rawls’s account of reciprocity is influential, it does not exhaust the plethora of ways in which the notion has been developed in the literature. Alternative approaches do not necessarily stem from contractualist frameworks and may place greater emphasis on interpersonal dimensions of reciprocity. For instance, Becker (1986) offers an account that is not strictly contractualist and highlights the reactive aspects of reciprocal relations, rather than grounding them primarily in considerations of impartiality. In this introduction, however, we will consider justice as reciprocity chiefly from a Rawlsian perspective.

⁹ This view has been referred to in different ways in the literature. In this introduction, we adopt McKerlie’s (2001) definition of the “Lifetime view.”

¹⁰ Also, this account has been conceptualized in different ways in the literature, including, for example, McKerlie’s (2001) formulation of the “time-specific priority” view and Bidadanure’s (2016) emphasis on “synchronic” age-group relational justice. Here, we adopt the definition Simultaneous Life Segments view—used by Elisabetta Galeotti’s in this Special Section—which evaluates age groups at a given temporal “snapshot.”

¹¹ It is, however, important to notice that Bidadanure’s (2016, 2021) account does not fit neatly into this characterization, indeed: Although she adopts a largely diachronic perspective with respect to distributive justice, her analysis of age-based relations and treatment is distinctly synchronic.

¹² A further approach focuses on whether individuals have enough at each stage of life, independently of comparisons with others. For discussion, see Gosseries (2023b).

¹³ Rawls (1999) clarifies that the parties in the original position do not know which generation they belong to; however, they are aware that they are members of the present generation, in the sense of being contemporaries. On this point, see also Heyd (2009, 173–174). Further, Rawls (1999) clarifies that the original position should not be conceived as an assembly of all actual or possible persons across time. Interpreting it in this way—whether as including everyone who will ever live or even all those who could possibly exist—would indeed render the device of the original position excessively indeterminate and overly abstract, thereby undermining its function as a “practical guide to intuition” (Rawls 1999, 120).

¹⁴ As for future nonoverlapping generations, a growing body of scholarship has been advancing proposals to strengthen governmental foresight, long-term planning capacities, and evaluation frameworks to better incorporate the interests of future generations. On this, see Boston (2021) and Swinkels et al. (2025) on “future design.” Further, and more specifically on future generations commissioners, see supra footnote 2. As for overlapping generations, see Vanhuysse and Tremmel (2018).

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