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An Analysis of the Principle of Just Savings and Economic (De)Growth: A Sustainable Median Between Accumulation Stage and Steady State Stage in Relation to Climate Change

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Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	3
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	3
<i>1 Introduction</i>	4
<i>2 Rawlsian Distributive Justice?</i>	8
3.1 Domestic vs Intergenerational Domain	10
3.2 Conception of Citizens and Society.....	11
3.3 Original Position and Veil of Ignorance.....	12
3.3.1 Stage 1 and the Principle of Just Savings	12
3.3.2 Stage 2 of the OP.....	13
3.3.3 Stage 3 of the OP.....	13
3.3.4 Stage 4 of the OP.....	14
<i>4 Principles vs Policy</i>	14
<i>5 Accumulation Stage</i>	14
<i>6 Steady State Stage</i>	14
<i>7 Economic Growth</i>	15
7.1 Tension That Economic Growth Brings.....	16
7.2 Green Transition	18
7.2.1 Commitment to Complete Green Transition	19
7.3 Degrowth	20
7.3.1 Commitment to Complete Degrowth.....	22
<i>8 Hybrid Mixed Model Approach</i>	24
8.1: Reconciling Domestic and Intergenerational Justice.....	25
8.2 Objections and Limitations	27
<i>9 Conclusion</i>	27
<i>Works Cited</i>	29

Abstract

In this thesis I argue that climate change challenges John Rawls's justice as fairness framework by creating a tension between economic growth in the accumulation stage and the Principle of Just Savings, which mandates resource preservation for future generations. Fossil fuel-driven growth exacerbates environmental degradation, perpetuating an unsustainable accumulation stage that undermines intergenerational justice. I propose a hybrid model that integrates the Degrowth Model's focus on reduced consumption with the Green Transition Model's emphasis on renewable energy to reconcile domestic and intergenerational justice. By addressing critiques from Hyunseop Kim, Susan Moller Okin, and Martha Nussbaum, the hybrid model extends Rawls's theory to non-ideal, global contexts, offering a sustainable framework for climate justice that balances economic development with ecological and ethical imperatives in international relations.

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1 Introduction

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) provides a foundational framework for understanding justice, particularly through the lens of intergenerational fairness and societal development. Central to Rawls's theory are the Principle of Just Savings and societal stages of development. Rawls's Principle of Just Savings emphasizes our duty to conserve resources for future generations. His two-stage model of societal development, consisting of the accumulation stage and steady state stage, ensures just institutions across generations through controlled economic development. However, anthropogenic climate change introduces a tension within Rawls's framework, as economic growth, traditionally achieved through nonrenewable energy is inherently tied to climate change, this undermines the very principles of justice it is meant to uphold. This paper argues that Rawls's Principle of Just Savings and societal stages of development require significant clarification to address the environmental and ethical challenges posed by climate change. This thesis argues that fossil fuel-driven economic growth undermines Rawls's principle of just savings by depleting resources, necessitating a hybrid model of degrowth and green transition to ensure intergenerational fairness. It proceeds by justifying Rawls's framework (section 2), demonstrating the tension with empirical and philosophical evidence (section 7.1), and proposing a sustainable solution (section 8.1), relying on fairness as its philosophical grounding.

To address this tension between economic growth and intergenerational justice in the context of climate change, it is essential first to understand the terms of the argument with Rawls's framework of justice as fairness. Rawls defends a two-stage model of societal development, beginning with the accumulation stage, where economic growth is prioritized to establish just institutions. He then moves to the steady stage, where further growth is unnecessary, and the focus shifts to maintaining justice. Central to this framework is the principle of just savings, which mandates that each generation conserve sufficient resources to sustain just institutions over time. The stability of just institutions requires equitable resource distribution and environmental sustainability to ensure future generations inherit a society capable of upholding Rawls's principles of justice. However, economic growth, when driven by fossil fuels, undermines these claims of justice by depleting resources and exacerbating environmental degradation, trapping societies in a perpetual accumulation stage that violates the just savings principle.

This tension is not merely an economic challenge but a fundamental threat to Rawls's conception of just as fairness. By depleting nonrenewable resources, current growth practices externalize environmental costs onto future generations, disproportionately harming the least advantaged globally. Stephen Gardiner's concept of the 'intergenerational storm' (2011) underscores this issue, arguing that current generations externalize environmental costs onto future ones, undermining intergenerational fairness. This violates the intragenerational Difference Principle and intergenerational just savings principle. This thesis proposes a hybrid model, combining the degrowth and green transition arguments that better address these shortcomings by aligning with Rawls's framework while adapting to ecological and global imperatives.

By examining critiques of John Rawls's ideas by scholars such as Hyunseop Kim, Susan Moller Okin, Martha Nussbaum, and others, we gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and limitations of his theory of justice. Many of these critiques fall under distinct groupings based on how scholars engage with Rawls's principles: 1) modifying the Difference Principle, 2) challenging the just savings principle, 3) critiquing the assumptions of the Original Position. Each group highlights potential limitations in Rawls's frameworks but also reveals gaps or insufficiencies in the alternatives proposed.

Scholars like Charles Beitz (1979) and Thomas Pogge (2002) argue that Rawls's Difference Principle should be extended globally to address international disparities exacerbated by climate change. Beitz holds that Rawls's focus on domestic justice ignores global resource inequalities, proposing a global Difference Principle to ensure equitable distribution of resources across nations (Beitz 1970, 136-153). Pogge similarly advocates for a cosmopolitan application, emphasizing duties of wealthier nations to mitigate climate impacts on poorer ones (Pogge 2002, 196-215). These critiques correctly identify Rawls's limited international scope but misinterpret his framework by overlooking the just savings principle, which already embeds intergenerational duties that can be extended globally. By solely focusing on intragenerational equity, these critiques neglect intergenerational justice from the temporal dimension where current global inequalities compound to future disparities. My hybrid policy addresses these shortcomings by introducing renewable energy strategies coupled with reduced consumption grounded in the societal stages of development with an emphasis on the least advantaged and ensuring resource preservation for future generations.

The second group, including Hyunseop Kim (2019), argues that the just savings principle, which mandates preserving resources for future generations, is inadequate for addressing environmental degradation caused by climate change. Kim proposes a background principle prohibiting actions that impair environmental conditions necessary for justice, arguing that Rawls's principle underestimates the ecological limits of growth (Kim 2019). While Kim's critique raises the concern of environmental factors, it lacks specificity and urgency, failing to account for the immediate, systemic reforms needed to address climate change's disproportionate impacts. Additionally, impairment metrics may also look different when analyzing rich and poor nations. As such "impairment" is subjective and would keep countries of power and domination in power and global south countries reliant on aid from developed countries for survival. This critique misinterprets the flexibility of the just savings principles, which can accommodate ecological constraints when interpreted through a non-ideal lens. My hybrid model overcomes these shortcomings by operationalizing the just savings principle through Degrowth's consumption reduction and green transition's shift to renewables, providing a framework that ensure resource preservation while addressing the urgency of climate change.

The third group includes that of Susan Moller Okin (2017) and Martha Nussbaum (2007), who challenge the idealized assumptions of Rawls's Original Position and veil of ignorance, particularly in non-ideal conditions like climate change. Okin critiques Rawls for neglecting gendered disparities as climate change disproportionately affects women and calls for a relational justice approach that prioritizes marginalized groups (Okin 2017, 98-115). Nussbaum critiques Rawls's focus on institutional justice, advocating for a capabilities approach that emphasizes

individual flourishing over abstract principles (Nussbaum 2007, 76–95). While these critiques rightly highlight the limitations of Rawls’s idealized theory in addressing real-world inequities, they overlook the OP’s adaptability, which can incorporate ecological and social constraints when applied to non-ideal scenarios. My hybrid model integrates these concerns by embedding community-led renewable projects that empower marginalized groups aligning with Okin’s relational justice and ensuring sustainable conditions for human flourishing as Nussbaum’s capabilities approach states.

Building on these critiques, this paper argues that Rawls’s framework is incomplete with integrating ecological constraints vis-à-vis development and growth, specifically as it relates to distributive justice considerations present with climate change. The proposed hybrid model combines the Degrowth model’s emphasis on reduced consumption, present in Rawls’s steady state stage, and the Green Transition model’s focus on renewable energy which supports the Principle of Just Savings ensuring sustainable resource use. This approach addresses the ecological limitations overlooked by Rawls as well as responds to criticism from those who critique the assumptions of the Original Position. By assessing Rawls’s principles with an emphasis on climate change, this paper aims to resolve the tension between economic growth and intergenerational justice by offering a sustainable approach that upholds fairness across generations.

Climate change is more than an environmental crisis; it’s a justice-based problem. Low-income communities, indigenous populations, and nations in the Global South face disproportionate harms despite contributing the least to global emissions. These inequalities challenge traditional notions of economic growth, often measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which Rawls among many others have critiqued as insufficient for assessing justice. Rawls instead uses fair distribution of primary goods, protection of basic liberties, and the advancement of the least well off, as articulated in his two principles of justice, the equal basic liberties, and Difference Principle. The Principle of Just Savings states that each generation should save enough resources to maintain just institutions. This principle is grounded in the principle of fairness derived from the OP where rational agents, behind the veil of ignorance, agree to principles that prevent any generation from being unfairly disadvantaged. This obligation is justified further by the moral requirement to maintain justice as fairness across time, ensuring that the basic structure remains equitable for all.¹ Resources to Rawls encompass more than just capital, but any conditions necessary for just institutions, including natural resources.² The Accumulation State Stage states economic growth is necessary only up to a certain point to secure these principles for all. The steady state stage maintains that when justice is achieved, no further growth is necessary.

Today the way that economic growth is achieved is through nonrenewable energy sources, but this drives climate change which perpetuates environmental degradation trapping

¹ "The just savings principle can be regarded as an interpretation of the previously accepted natural duty to uphold just institutions. Each generation must not only preserve the gains of culture and civilization, and maintain intact those just institutions that have been established, but it must also put aside in each period of time a suitable amount of real capital accumulation." (A Theory of Justice, revised ed., 1999, p. 252)

² Implied to assume any resource necessary to maintain just institutions including; economic capital, natural resources, social and institutional capital, cultural resources, technological and intellectual capital

society in a perpetual accumulation stage that violates the Principle of Just Savings by depleting resources for future generations.

This tension is particularly acute when considering how current economic growth practices destabilize the just institutions central to Rawls's theory. Current economic growth undermines the stability of just institutions in Rawls's framework, hinging on the fact that fossil fuel-driven growth depletes finite resources and exacerbates climate change, directly conflicting with the just savings principle. Rawls's just institutions, designed to uphold equal basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity, depend on a stable resource base to function equitably over time. However, relentless growth reliant on nonrenewable energy sources, such as coal and oil, accelerates environmental degradation, leading to resource scarcity and ecological instability that jeopardize the ability of future generations to maintain these just institutions. This degradation locks societies into a perpetual accumulation stage, where short-term economic gains are prioritized over the long-term sustainability required by the just savings principle, eroding the material and ecological foundations of justice. The incompatibility lies in the growth's tendency to externalize environmental costs onto future generations, violating Rawls's imperative that each generation must save enough to ensure just institutions endure, thus necessitating a shift away from such unsustainable practice to align with intergenerational fairness. This tension between the just savings principle and societal stages of development created by climate change raises two critical questions;

1. To what extent is a commitment to economic growth compatible with the demands of intergenerational justice?
2. More specifically, given the existence of climate change- is a commitment to economic growth compatible with the demands of the "*just savings principle*," as defended by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (TOJ)?

I argue that Rawls's principles require clarification to navigate the climate change crisis and tension between Rawls's Principle of Just Savings and societal stages of development. The Principle of Just Savings and societal stages assume resource availability and institutional stability, but climate change disrupts these assumptions connecting growth to environmental harm and climate change. The Degrowth model aims at slowing down growth to where consumption is eliminated. This addresses issues of overconsumption and ecological constraints while ensuring resources for future generations. The Green Transition emphasizes a shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy that enables sustainable development, mitigating climate change impacts on justice. By integrating these approaches, the hybrid model not only aligns with Rawls's commitment to fairness but also responds to critiques that were not sufficient in providing alternatives. This paper adopts Rawls's distributive framework, which I argue is uniquely suited to address the ethical and ecological challenges of climate change, as further explored in section 2.

Section 2 justifies adopting Rawls's distributive justice framework over alternatives like strict egalitarianism, emphasizing its compatibility with climate justice. Section 3 unpacks Rawls's core concepts such as justice as fairness, the Original Position, the Principle of Just Savings, laying the groundwork for analyzing climate change's impact. Section 4-6 examines how economic growth in the accumulation stage conflicts with intergenerational fairness,

perpetuating environmental harm. Section 8 proposes a hybrid model combining Degrowth and Green Transition, detailed in subsections on their theoretical and practical alignment with Rawls's principles. Section 8.1 explores how this model reconciles domestic and intergenerational justice through sustainable policies. Finally, Section 9 concludes by synthesizing how the hybrid model adapts Rawls's framework to address climate change's ethical and ecological challenges.

2 Rawlsian Distributive Justice?

To address the tension between economic growth and intergenerational justice posed by climate change, I adopt John Rawls's distributive justice framework, which offers a morally robust and practically feasible approach to balancing fairness and ecologically sustainability. By contrasting Rawls's approach to other forms of egalitarianism, this section argues that Rawls's framework is uniquely suited to navigate the ethical and ecological challenges of climate change while supporting the formation of just institutions over time.

The Principle of Just Savings holds that each generation must save sufficient resources to ensure future generations can maintain just institutions (Rawls 1971, sec. 44). The principle is justified in the OP, where rational agents, unaware of their generational position, would agree to save resources to prevent any generation from being unfairly disadvantaged in sustaining a just basic structure. When applied to climate change, the PoJS demands preserving environmental resources, such as a habitable climate, to ensure future generations can enjoy the benefits of justice.

Rawls's framework is more effective than other alternative like strict egalitarianism. Strict egalitarianism, hinder innovation for climate solutions like renewables, Rawls's Difference Principle allows inequalities for efficiency while aiding the disadvantaged like climate-displaced groups. The just savings principle ensures sustainability, unlike utilitarian short-term exploitation. The Paris Agreement's equitable burden sharing reflects Rawlsian principles. Unlike utilitarian approaches that prioritize present gains over future costs or strict egalitarian which prioritizes absolute equality over ensuring benefiting the least well off, Rawls principle ensure intergenerational fairness by limiting excessive resource depletion, making it a critical tool for addressing long term impacts of climate change.

To directly address the claim that continued economic growth is not supported by Rawls, this section justifies why Rawls's framework, grounded in the OP, rejects perpetual economic expansion in favor of sustainable resource preservation. These agents would reject continuous growth because it risks depleting critical resources, such as a stable climate, that are necessary for a just basic structure. Rawls explicitly states that "once just institutions are firmly established, the net accumulation required is zero" (Rawls 1971, 255), indicating that in the steady state stage, further economic growth is unnecessary, and resources should be maintained to sustain fairness. This principle supports policies that prioritize environmental sustainability over relentless growth, ensuring future generations can enjoy the benefits of justice, such as an inhabitable planet.

Human rights and historical responsibility framework, like Rawls's, reject endless growth, but Rawls's distributive justice framework is ideal for climate justice and economic

(de)growth due to its impartial integration of intragenerational and intergenerational fairness. Human rights approaches (Knox 2020) prioritize individual protections but lack systemic generational balancing required to address climate change. Similarly, historical responsibility focuses on past emissions but struggles with forward looking resource allocation (Caney 2005). Rawls's OP, however, ensures impartial principles like just savings and Difference Principle, addressing complex climate trade-offs comprehensively.

While the just savings principle addresses intergenerational equity, Rawls Difference Principle, which governs intragenerational distribution, is highly relevant to climate change within a single generation. The Difference Principle permits social and economic inequalities only if they maximize the benefits of the least advantaged members of society (Rawls 1971, sc. 26). Justified in the OP, it reflects the rational choice of agents who prioritize the worst-off to ensure fairness under uncertainty. Although the Difference Principle does not apply intergenerationally,³ it provides a framework for addressing climate change disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities in each generation. For example, climate policies can be designed to generate revenue that funds adaptation measures for low-income groups most vulnerable to climate impacts, aligning with the Difference Principle's focus on benefiting the least advantaged.

Rawls's approach, while rooted in ideal theory, adapts to the non-ideal challenge of climate change by providing a moral foundation that transcends mere economic considerations (Frere et al. 2020; Carter 2022). By prioritizing fairness, equity, and sustainability, Rawls's distributive justice framework offers a compelling lens for resolving the tension between economic growth and climate justice, ensuring that both present and future generations can thrive under just institutions.

3 Rawls

John Rawls was a political philosopher in the liberal tradition and lays out his theory of justice as justice as fairness in his book *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and later clarified it in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (JF:AR) (2001). His theory of justice as fairness describes a society of free citizens holding equal basic rights and cooperating within an egalitarian economic system (Wenar 2021). He later focuses on foreign policy that aims to create peaceful and tolerant international order in *The Law of Peoples* (1993), which touches upon international justice.

To Rawls, justice as fairness aims to describe a just arrangement of political and social institutions of a liberal society; he calls this arrangement a society's *basic structure*. Rawls believes that the basic structure is where justice begins as institutions distribute the main benefits and burdens of social life such as basic rights, opportunities, wealth and income, and so on. Rawls states that the liberal society has reasonable pluralism and enough resources for everyone's basic need to be met (Wenar 2021; Rawls 1993).

Rawls believes, as stated in his concept of justice as fairness, that a society of free citizens with equal basic rights should work together cooperatively within an egalitarian economic system. He begins by stating that citizens do not deserve to be more favored by social

³ Rawls explicitly limits the DP to distributing goods within a single generations

institutions because of socio-economic class, race, natural propensities, and so on. Since these features are morally arbitrary, no one citizen is more entitled to benefits than another because of them (Wenar 2021). Rawls believed in equality-based reciprocity; all social goods are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution is to everyone's advantage. Rawls's egalitarianism sets equality as the baseline and any inequality must improve everyone's situation, especially the worse off (Rawls 1971). These ideas are supported by his *two principles of justice*;

First Principle: Each person has the same inalienable claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all;

Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions:

- a. They are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of *fair equality of opportunity*;
- b. They are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the *Difference Principle*) (JF, 42–43).

These principles operate within a lexical priority; the first principle's fulfillment takes priority over fulfillment of the second principles and within the second principle, fair equality of opportunity takes priority over the Difference Principle. The first principle affirms that all citizens should have familiar basic rights and liberties and that these rights and liberties are equal among citizens. Within the first principle there are two features that make it distinctive; the first being that basic rights and liberties are not to be traded off against other social goods, and the second being that it requires fair value of political liberties. This second feature states that citizens should be substantively equal. If citizens are similarly endowed and motivated, they should have similar opportunities to hold office, to influence elections, and so on regardless of how rich or poor they are (Rawls 2001).

The second principle is two-part, the fair equality of opportunity that requires citizens with the same talents and willingness to use them to have the same education and economic opportunities regardless of socioeconomic class. The second part is the Difference Principle, which states that allowing inequalities of wealth and income can lead to a larger social product. For example, higher wages can cover the costs of training and education and can provide incentives to fill jobs that are more in demand (Wenar 2021). The Difference Principle allows inequalities of wealth and income so long as these will be to everyone's advantage and specifically to the advantage of those who will be worst off. The Difference Principle requires that any social or economic inequalities be arranged to provide the greatest benefit to the least advantaged members of society.

3.1 Domestic vs Intergenerational Domain

Rawls distinguishes the domestic and intergenerational domains in *A Theory of Justice*, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, and *The Laws of People*, by scope, purpose, and application within the OP. The domestic domain focuses on justice within a single, closed, and self-sufficient society, addressing the basic structure that distributes rights, opportunities, and resources among contemporaries. The domestic domain basic structure is to ensure fairness through Rawls's two principles of justice. In the OP, agents behind the veil of ignorance are to maximize fairness within a shared temporal context within a single generation.

In contrast, the intergenerational domain extends justice across generations by emphasizing obligations to future generations through the Principle of Just Savings, which requires each generation to conserve sufficient resources to sustain just institutions.

The domestic and intergenerational domains find shared foundations in the Original Position behind the veil of ignorance. The veil of ignorance unifies the domestic and intergenerational domains by requiring agents to consider both current and future citizens, with the domestic domain focusing on agents representing a single generation. The intergenerational domain extends this through a present time entry perspective, where agents, acting as the current generation, account for future generations, ensuring domestic justice aligns with intergenerational obligations. The interaction between the domestic and the intergenerational is shown via the basic structure of society where major institutions are designed to implement domestic principles while adhering to intergenerational constraints, like the Principle of Just Savings. The societal stages of development link the domestic and intergenerational domains by illustrating how a society advances toward justice over time while fulfilling obligations to both current and future generations.

For example, domestic institutions like labor markets and taxation systems should be formed to ensure equal liberties and fair opportunities. However, the Principle of Just Savings requires them to operate sustainably, avoiding resource depletion that harms future generations. In theory, domestic policy that increases industrial production to reduce poverty must consider environmental impacts such as the constraints of climate change vis-à-vis Principle of Just Savings. The intergenerational domain requires domestic priorities to think forward into how policies affect immediate welfare and future costs.

This differentiation between the domestic and the intergenerational highlights the tension that fossil fuels and nonrenewable energy create in the international and intergenerational context (See section 7.1). Furthermore, Rawls's non-ideal theory, though underdeveloped, offers guidance for addressing climate change's systemic inequalities. Non-ideal conditions such as resource depletion and global disparities require adjusting the Principle of Just Savings to prioritize sustainable practices, informing the hybrid model's focus on Degrowth and renewable energy (Rawls 1971, 245–46).

3.2 Conception of Citizens and Society

Rawls envisions society as a fair system of cooperation over time, where principles chosen in the OP ensure justice across generations, providing a foundation for addressing climate change's ethical and ecological challenges. In the Original Position, citizens choose their principles like the just savings principle impartially, ensuring justice across generations (Rawls 1971). Rawls believed that citizens are free and equal, and that society should be fair. Rawls uses *the conception of citizens* and *conception of society* to construct official justification for the two principles using his argument from the thought experiment, Original Position. Rawls's conception of citizens views them as free in three ways: each considers herself entitled to make claims on social institutions in her own right, sees her public identity as independent of any specific comprehensive doctrine, and takes responsibility for planning her own life with the opportunities and resources she can reasonably expect (Rawls 2001). Rawls states that citizens are equal in virtue of having the capacities to participate in social cooperation over a complete life. Citizens may possess varying skills, talents, and abilities, but as long as they meet the minimum threshold required for cooperative participation in society, they can contribute to just institutions. These citizens, in addition to being free and equal, are also reasonable and rational.

Reasonable citizens have the capacity to abide by fair terms of cooperation, even at the expense of their own interests, provided that others are also willing to do so (Rawls 1993; Wenar 2021; Rawls 1971). Citizens are rational in that they have the capacity to pursue and revise their own view of what is valuable in human life. “Rawls calls this the capacity for *a conception of the good*. Together these capacities are called the *two moral powers*” (Wenar 2021). Rawls’s conception of a well-ordered society is defined by fairness, where all social institutions treat all cooperating members equitably, regardless of race, gender, religion, class of origin, natural talents, reasonable conception of the good life (Wenar 2021).

3.3 Original Position and Veil of Ignorance

The Original Position thought experiment attempts to answer the question of what free and equal citizens agree to under fair conditions. The OP is designed to determine the principle of justice that rational agents would agree to under fair and impartial conditions. The OP is a hypothetical situation where individuals choose the basic structure of a just society by removing biases related to personal circumstances. Within the OP is the feature of the *veil of ignorance*. Behind the veil participants in this hypothetical scenario are unaware of specific details about themselves, such as their: social status, wealth, race, gender, or ethnicity, talents or abilities, personal beliefs or preferences ensuring that no one can tailor principles to favor their own situation, promoting impartiality and fairness.

The original position argument consists of four stages. Initially, the parties select principles of justice, subsequently, they verify that a society governed by these principles could remain stable over time (Rawls 2001). Rawls argued that parties within the OP, behind the veil, will see that the two principles of justice are congruent with each citizen’s good.

3.3.1 Stage 1 and the Principle of Just Savings

Rawls first defined the *Principle of Just Savings* in the Theory of Justice, Section 44, in reference to intergenerational justice. Rawls defines the *Principle of Just Savings* in the two-part argument for justice as fairness (JF), which occurs at the first stage of the Original Position (OP) (Rawls 1971; 2001; Wenar 2021). Under the OP, parties are not allowed to know the social positions or the particular comprehensive doctrines of the persons they represent (Rawls 1971; 2001). At this first stage, the parties agree to a *Principle of Just Savings* to regulate how much each generation must save for future generations (Rawls 1971; 2001).

The parties do not know which time period the citizens they represent belong to, so it makes sense for them to choose a savings principle that treats all generations fairly. Rawls argues that the parties do not have to select a savings principle that requires continuous economic growth as such a principle would risk depleting resources required by future generations to maintain just institutions. Continuous growth would also not be agreed upon in the OP as rational agents would not opt for a principle that puts future generations at risk when they do not know which generation they belong to. Instead, they might opt for a Millian “steady state” with no real growth once a generation achieves the conditions where the two principles of justice are fulfilled. After settling on the two principles of justice and a just savings principle, the parties move forward through the four-stage sequence, adapting these broad principles to the specific circumstances of the society they represent.

The Principle of Just Savings acts as a background constraint in Rawls's theory that ensures intergenerational justice by obligating each generation to save sufficient resources to maintain just institutions for future generations. The Principle of Just Savings preserves just institutions across time by requiring each generation to pass on a suitable amount of capital to ensure that future generations can sustain a society governed by Rawls's two principles of justice. The principle prevents current generations from depleting resources for short term gains, ensuring that future generations inherit a society capable of securing basic liberties and opportunities. Since agents are unaware of generational positioning, they would choose a savings principle to avoid favoritism to the present over the future.

Within the OP, agents are rational, free and equal, representing members of society but unaware of their social position, wealth, talents, or generational placement due to the veil of ignorance, ensuring impartiality. Agents aim to choose principles that secure a just society for all. Rawls states that "the parties are to agree to a savings principle that regulates how much each generation is to set aside for those to come" (Rawls 1971). Agents then agree that each generation must save enough capital as the goal is not maximizing wealth but preserving the conditions of justice. The Principle of Just Savings constrains the Difference Principle, ensuring that inequalities benefitting the least advantaged in the present do not deplete resources needed for future generations to maintain just institutions. This savings rate is not fixed and depends on the stage of development. In the accumulations stage development is higher to build just institutions and in the steady state stage savings stabilize to maintain just institutions. To ensure intergenerational fairness, the principle balances present sacrifices with benefits in the future, avoiding excessive savings and insufficient savings. Rawls assumes that these agents adopt a present time of entry interpretations where they act as if they represent the current generation but must account for all future generations ensuring fairness across generations.

While this addresses intergenerational justice, it does not take into consideration climate change and the ways in which savings and development are achieved.

3.3.2 Stage 2 of the OP

In Rawls's OP, the four-stage sequence refines the two principles of justice and the just savings principle to align with the specific conditions of a society. At the second stage, the parties gain information about the society's political culture and economic development. With this knowledge, they design a constitution that upholds the two principles, translating broad principles into specific rights (e.g. translating freedom of thought into the right to free political speech).

3.3.3 Stage 3 of the OP

In the third stage, the parties acquire more detailed information about society and focus on legislation to implement the principles within the constitutional framework. They regulate areas like property, taxation, wages, and inheritance to ensure fair equality of opportunity and the Difference Principle, which seeks to maximize the position of the least advantaged.

3.3.4 Stage 4 of the OP

At the fourth stage the parties have full knowledge of society and act as judges and administrators applying the previously agreed upon legislation to specific cases. This stage ensures that principles of justice are fully realized in practice. The parties work together to secure the fair value of political liberties by requiring public funding for elections, restrictions on campaign contributions, and equal access to media thus preventing concentrations of wealth from dominating politics.

4 Principles vs Policy

To address the tension between the Principle of Just Savings and societal stages of development, an understanding of the difference between principles and policies is necessary. In *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001), they explain their roles within the framework of the OP and four stage sequence. Principles are fundamental, abstract norms that define the basic structure of a just society.

Principles are chosen in the OP and behind the veil of ignorance by rational agents to govern the fair distribution of rights, opportunities, and resources. For example, the Principle of Just Savings addresses intergenerational justice, requiring each generation to save sufficient resources to ensure that future generations can maintain a just society that satisfies the two principles of justice.

Policies on the other hand are specific rules, laws, or institutional arrangements developed to implement the principle of justice. They are created during the four-stage sequence, where the veil of ignorance is gradually lifted, and parties gain more and more information about their society's conditions. While the accumulation stage and steady state stage are not policies in themselves, they give direction for policy to be made.

5 Accumulation Stage

In the accumulation stage society actively saves and invests resources to build the economic, social, and institutional capacity that is necessary to achieve a just society. The accumulation stage is necessary for societies that are not sufficiently developed to reach Rawls's two principles of justice. The Principle of Just Savings mandates that each generation contributes to this accumulation, ensuring that the least advantaged in future generations are better off. The background just savings principle allows for future generations to continue allowing each generation to benefit from intragenerational equal liberties, fair opportunities, and benefits from the Difference Principle. Within the four-stage sequence, particularly the legislative stage, policies during the accumulation stage might include heavy investment in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and should include environmental conservation to build the foundation for a just society.

6 Steady State Stage

The steady state stage is where a society has achieved a level of development that has sufficiently satisfied the two principles of justice. At this point, the need for development ceases. From this point forward, society can maintain a Millian "steady-state" with zero real economic growth, prioritizing the preservation of justice rather than further accumulation. The steady state

stage represents a sustainable equilibrium where the basic structure of society consistently upholds equal liberties, fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle. Once a society reaches the steady state stage, each generation's duty is to preserve the just institutions and resources rather than accumulating more. In the four-stage sequence, policies in the steady state stage focus on maintenance and sustainability such as stable tax systems, environmental regulations to prevent overconsumption and depletion of resources, or policies to ensure fair value of political liberties. These policies aim to preserve the conditions of justice without requiring additional economic expansion.

While the accumulation stage and steady state stage are not principles themselves, they have implications of the Principle of Just. The Principle of Just Savings provides the normative foundation for these stages, guiding generations on how they should either save or maintain resources to ensure intergenerational justice.

7 Economic Growth

To understand the relationship between climate justice and economic growth, we first must understand how growth is used in existing literature. Today, economic thought is typically measured via quantitative indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employment rates, and spending. However, literature concerned with justice, especially in the context of climate justice, challenges these measures including the well-being of the worse off, social justice, and sustainability. Philosophers as old as Aristotle (Aristotle, n.d.; Post 2022) have employed alternative frameworks to measure economic growth emphasizing access to rights and liberties, social mobility, and quality of life. Current justice-based literature builds upon well-established metrics but approaches economic growth as an abstract concept rather than strictly defining it in terms of Gross Domestic Product, job creation per quarter, (un)employment rate, or the consumer price index. Instead, it often focuses on qualitative aspects, questioning what economic growth truly means and whether it leads to well-being, justice, or sustainability.

Rawls's theory has been widely studied for decades because it addresses societal development and justice, prioritizing fairness across generations over traditional economic measures like GDP. Rawls did not write extensively on environmental issues, but his concept of Principle of Just Savings and two-stage model of societal development provide a lens for thinking about intergenerational responsibility as it relates to climate and environmental degradation. His emphasis on institutional justice, raising the worst-off, and the long-term maintenance of a just society makes his work especially relevant for discussions about sustainability and climate change. Understanding Rawls helps clarify how commitments to justice alter our views of growth and development in a world with climate change.

Growth does not necessarily improve health, wellbeing, or education for that matter as well as being a poor proxy for even monetary wellbeing.⁴ GDP also ignores distribution and aggregates across life components which fails to distinguish between wealth and the distribution of opportunities, rights, or safety (M. C. Nussbaum 2023).⁵ This could mean that countries with similar GDP can differ drastically in the areas that matter more than gross monetary capital.

Instead, Rawls calls for development to be evaluated in terms of how it supports just institutions, going hand in hand with the societal stages of development. Rawls wants to ensure fair equality of opportunity, and mechanisms that uphold the basic structure of society over time. Justice-based economic thought views growth not as an end, but as a means that must be evaluated against normative principles, particularly whether it enables all individuals, especially the worst-off, to live fully human lives. Demonstrating that GDP is insufficient, Rawlsian principles offer a more robust and ethically grounded framework for evaluating development.

Mainstream economic thought tends to emphasize the need for continuous economic growth. Some argue that continuous economic growth provides solutions to three central arguments;

1. “That continued economic growth could make everyone within a society and globally, and especially the worst off, progressively better off;
2. That the pursuit of economic growth spurs ongoing innovation, which enhances people’s opportunities and protects a society against future risks;
3. That continued economic growth fosters attitudes of openness, tolerance, and generosity, which are essential to the functioning of a liberal democratic society” (Rose 2020).

However, growth does not automatically provide these outcomes and has historically impaired the climate to the point where continuous economic growth makes conditions worse (Sen et al. 2010). Others argue that when a high material standard is achieved, continued economic growth would not bring enough return on investment for continued growth (“Red Sky at Morning,” n.d.). Growth creates tension with the environment insofar as we continue to use nonrenewable resources that contribute to environmental degradation and climate change.

7.1 Tension That Economic Growth Brings

In its current structure, development is dependent on fossil fuels and other nonrenewable resources. The reliance on fossil fuel-driven economic growth creates a profound tension within Rawls’s justice as fairness framework, undermining the just savings principle and perpetuating an unsustainable accumulation stage. This tension poses a fundamental challenge to Rawls’s theory, as it erodes the ecological and institutional foundations necessary for intergenerational justice, exacerbates intragenerational inequalities, and necessitates a hybrid model.

In Rawls’s framework, the accumulation stage drives economic growth to establish just institutions that secure equal basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity. The Principle of Just Savings states that each generation has a duty to save enough to maintain just institutions for future generations (Rawls 2001). However, contemporary economic growth, heavily dependent on nonrenewable resources like fossil fuels, accelerates climate change, and depletes finite resources.

Economic growth is seen as a necessity both within mainstream economic theory and within Rawls’s theory, but in its current structure, its necessity seems to supersede sustainability. Rawls sees economic growth as a means to sustainability, whereas mainstream economic perspectives advocate for continuous growth as a way to improve living standards and democratic values. However, critics such as Rawls argue that infinite growth on a finite planet is fundamentally unsustainable (Daly 2022). The IPCC warns that global emissions must be halved

by 2030 to limit warming to 1.5 degree Celsius, yet growth trajectories project a 2.4-3.5 degree Celsius by 2100, threatening irreversible ecological harm (IPCC 2022). This depletion directly violates the just savings principle by undermining the resource base future generations need, locking societies in a perpetual accumulation stage that prioritizes short-term gains over long-term fairness.

Stephen Gardiner's (2011) 'intergenerational storm' highlights how climate change exacerbates the tension between economic growth and Rawls's just savings principle, as current generations externalize environmental costs, such as resource depletion and emission, onto future ones. This undermines Rawls's assumption of stable resources for just institutions (Rawls 1971). While Gardiner proposes global ethical frameworks to address this, his solution lacks specific policies to balance ecological and economic demands. My hybrid model offers a practical, Rawlsian approach to ensure intergenerational fairness, surpassing Gardiner's broad institutional call for reform with actionable policy.

Despite this, current literature overlooks the tension between Rawls's principle of just saving, and the 'two stages of societal development' in the context of climate change. The accumulation stage places a responsibility on currently living people who have a justice-based reason to save for future people only if such saving is necessary for allowing future people to reach the sufficientarian threshold as specified (Meyer 2021). The steady state stage is reached once just institutions are securely established and further economic growth is no longer necessary (Meyer 2021). Climate change complicates this model by challenging the assumption that growth is a positive or even neutral force in the accumulation stage.

This tension constitutes a significant challenge to Rawls's framework for three main reasons. First, it undermines intergenerational justice by externalizing environmental costs onto future generations. Resource depletion and climate impacts, such as rising sea levels and extreme weather, restrict future generations' access to primary goods like clean water and arable land, violating the impartiality of the OP. Second, fossil fuel-driven growth exacerbates intragenerational inequalities, as marginalized groups face disproportionate climate harms despite contributing least to emissions (IPCC 2022). This conflicts with the Difference Principle which permits inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged. Finally, the reliance on nonrenewable resources prevents societies from reaching a true steady state stage. This perpetual accumulation stage erodes the stability of Rawls's basic structure, as environmental degradation threatens the liberties and opportunities that just institutions are designed to safeguard.

The significance of this tension arises in its threat to Rawls's justice as fairness: the ability to sustain a just society over time. Proposal for green capitalism (Cooper 2024) or technological optimism (Tupy 2018; Hoover Inst., n.d.) argue that market mechanisms or innovation can sustain growth without ecological harm, but they overlook the finite nature of resources and risk perpetuating inequalities, forgoing Rawls's focus on the worst-off.

To resolve these theoretical tensions, a hybrid model integrating Degrowth and Green Transition is essential:

1. The Degrowth model, which provides a more philosophical argument that emphasizes that continuous economic growth is not necessary. This argument was used as it fits into Rawlsian principles of a steady state stage.

2. The Green Transition approach allows for continuous economic growth so long as there is a shift toward green or renewable energy. This approach aligns with Rawls's Principle of Just Savings but does not fit the traditional conception of a steady-state stage.

Proponents of continuous growth argue that benefits include making everyone better off, enhancing and protecting those from future risks, and fostering liberal democratic goals that align with many capitalistic societies' goals. On the other hand, proponents who argue that continuous economic growth is unnecessary contend that it is unsustainable and that eventually growth will come at too great a cost for only marginal benefits. The debate surrounding the philosophy of climate change and economic growth has been a contentious one; some scholars believe that continued economic growth could be feasible and maybe desirable but not without significant changes to its characteristics (Offord 2012); others, however, argue that infinite growth on a finite planet is inherently impossible without significant damage and ecological collapse (Daly 2022).

Even in 1987, before the widely accepted notion of climate change, philosophers were arguing that economic growth must be balanced with environmental concerns to achieve sustainable development ("Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future," n.d.).

7.2 Green Transition

The green industrial transformation "refers to the shift from a resource-intensive economy with high carbon emissions to a resource-efficient economy with low carbon emissions" (Mehmood et al. 2024). The Green Transition seeks to balance the Principle of Just Savings with societal development stages, enabling ongoing economic growth while respecting the limits of a finite planet. The Green Transition allows for a reduction in emissions, the ability to mitigate climate change, as well as preserving the structural integrity of the environment. The Green Transition can be understood as the shift towards a sustainable, low-carbon economy that involves changes in energy production, consumption, and industrial processes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The goal of these movements is to promote sustainable development while simultaneously upholding the needs of economic growth. This process involves combining strategies such as renewable energy, circular economy, and decarbonization to create a sustainable and resilient industrial system (Mehmood et al. 2024). Economic development and environmental deterioration are negatively connected (Mehmood et al. 2024) but a Green Transition could shift this connotation to economic development being connected to sustainable development. For example, in Pakistan, relentless floods and severe heat waves have become a harsh reality pushing the country to rank fifth among those most affected by extreme weather events. Rising temperatures scorch vast regions, while the rapid melting of glaciers threatens the flow of rivers that sustain the majority of the population (Mehmood et al. 2024).

Within the Green Transition there are two major sub-themes: "First, determining the significance of green industrial transformation and environmental legislation in the context of carbon emissions reduction. Second, the technical advancements, inbound foreign direct investment, and carbon emissions. Both themes are critical to comprehend to formulate sustainable policies for the nation and the whole world" (Mehmood et al. 2024). Importantly, the Green Transition aimed at mitigating climate change must be a global effort, rather than limited to individual countries such as Pakistan.

Denmark is a prime example of a country committing to a Green Transition using wind energy. Denmark achieved 50% renewable electricity by 2020, demonstrating the Green Transition's feasibility. Subsidies from wind farms and grid modernization created jobs, aligning with the Difference Principle by benefiting low-income workers, while reducing emissions to support the Principle of Just Savings.

Critiques of the green transition highlight its potential to create new injustices and exacerbate existing inequalities, despite its aim to reduce carbon emissions. Scholars argue that low-carbon transitions may fail to address structural drivers of injustice in energy markets and the broader socio-economy, potentially worsening conditions for marginalized groups. A Rawlsian distributive justice framework is often proposed to ensure fairness, but critics note that without vigilant application, the transition risks prioritizing environmental goals over social equity. The increased demand for critical minerals and biofuels, alongside the obsolescence of carbon-based infrastructure, further complicates achieving a just and equitable transition.

The Green Transition's goal of decarbonizing in theory should solve the problem of climate change, but some critics may ask the question, how the transformation to a green economy solves climate change if capitalism is still present. Under this framework capitalism is not abolished but reoriented in a way that shifts investment towards sustainable alternatives that would at the least reach net zero emissions. The drive for innovation and competition, properties of capitalism, is increasingly challenged to focus on developing green alternatives. Mainstream thought has tied together the ideas of capitalism, economic growth, and carbon emissions, but this does not have to be the case as there can exist capitalism and economic growth with the absence of carbon emissions. This green form of economic growth relies on assumptions that capitalist markets, when properly regulated and incentivized, can create economic success and can in theory lead to a steady state stage and long-term environmental sustainability.

7.2.1 Commitment to Complete Green Transition

While some political theorists have used Rawlsian justice to advocate for a Degrowth society (see section 7.3), others have argued that Rawls's principles provide strong moral grounds for a Green Transition that is compatible with economic growth. These scholars reinterpret Rawls with new information about contemporary environmental challenges to argue that a just, growth compatible decarbonization is not only possible but morally required under Rawlsian theory.

For example, Stephen Gardiner uses Rawls's Principle of Just Savings to argue that current generations have a duty to preserve the ecological and institutional conditions necessary for justice in the future (Gardiner 2011). Gardiner rightfully argues that if left unmitigated, climate change threatens the basic structure of society and the conditions under which future individuals can exercise their rights and liberties (Gardiner 2011). Failing to address climate change directly violates principles of intergenerational justice, which is key to a Rawlsian conception of justice. Gardiner insists that there is a Rawlsian moral obligation to invest in a 'robust Green Transition', which he defines as a decisive shift away from fossil fuels toward long-term sustainability (Gardiner 2011). Gardiner gives green growth policies, such as clean energy innovation, climate adaptation, and carbon pricing, as mechanisms that fulfill our Rawlsian duty to future generations without requiring a reduction in economic activity. However, Gardiner's critique assumes that growth can indefinitely support justice without addressing ecological limits; these risks violating the just savings principle.

Coming from the legal field, Robert Hockett draws explicitly on Rawls to argue that a justice driven Green Transition is necessary vis-à-vis the Green New Deal. Hockett maintains

that Rawlsian justice requires proactive public investment in green infrastructure, clean energy, and ‘green jobs’, not only to protect future generations but also to ensure fair equality of opportunity in a changing economy where markets will look drastically different than they do pre-Green Transition (Hockett 2005). Hockett interprets Rawls property owning democracy as a template for restructuring economic relations in a Green Transition. By dispersing productive assets, democratizing control over energy and using public institutions to ensure that the least advantaged benefit from the green economy, Hockett’s restructuring aligns within the Rawlsian paradigm (Hockett 2005). His work demonstrates that Rawlsian justice can justify structural change in the form of energy, finance, and labor that collectively amount to a Green Transition and shift from fossil fuels without sacrificing growth or abandoning liberal economic commitments. However, Hockett’s analysis focuses on the domestic while understating the global fairness aspect of the just savings principle. Hockett does not discuss the Difference Principle’s application to the least advantaged globally. Climate policy must consider international perspectives to address the core issue of intergenerational tension caused by development across different stages of societal development.

Marc Fleurbaey and Gregoire Giraud (2012) and Johnathan Harris et al. (2002) apply Rawls’s Difference Principle and Principle of Just Savings to advocate for a growth compatible Green Transition addressing climate justice without rejecting economic growth. Fleurbaey and Giraud (2012) argue that wealthy nations must support sustainable development in the global south through equitable emissions rights and market-based mechanisms like global carbon taxes, redistributing revenues to fund decarbonization and development, respecting Rawlsian fairness by benefiting the least advantaged and honoring historic responsibilities (Fleurbaey and Zuber 2012). Similarly, Harris et al. (2002) emphasizes that environmental degradation disproportionately harms the least advantage, justifying strong domestic regulations, such as carbon pricing and renewable energy investment, to ensure sustainability and preserve justice as fairness. Hayward (2005) complements this by framing environmental integrity as a Rawlsian primary good essential for autonomy and equality. These scholars advocate for a technologically enabled Green Transition that ensures intergenerational fairness and protects vulnerable communities via market-driven and institutional reforms, aligning with Rawls’s principles within a growth-oriented framework (Fleurbaey and Zuber 2012; Hayward 2005; Harris et al. 2002). However, Fleurbaey and Giraud (2012) and Harris et al (2002) risk exceeding ecological and resource limits with their heavy reliance on growth-oriented market mechanisms that also do not align with Rawls’s steady state stage. This risk violating the just savings principle while simultaneously neglecting and limiting fairness for vulnerable populations.

These authors collectively demonstrate that through the Difference Principle, just savings principle, and fair equality of opportunity, a support for a growth compatible Green Transition addressing climate change and inequality (Fleurbaey and Zuber 2012; Harris et al. 2002; Hayward 2005; Hockett 2005; Gardiner 2011). Rather than requiring strict Degrowth, their approach promotes ecologically sustainable, intergenerationally fair, and socially inclusive policies through green investment, institutional reform, and resource redistribution. However, they fall short in ensuring Rawls’s commitment to justice without altering his framework.

7.3 Degrowth

As the climate crisis worsens, some scholars argue that current efforts to address climate change are not effective. They believe mainstream approaches to be inefficient and unlikely to meet the Paris Climate Agreement's goals. The agreement aims to limit global warming to 1.5°C

above pre-industrial levels. It also sets a secondary target of 2°C above pre-industrial levels. Scientists believe that society has surpassed the 1.5° benchmark. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) confirmed that 2024 was the warmest year on record, with temperatures approximately 1.55°C above pre-industrial levels (WMO, n.d.). Surpassing this benchmark reveals the failure of conventional emissions reduction methods, highlighting the urgent need for degrowth strategies.

Amid the French protests of May 1968, the idea of Degrowth was born under the name *décroissance* (Driscoll, n.d.). *Décroissance* became mainstream in 1972 because of a push from the Club of Rome published *The Limits to Growth*, as it quickly gained traction with Parisian Marxist circles. The Degrowth argument has recently gained more attention as the movement comes from the accurate depiction of how healthy countries have developed and benefited from the use of fossil fuels. Fossil fuels and economies coevolved together; coal powered the earliest factories in the Industrial Revolution. Electricity then lit, connected, and expanded cities around the world. Oil and gas knit the post-World War II world economy together (Driscoll, n.d.). Economic growth went hand in hand with emissions growth. The Degrowth movement “argues that while switching to green growth may be theoretically possible, sufficiently rapid decarbonization requires Degrowth” (Driscoll, n.d.).

Degrowth broadly means shrinking rather than growing economies, so we use less of the world’s energy and resources and put wellbeing ahead of profit (World Econ. Forum 2022). Degrowth is not a new argument but in recent years a resurgence within the economic framework of low growth, no growth, and Degrowth in high consumption economies such as our own (Victor 2012). “Degrowth was explicitly conceptualized by a network of thinkers initially centered in France, among them philosopher André Gorz (1980: 13), who wrote: “even at zero growth, the continued consumption of scarce resources will inevitably result in exhausting them completely” (Paulson 2017). The goal of Degrowth is not to maintain a steady level of consumption, but to progressively reduce it in order to leave sufficient resources for future generations, an aim that closely aligns with the Principle of Just Savings. The Degrowth argument is a key component of the broader case for finite growth. Serge Latouche argues that the current models of economic growth are unsustainable and need to be replaced by a model of Degrowth (Latouche, n.d.). However, Degrowth can contribute to economic stagnation coupled with the lack of desirability and feasibility; it is fraught with drawbacks. I take these criticisms into consideration in my hybrid model that allows for growth and social mobility while being feasible.

The long-term feasibility of economic growth has been questioned by analysts (Ayres and Warr 2009), who emphasize the relationship between economic growth, measured as increases in real GDP, and access to cheap supplies of materials, in particular, fossil fuel sources of energy (Victor 2012). Philosophers such as Ayers and Warr (2009) believe that supplies are not expected to last into or past the 21st century, undermining a fundamental condition on which past economic growth has been based and failing to fall in line with a Principle of Just Savings. This would support the claim that current economic models are ineffective in preventing further climate change. The inability for continuous growth stated by Ayers and Warr is further supported by claims of environmental constraints on growth (Rockstrom et al. 2009; Victor 2012).

7.3.1 Commitment to Complete Degrowth

Degrowth advocates have increasingly turned to Rawlsian theory to support the claim that the appropriate economic policy for a just society is not endless growth but intentional Degrowth. Among them, Barbara Muraca (2012) and Andre Barata and Maeia Joao Cabrita (2019).

Muraca argues Degrowth is not merely about reducing economic output or consumption, but about redefining prosperity and justice beyond the paradigm of economic growth (Muraca 2012). Muraca argues that Degrowth should be seen as a normative project rooted in ideas of environmental justice, democratic participation, and the right to a good life (Muraca 2012). Central to her critique is the claim that the Difference Principle is insufficient for meeting the ethical demands of a Degrowth society, though it can be reinterpreted more effectively when combined with the capabilities approach (Muraca 2012). Her critique is centered on the limitation of the Rawlsian framework in a growth orientated economic paradigm and argues for an adaptation centered around Degrowth (Muraca 2012).

Muraca acknowledges that Rawls does not treat economic growth as intrinsically valuable and in TOJ, he states that justice should not be sacrificed for greater economic efficiency or income (Muraca 2012). Muraca questions economic growth as necessary to achieve the benefits that Rawls states it has and as such reinterprets the Rawls's Difference Principle. She argues that growth primarily benefits the already advantaged. She argues that Degrowth prioritizes redistributing wealth and opportunities directly improving the conditions of the least advantaged without relying on indirect growth-based mechanisms such as the trickle-down justification (Muraca 2012).

Muraca critiques Rawls and his theory of resourcism, the view that distributive justice is about the fair distribution of impersonal resources like income and wealth, which are seen as key to achieving well-being (Muraca 2012). Muraca uses Rawls's theory of justice, which advocates for an equal distribution of social primary goods unless inequality benefits the worst off. However, Rawls does not define a 'good life' because such concepts are plural and subjective. Rawls argues that justice should focus on securing equal freedom and fair chances, leaving individuals to define their own good. This avoids paternalism but limits how resources actually affect people's lives. Muraca further supports this claim with critics like Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum who argue that resourcism is too narrow (M. C. Nussbaum 2023; Sen et al. 2010; Muraca 2012). It overlooks environmental factors such as age, climate, culture, and family dynamics that affect people's ability to use resources to live a 'good life'. Muraca thus argues that Rawlsian justice, when properly interpreted, should support the goals of Degrowth.

Muraca invokes Rawls's Principle of Just Savings arguing that infinite growth is ecologically unsustainable and thus incompatible with intergenerational justice. She argues that a Degrowth transition is necessary to ensure that future generations inherit a just livable world (Muraca 2012). Muraca ends by stating that if Rawls's principles are taken seriously the priority of justice, the Difference Principle, and intergenerational fairness will naturally and logically move towards Degrowth and away from a growth dependent society (Muraca 2012). A fair Degrowth society is then more Rawlsian than a society structured around endless economic expansion

However, Muraca's interpretation of Rawls assumes that growth directly benefits the advantaged and degrowth directly improves the conditions of the least advantaged, this lacks empirical grounding. Economic growth has historically and in Rawls's framework allows for growth as long as it benefits the worst-off. This interpretation is taken further by Andre Barata and Maria Joao Cabrita (2019), who propose a "degrowthist reformulation" of the Difference Principle itself (Barata and Joao Cabrita 2019). They argue that Rawls's standard Difference

Principle, focused on maximizing the benefit for the least advantaged, is vulnerable to ambivalent readings that justify vast inequalities as long as the worst off see even a marginal gain (Barata and Joao Cabrita 2019). In practice, this has produced a form of assistencialism rather than structural justice. Barata and Cabrita argue that Rawls's framework allows for an excessive tolerance of inequality, even though it undermines fair equality of opportunity and erodes the social bases of self-respect (Barata and Joao Cabrita 2019).

To correct this problem, they propose a reformed Difference Principle that includes an explicit "brake clause": new inequalities are permissible only if they also result in a reduction of overall inequality (Barata and Joao Cabrita 2019). This clause means that they must degrow social and economic inequalities. This would re-anchor Rawls's theory in its original egalitarian aim, bringing it into alignment with the political and ecological goals of Degrowth. This degrowthist reinterpretation draws on Rawls's support for property-owning democratic and liberal socialism over welfare state capitalism. These regimes are designed to improve the concentration of wealth and power, promote fair equality of opportunity, and distribute capital and resources widely across the population. In a property-owning democracy, Rawls aims to have a progressive tax system, universal education and healthcare, strong labor protections, and limits on inheritance, all policies that Muraca and Barata and Cabrita interpret as structurally congruent with Degrowth.

To operationalize their vision, Barata and Cabrita recommend concrete egalitarian rules such as progressive inheritance and wealth taxes to prevent the intergenerational accumulation of inequality, egalitarian impact assessments for budget and policies, and limits on wage ratios and CEO pay disparities, particularly where public funds are involved (Barata and Joao Cabrita 2019). These measures, the authors argue, are not only practical expressions of Rawlsian justice but necessary conditions for a Degrowth transition that maintains justice as fairness, reciprocity, and legitimacy.

However, I argue that Barata and Cabrita's theory is impractical and does not fit within Rawls's justice as fairness. In their efforts to align Rawlsian justice with Degrowth, Muraca and Barata propose a reinterpretation called the brake clause, yet their arguments face significant theoretical and practice challenges including potential contradictions within Rawls's framework, lacking clarity and stagnation in development. Rawls's Difference Principle allows inequalities if they maximize the benefits for the least advantaged, providing flexibility to incentivize productivity and innovation. The brake clause, requiring that inequality also reduces overall inequality, imposes a stricter egalitarian constraint that risks contradicting Rawls's intent. For example, an inequality that significantly improves the worst-off's position might be disallowed if it slightly increases overall inequality, even if the effect aligns with justice as fairness. The brake clause also has potential to create tension with Rawls's equality of opportunity due to its rigid focus on reducing equality. This may restrict policies that enhance opportunities if they temporarily increase inequality, even if they benefit the least advantaged. Aside from theoretical incompatibility, the brake clause lacks clarity and practical strategies on how to measure "overall inequality". This may prevent short-term inequality at the expense of future reductions in inequality. For these reasons Barata and Cabrita's brake clause, while having the potential to align with the goals of degrowth and environmental stability, does not fit within Rawls's framework.

While these authors articulate the importance of recognizing degrowth, their theories present tension with Rawls's framework. Instead of focusing on reworking the Difference Principle to account for environmental degradation, I make the argument that in order to resolve the tension theories should be shifted to implementing a new growth model that resolves the tension. Muraca and Barata and Cabrita argue that Rawlsian justice, when the assumptions of

growth dependency are removed and interpreted through a structurally egalitarian lens, commits us to Degrowth. Degrowth is not a rejection of Rawls but a potential interpretation of his principles in a world where there are ecological limitations and widening inequality that makes the status quo growth based dependency on nonrenewable energy unsustainable. In these authors' views, a Rawlsian society of justice as fairness must be a Degrowth society, however this is a limited view that does not incorporate the values of green transition. This leads me to my hybrid mixed model approach.

8 Hybrid Mixed Model Approach

In this section I will argue for an approach that takes the strengths of both the Degrowth model and the Green Transition model within the constraints of a Rawlsian theory to relieve the tension between the Principle of Just Savings and the societal stages of development. The model I suggest is a median between a fully Degrowth model and a full Green Transition model.

Taking aspects of a Degrowth model, such as its commitment to lowering consumption and the emphasis on the fact that it does not require continuous economic growth, fall in line with the idea of a steady state stage that Rawls advocates for. This, however, is not the case for the Green Transition model. The Green Transition model does not claim that economic development would stop at a steady state stage. Instead, it suggests that growth after the Green Transition would lack the negative effects caused by nonrenewable energy sources. As a result, this model supports continuous economic growth.

Based on my critique of Degrowth in Barbara Muraca (2012) and Andre Barata and Maeia Joao Cabrita (2019) and Green Transition in Gardiner (2011) and Hockett (2005), I argue for a hybrid approach.

A complete Green Transition would involve immediate short-term costs such as job losses in industries that will be 'transitioned' to green alternatives which would temporarily worsen condition for the least advantaged, challenging the Difference Principle unless mitigated by strong social safety nets. The green transition relies heavily on advancement that would require significant economic investment. In constrained societies this could divert funds away from the least advantaged while simultaneously benefiting cosmopolitan communities, first leaving rural areas to face increased costs and outdated systems. Within Rawls's theory, the green transition would create tension with his societal stages of development as there would never be a true steady state stage. Continuous economic growth would eventually lead to a decrease in marginal benefits until it would be unnecessary and obsolete. Any continuation of 'growth' past just institutions and the upkeep of just institutions would conflict with Rawls's policy grounded in justice as fairness.

To a more extreme extent, a complete degrowth policy would disproportionately harm the least advantaged who rely on economic growth for access to basic primary goods, scaling down would undermine the Difference Principle without proper safety nets while simultaneously rejecting the veil of ignorance. Rational agents would reject policies that reduce the well-being of the poorest as it violates the requirement to maximize the position of the least advantaged.

An approach that values the transition away from fossil fuels and other GHG emission intensive activities and more towards green or renewable energy would allow for a steady state stage to be achieved with the Principle of Just Savings in mind. Coupled with the emphasis on lowering consumption, this transition could take various forms. These include shifting from mass consumption of cheap goods to purchasing fewer, high-quality items; investing in public transit infrastructure to reduce reliance on multiple household vehicles, especially in urban areas; and expanding the use of shared infrastructure. The hybrid approach is both more realistic and

feasible but also falls more in line with Rawlsian principles of justice and standards advocated for in TOJ and JF:AR, that being of course the limitations of economic growth.

To create an effective hybrid model that aligns with Rawls's justice as fairness, the Degrowth model's extreme stance of complete zero consumption must be forgone to avoid undermining the Difference Principle, which prioritizes benefits for the least advantaged through sustainable economic activity. Similarly, the Green Transition's reliance on endless capitalistic growth and resource-intensive technologies should be rejected to prevent ecological depletion and ensure compliance with the Principle of Just Savings. By integrating Degrowth's focus on reduced consumption with the Green Transition's emphasis on renewable energy, the hybrid model achieves a sustainable balance that supports equitable resource distribution and intergenerational justice.

8.1: Reconciling Domestic and Intergenerational Justice

The interaction between the domestic and intergenerational domains in John Rawls's framework of justice as fairness is strained by climate change, as economic growth in the domestic domain often undermines intergenerational obligations. This tension is evident in the conflict between growth and sustainability, ideal vs non-ideal conditions, and balancing present and future sacrifices, necessitates a practical solution. The hybrid model of Degrowth and Green Transition addresses these challenges by aligning domestic justice priorities with intergenerational fairness through sustainable policies. This subsection examines how the hybrid model resolves the domestic-intergenerational tension, offering a pathway to reconcile Rawls's principles with climate change realities.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2022) estimates that halving emissions by 2030 requires rapid renewable adoption and consumption reduction, aligning with the hybrid model's dual strategy (IPCC 2022). Additionally, the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2018) projects 24 million green jobs by 2030, supporting domestic justice by providing opportunities for the least advantaged, while renewable expansion preserves resources for future generations (IPCC 2022).

In the domestic domain, Rawls justifies economic growth during the accumulation stage to achieve just institutions, such as expanding opportunities for the least advantaged through investments in education or infrastructure (Rawls 1971, 287). However, fossil fuel-driven growth depletes resources and exacerbates climate change, violating the Principle of Just Savings. This creates a tension between the need for domestic growth to alleviate current inequalities and the intergenerational duty to maintain a stable environment, resulting in a prolonged accumulation stage that delays reaching the steady state stage where growth is no longer necessary. The hybrid model mitigates this by reducing consumption through Degrowth, minimizing environmental degradation, and transitioning to renewable energy, enabling sustainable growth that supports domestic justice without compromising future resources.

Rawls's view on economic growth, posits that growth is necessary only during the accumulation stage to establish just institutions that secure basic liberties, fair equality of opportunity and benefits for the least advantaged, as justified in the foundation for a just society. Once these institutions are established, there is a steady state where further growth ceases in order to prioritize resource preservation, aligning with the principle of just savings. He justifies this by arguing that continuous growth risks depleting resources, violating intergenerational fairness as rational agents behind the veil of ignorance would avoid favoring the present generation. In contrast, my hybrid model, as proposed in the document, integrates Degrowth's reduced consumption with the Green Transition's renewable energy focus, allowing for sustainable, targeted growth that supports domestic justice through green jobs and

intergenerational justice by minimizing ecological harm. My approach argues that Rawls's framework is insufficient for reasons of anthropogenic climate change and that my hybrid policy resolves this tension using Rawls's savings principle.

Rawls's theory assumes ideal conditions, a well-ordered society with compliant institutions and sufficient resources (Rawls 1971, 8), but climate change introduces non-ideal conditions, where growth undermines both domains. Critics like Hyunseop Kim (2019) argue that Rawls's domestic focus neglects global climate impacts, while Susan Moller Okin (2017) highlights gendered disparities in environmental harm, and Martha Nussbaum (2007) critiques Rawls's inattention to ecological limits (Kim 2019, 45; Moller Okin 2017, 45; M. Nussbaum 2007, 89).

While these critiques suggest adapting the Difference Principle to environmental constraints, such an approach is theoretically insufficient within Rawls's framework. However, adapting the principle focuses on intra-generational distributive justice, neglecting the intergenerational obligations central to climate change. In contrast, emphasizing the just savings principle and societal stages of development offers a superior approach, as the just savings principle mandates conserving resources to sustain just institutions across generations, directly addressing climate induced resource depletion. The societal stages dynamically balance growth with sustainability, preventing the perpetual accumulation stage driven by fossil fuels. The hybrid model, combining Degrowth's reduced consumption with Green Transition's renewable energy focus, aligns with Rawls's theory better because it aligns with the just savings principle and steady state stage, ensuring ecological stability for future justice while addressing present needs, unlike the Difference Principle's limited temporal scope. In the OP, rational agents would endorse this model for its comprehensive commitment to intergenerational fairness, adapting Rawls's framework to nonideal ecological realities without compromising domestic justice.

The Principle of Just Savings requires current generations to make sacrifices, such as reducing consumption, to ensure benefits for future generations; however, this can conflict with immediate domestic priorities like poverty alleviation (Rawls 1971, 287). The hybrid model balances these commands through an overlapping consensus, where stakeholders agree on sustainable practices despite differing priorities. For instance, investing in renewable-powered public transit reduces emissions and fulfills intergenerational obligations, while also improving access for low-income communities and advancing domestic justice goals. Such policies ensure that sacrifices do not disproportionately burden the least advantaged, aligning with the Difference Principle. By fostering green jobs and equitable resource distribution, the model reconciles present and future needs, enabling a transition to a steady state stage.

The hybrid model's practical application extends Rawls's framework to non-deal, global contacts. Policies like international renewable energy partnerships can reduce transboundary climate harms, addressing Kim's cosmopolitan critique, while community led solar projects empower marginalized groups, responding to Okin's relational justice. By ensuring resource sustainability, the model supports Nussbaum's capabilities framework, securing conditions for human flourishing. These measures demonstrate how the hybrid model resolves the domestic-intergenerational tension, adapting Rawls's principles to achieve a just, sustainable society where present and future generations thrive.

For example, a two-policy mechanism, a global carbon pricing framework, as recommended by OECD (2021), could generate \$1 trillion annually to fund renewable infrastructure, creating green jobs for the least advantaged and reducing emissions to preserve resources (Errendal et al. 2021). International renewable partnerships, such as China's solar exports to Africa, enable developing nations to pursue sustainable growth, addressing Kim's (2019) call for cosmopolitan justice while supporting the Principle of Just Savings. The hybrid

model informs global climate governance by embedding Rawlsian justice as fairness in the Paris Agreement nationally determined contributions (NDCs). It prioritizes equitable resource distribution and sustainable development for vulnerable nations, aligning with the Difference Principle (UNFCCC, n.d.).

8.2 Objections and Limitations

Rawls's framework, designed for domestic justice, struggles with global climate issues, as *Laws of People* offers limited guidance for transnational challenges. Scholars like Kim (2019) and Nussbaum (2007) critique its domestic focus and ideal assumptions, noting that climate change requires non-ideal, global approaches like the Capabilities Approach or Intergenerational Justice. While Rawls's principles assume reasonable actors and compliant institutions, climate change's real-world complexities demand coordinated global action, which his framework lacks. The hybrid model addresses these limitations by integrating the just savings principle with sustainable policies, ensuring intergenerational fairness and global cooperation without abandoning domestic justice. This paper does not argue that Rawls is the only correct theorist to apply, but rather that if Rawls's theories are used, the concepts of climate change introduce a tension that must be resolved to effectively apply a Rawlsian framework of justice to climate change.

9 Conclusion

John Rawls's framework of justice as fairness, with its Principle of Just Savings and societal stages of development, faces a profound challenge from climate change, as fossil fuel-driven economic growth perpetuates an unsustainable Accumulation State, depleting resources and undermining intergenerational fairness. The Principle of Just Savings requires each generation to preserve sufficient resources to maintain these institutions for future generations, enabling a steady state stage where further growth becomes unnecessary (Rawls 1971). However, current growth, reliant on nonrenewable energy, drives climate change, depleting resources and threatening future generations' liberties and opportunities. This perpetuates an Accumulation stage, preventing a steady state stage from occurring thus violating intergenerational fairness between present generations and future generations.

This tension, explored through Rawls's Original Position, veil of ignorance, and two principles of justice, threatens the fair values of liberties while exacerbating inequalities, particularly for marginalized communities and future generations. To resolve this, I propose a Hybrid Model that integrates the Degrowth Model's emphasis on reduced consumption with the Green Transition Model's focus on renewable energy, aligning sustainable development with Rawls's commitment to fairness.

From the Original Position, rational agents behind the veil of ignorance would endorse this model to ensure justice across generations, translating principles into policies through the four-stage sequence. For example, policies like Denmark's wind energy subsidies, which achieved 50% renewable electricity by 2020, and Barcelona's superblock program. This reduces emissions through fewer vehicles and more pedestrian-friendly zones, illustrates how the Hybrid Model mitigates climate change while advancing equitable opportunities for the least advantaged, fulfilling the Difference Principle. By addressing critiques from scholars like Hyunseop Kim, Susan Moller Okin, and Martha Nussbaum, the model extends Rawls's framework to non-ideal, global contexts, incorporating ecological limits and relational justice.

In the domestic domain, the Hybrid Model promotes policies like carbon taxes and community-led solar projects to reduce emissions and create green jobs, ensuring fairness within

societies. In the intergenerational domain, it upholds the Principle of Just Savings by transitioning to renewable energy and minimizing resource depletion, enabling a sustainable steady state stage. Globally, the model aligns with frameworks like the Paris Agreement's national determined contributions, fostering equitable resource distribution for vulnerable nations and addressing Kim's cosmopolitan critique.

This Hybrid Model not only resolves the tension between economic growth and intergenerational justice but also reimagines Rawls's framework for the realities of climate change. By balancing present needs with future obligations, it offers a transformative vision for international relations, urging global cooperations to secure a just, equitable, and sustainable future for all generations.

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