1. Introduction

What is so special about the field of intergenerational justice for Rawls to claim that 'it submits any ethical theory to severe if not impossible tests' (1971: 284)? Justice between generations focuses on the moral rights and obligations of people who are born at different times, as, for example, international justice does with respect to those with different citizenships, and, more generally, those born in different places. What then are these difficult questions raised by our differences in 'temporal location'? Broadly, we can distinguish three subsets of issues.

The first debate (discussed in Section 2) has to do with the very possibility of intergenerational justice beyond our obligations towards members of other generations while they coexist with us. Here, we ask ourselves whether we owe anything to people who either have died already, or are not yet born. This problem does not only affect the relations between distant generations: as soon as my own parents have died and as long as my children are not yet born, I can ask myself 'why would I owe them anything?' Differences in temporal location mean that people may not exist at the same time—be it only during part of their life—which raises special ethical challenges.

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The next two issues consist in attempts at answering a single question: what (if anything) do members of a generation owe members of another one? As the word 'generation' can be understood either as 'birth cohort'—that is, a set of people born within the same lapse of historical time—or as 'age group'—that is, a set of people being at the same stage of their biographical time—this question can indeed be answered from two angles (for example, Daniels 1988: 12–13; van Parijs 1996: 67–9).

Sharing non-renewable resources such as oil between generations clearly belongs to the realm of justice between birth cohorts. In contrast, age discrimination on the job market will appear to most of us to belong mainly to the sphere of justice between age groups. These two spheres of intergenerational justice will be dealt with respectively in Sections 3 and 4.

2. HARM AND EXISTENCE: THE POSSIBILITY OF JUSTICE BETWEEN NON-CONTEMPORARIES

2.1 Should We Care about the Past?

Let us thus address the first set of questions. There are essentially two difficulties related to our non-contemporaneity with past generations. We may have several reasons for looking at the past in the context of a theory of intergenerational justice. Suppose first that one community (for example, Afro-Americans or Australian aboriginals) has an average wealth level lower than that of another community (for example, Euro-Americans or Euro-Australians). And let us assume that this difference in wealth can be traced back to injustices done in the past by the ancestors of the wealthier community. Are not the current members of such a community morally bound to some reparation? Part of the answer rests upon whether people today can be held responsible for unjust actions from which they have benefited, but against which they were unable to do anything, since they did not exist at that time (see Bedau 1972; Waldron 1992; Thompson 2000). Suppose we provide a negative answer. It means that we may look for alternative approaches (for example, 'unjust enrichment' or more simply intra-generational distributive justice) to account for our obligations to improve the condition of the worst-off communities in society. But it may also have implications in deciding, for example, whether the citizens of a country should be bound to pay back an external public debt contracted by earlier governments that they never had a chance to elect.

This first issue is, however, not so much one of justice between generations (for example, between possibly careless Euro-Americans of today and their descendants...
who will have to pay the costs of such carelessness) as one of rectification between two groups across generations (for example, the alleged obligations of contemporary Euro-Americans towards today's Afro-Americans, because of what the ancestors of the former inflicted upon the ancestors of the latter). The other question, more genuinely intergenerational, is whether our—now dead—ancestors can be harmed by some of our current actions (for example, destroying what they regarded as an architectural masterpiece for the sake of building a motorway). One might claim that if, whatever our actions, dead people can never be harmed, then no moral constraints on our actions could be derived from their past wishes or achievements. In other words, the question here is not whether we can inherit an obligation that a dead (group of) people had towards some other (group of) people. Instead, it is whether we can meaningfully have an obligation towards our ancestors themselves.

We can start from two assumptions: either dead people 'exist' (immortalism) or they do not (mortalism) (Mulgan 1999). As to the latter, there have been attempts by mortalists at defending the possibility of using a concept of (pre)posthumous harm (see Feinberg 1984; Waluchow 1986; Lamont 1998). Posthumous harms are possible only if there are posthumous properties (for example, interests). But, in order for the latter not to be free-floating properties, they need to be ascribed to ante-mortem persons. Now, it makes perfect sense to ascribe properties to people after their death. Saying that Ronald Reagan is one of the five last US presidents illustrates the fact that the way we describe persons may depend on subsequent events, including posthumous ones. However, once we ask when an ante-mortem person was harmed by a post-mortem action, we need to argue that the post-mortem harm took place before the person's death—that is, while she was alive. This requires a deterministic view ('it has been true since the beginning...'), which is hard to swallow. Admittedly, there are alternative ways of defending the idea of obligations towards dead people. Either we abandon the idea of 'posthumous harm' and argue for the possibility of posthumous duties in the absence of correlative harms. Or we adopt an immortalist view, which is probably what underlies the view of many of those who believe that dead people can be harmed.

What are the consequences of such views for a theory of intergenerational justice? For those—be they immortalists or not—who hold the view that dead people can be harmed, the question of our duties towards dead people should be regarded as an essential component in the definition of our intergenerational obligations. Not only would we have obligations towards the past. But the content of these obligations would affect the content of what we owe to the coming generations, both because resources devoted to caring for the dead (for example, managing cemeteries) will not be used for current and future people, and because of the consideration given to the dead's desires as to what should be transferred to our descendants (see Thompson 1999). The workers who died while building the pyramids or the soldiers who were killed on the battlefields for their country may understandably have wished that what they were working or fighting for be passed to future generations. While such
wishes are certainly not *irrational*, does this entail that it would be *immoral* not to try to fulfil them (for example, Thompson 1999)? Moreover, it would require at least that we work out a plausible theory to address conflicts, for example, between the desires of remote and less remote past generations or between the ideas of the ‘few’ current human beings and those of the huge crowd of people who are now dead (for example, Bykvist 1998: 67-8). For those holding the contrary view that dead people *cannot* be harmed, intergenerational justice can be described as a story involving current and future generations only. This does not entail, however, that it would be a ‘one-way story’, for the existence of generational *overlap* is such that caring about the previous generation will not necessarily amount to caring for a non-contemporary generation. To conclude on this point, either one argues that we do not have obligations towards dead people, which shapes the scope of questions that a theory of intergenerational justice has to address. Or we consider that we do have obligations towards dead people, in which case we should explain *why* as well as *how* the wishes of all these dead people can be articulated between themselves as well as with those of people alive today. In addition, liberals may have to address the following challenge: how to design procedures (including voting procedures) that are such that the views of both ‘mortalists’ and ‘immortalists’ can be accommodated in society (see Mulgan 1999)?

### 2.2 Should We Care about the Future? The Non-Identity Challenge

There is a more serious difficulty, however. At first sight, one might expect that, given the temporal direction of causation (if any), acting now in a certain way (for example, burying radioactive waste unsafely) might clearly *harm* future people, even though they do not exist yet. There is, however, one *fact* that entails a challenge to the possibility of using a concept of harm with regard to future people. It is often overlooked that most of our actions not only affect what will end up being transferred to future people. They also affect the *identity* of these very people—that is, whether it is *this* or *that* person who will be conceived and born. Let us consider the following case. Two parents learn from their medical doctor that, if they were to conceive a child now, he would certainly be born blind. They can, however, follow a very cheap and painless treatment for two months, in which case they would be able to conceive a child who will certainly not be blind. The crucial fact is that, since it is another egg and another spermatozoa that would meet, this would be *another* child. The problem that the parents then face is the following. They are wondering why it would be *wrong* to conceive the (blind) child now. His life would certainly be worth living. And there would be no way to prevent him from being blind, other than not conceiving him. Conceiving another child with perfect vision could thus hardly be said to *improve* the situation of *this* child. How could the blind child then
ever be said to have been harmed by his parents’ decision to conceive him, if being born blind is the best possible genetic condition for this child?

This is the non-identity challenge (see for example, Parfit 1984: ch. 16). We find ourselves in non-identity cases whenever the absence of an allegedly harmful action would also have meant the non-existence of the allegedly harmed person. The key question is whether a moral/legal concept of harm can still be used in such circumstances (see for example, Woodward 1986; Shiffrin 1999). This does not only affect the assessment of ‘procreative’ actions. In fact, most of our actions, to the extent that they have an impact on the moment of our sexual intercourse, hence on which spermatozoa and which egg will meet, are also subject to this challenge. This is the case, for example, with transportation or energy policies. Thus, a car-addicted father could tell his daughter: ‘well, I might have taken the bicycle and left you a cleaner environment; it is, however, unlikely that it would have been you whom I would be speaking to now; are you not then better off alive in a polluted environment than non-existent?’ Does it not follow from the non-identity challenge that, whatever we do, we will not do anything wrong towards future people? If we want to avoid such a conclusion, we have at least two sets of strategies at our disposal. One consists in questioning the practical significance of the non-identity problem. Another consists in arguing that we can come up with meaningful accounts of wrongful actions that would not be harmful ones at the same time. We shall focus here on the first set of strategies, of which we shall mention three avenues.

One avenue consists in arguing that, in a wide amount of cases, more than one action could lead or have led to the conception of a given person. Even though it was very unlikely that this person would have been born had I acted otherwise (for example, given the huge number of competing spermatozoa), it was still possible. According, for example, to Roberts (1998: 26–7), we should restrict the scope of the non-identity challenge to cases where it would have been impossible for another person to have been conceived, had we acted otherwise. If this strategy appears to be too restrictive, introducing probabilities in the definition of the problem’s scope may well be meaningful (see for example, Vallentyne 1987). A related way of restricting the scope of the non-identity problem consists in defending a distinction between necessary and potential people (for example, Arrhenius 2000: 141–5). Here, instead of arguing that the problem arises only with respect to an action that was necessary for the allegedly harmed person’s existence, it is being argued that people who would necessarily have been born, whatever our actions had been, fall outside the scope of the non-identity argument. However, one may wonder whether anybody can ever be ‘necessary’ in this sense.

A second—more significant—avenue consists in focusing on cases where the future person’s life can be expected not to be worth living. In this case, the use of a concept of harm is not being blocked by the non-identity circumstances. We do not need to show that, once born, this person could have had a better life. Showing that she has an irreversibly bad life will do. In such a case, there is no need for a
comparison with an alternative state of the same person. It is enough to compare
the person's current or expected condition with an absolute threshold. Whenever
the child to be born can be expected to have a life irreversibly below such a thresh­
old, the fact that the only way to prevent this is for this child not to exist does not
entail that a concept of harm cannot be used.

This still leaves us with cases, like the ‘blind-child’ or the ‘car-addicted-father’
one's, where the expected life of the child is worth living. Let us mention in this
respect a third avenue, which rests on two assumptions. The factual assumption is
that there is generational overlap. This means that the car-addicted father, once his
daughter has been conceived (and born), will still spend a significant amount of
years with her. The normative assumption is that the fulfilment of some obligations
should be assessed as soon as the child has been conceived, whereas, for other obliga­
tions, this may be done after conception. An example of the former is the possible
obligation not knowingly to conceive a child with a given set of physical character­
istics. As an illustration of the latter, let us mention our obligations towards the next
generation. We may claim that, if our generation has the obligation to transfer to
the next one a given basket of ‘goods’, it is only at the end of this generation’s life
that its fulfilment should be assessed. At least some flexibility should be left to each
generation as to when (during its life) it should operate such transfers. We should
make sure, however, that, on the day of our death, our obligations to the next birth
cohort will have been fulfilled. Let us thus refer to these as complete-life obligations—
that is, obligations the fulfilment of which should be assessed only at the end of our
lives. Now, once we bring together the idea of generational overlap and the notion
of complete-life obligations, the car-addicted-father case (and more generally
energy-policy, transportation-policy, and so on cases) can be addressed as follows.
We may consider that his ‘pre-conception’ pollution did not harm his daughter,
given the non-identity circumstances. However, the father should not use this non­
identity argument as an excuse for not taking action after conception took place in
order to make sure that his complete-life obligations will turn out to have been ful­
hilled. Whatever he did before his daughter was conceived, if he turns out at the end
of his life not to have fulfilled his intergenerational obligations as they apply to envi­
ronmental matters, he will certainly have harmed his daughter. Given that he is able
to catch up on the accumulated pre-conception pollution by taking post-conception
measures, he should not be entitled to claim that the pollution eventually trans­
ferred to his daughter in violation of his intergenerational obligations was necessary
for this daughter to have existed. This is how complete-life obligations towards the
next generation can escape the non-identity challenge. And, if we are able to ground
our obligations towards more remote generations on those we have towards the
next generation (for example, based on the view that we should not act so as to pre­
vent the next generation from being able to fulfil its own obligations), our obliga­
tions towards these more remote generations may also escape the non-identity
challenge. Our theory of justice towards future people would thus have to rest
entirely on our obligations towards members of the next generation, obligations towards subsequent generations being derived by transitivity.

One may, however, remain unconvinced by such a view, for at least two reasons. First, those who believe that the parents should have waited two months in the blind-child case are still left with no plausible account of the possible wrongness of the parents' impatience. Secondly, the solution proposed to deal with the 'car-addicted father' does not allow us to account for obligations towards remote people in a direct way, unless we adopt Roberts's approach mentioned above. We would have no direct obligations towards remote future generations, except the minimal one of not acting in a way that would make their life not worth living. Thus, those who want to address these two worries may then have to develop a second strategy consisting either in proposing alternative concepts of harm or in arguing for the possibility of harmless wrongs. In the latter case, they need to explain how a given action can be wrong despite, in a sense, being bad for no one (Parfit 1984; Arrhenius 2000: ch. 8).

3. Theories of Justice between Birth Cohorts

It is one thing to decide whether we owe anything to the next generation(s). It is another to define what we owe them. Most standard theories of justice have tried to answer this difficult question. It will not be possible to provide an analysis of the variety of proposals. We shall focus on a comparison between a reciprocity-based and an egalitarian account of justice between generations. We shall then turn, on the one hand, to a brief discussion of alternative theories and, on the other hand, to implementation issues.

3.1 Indirect Reciprocity. On Borrowing the Earth from our Children . . .

To account for our obligations towards the next generations, one popular formula is: 'we borrow the earth from our children' (stewardship). This phrase formulates in an ambiguous and compressed form the idea that we owe back to our children something that they never gave us in the first place, since it is from our parents that we received it. The idea of indirect reciprocity accounts properly for this. It points at the fact that the generation that made us a debtor is not itself the final creditor generation. Contrary to what happens in a direct reciprocity context, it is not the
same person (or set of persons) who benefited us in the first place and to whom we owe something back. This has an additional consequence: the indirect reciprocity ‘open loops’ can be put together into an intergenerational chain.

It is worth distinguishing two different uses of the notion in the intergenerational justice debate. At times, it is supposed to justify the existence of obligations towards future people. There is, indeed, nothing obvious in owing something to a (coming) generation that has not benefited us (yet) in any way. The maxim we can use in such a case is then: we owe something to the next generation because we received something from the previous generation (hereinafter the ‘justificatory maxim’). At other times, the idea of indirect reciprocity is used to define the content of our obligations towards future generations: what we owe to future people is (at least) as much as what we have received from previous generations (hereinafter the ‘substantive maxim’).

This may seem a plausible way of accounting for our intergenerational obligations. However, we shall see, in line with Barry (1989), that it faces very serious challenges. First, the ‘gift-obligation’ objection asks whether any gift should give rise to corresponding obligations. Either it is a gift for which nothing is expected in return, in which case we would not be bound to anything. Or, if something is expected in return, the person who accepts the gift should be able at least to understand what it entails as well as to refuse such a gift. Can you expect a newborn to refuse ‘gifts’ for which she will be bound over for the rest of her life? Similarly, should we feel obliged to give life in turn because we benefited ourselves from such a gift? The ‘gift-obligation’ objection is a strong objection. Is it the only one, however? The ‘past–future’ objection raises a second problem: even if we were to consider that gifts may justify obligations in return, why would it follow from the fact that it is from the previous generation that I received something that I should give it back to the next generation? At first sight, there is nothing in the definition of indirect reciprocity that requires such a temporal orientation. For example, given the fact of generation overlap, part or the whole of our obligations could be fulfilled on a direct reciprocity basis, to the benefit of the previous generation who benefited us in the first place (for example, through expensive elderly health care). In such a case, would it still be the case that we would owe the next generation at least as much as what we received from the previous generation? Perhaps not, since, under a reciprocity logic, we cannot owe more than what we initially received.

However, there is a ‘zipper’ counter-objection. If we start to reciprocate to members of the previous generations, they in turn will have to reciprocate to someone else if they are willing to comply as well with the reciprocity principle. They would otherwise have received at the end of their life more than they would have given (net intergenerational transfers). The problem is that the previous generation might not itself have any older (and still alive) generation beyond it. Hence, reciprocating might force it to violate the principle of reciprocity, because it would find no one further back in time to reciprocate to. This is unacceptable. The ‘past–future’ objection is thus not as robust as it may have seemed (for a fuller assessment,
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see Gosseries 2001). Still, the ‘gift–obligation’ one remains a very serious challenge. And a further difficulty is that reciprocity reduces justice to an equivalence in contributions, which is a core idea underlying, for example, contract law regimes. The logic of such a commutative view of justice is, however, far apart from a distributive one that typically underlies, for example, egalitarian theories. This has practical consequences, as we shall now see.

3.2 Rawls’s Two-Stages Approach

Is there any plausible distributive theory of intergenerational justice? Let us look at Rawls’s work, which is a cornerstone for the current debate. The author of A Theory of Justice (1971) devotes one section (sect. 44) to our topic and deals with both procedural and substantive issues. Although it is probably not the most interesting part, the procedural dimension of Rawls’s intergenerational proposal gave rise to extensive discussion (English 1977; Routley and Routley 1977: 166–173; Paden 1977; Wissenburg 1999). The reader will remember that Rawls’s idea of an ‘original position under a veil of ignorance’ provides a justificatory hypothetical device relying on a notion of counterfactual insurance (1971: sect. 24). To decide upon the principles of justice to be adopted, we have to imagine ourselves as if we did not know our gender, our social status, our talents, and so on. In the case of intergenerational justice, people in the original position are being asked to define ‘how much they would be willing to save at each stage of advance on the assumption that all other generations are to save at the same rates’ (Rawls 1971: 287). Rawls adds, however, two specifications, departing from the standard veil of ignorance. First, while ignoring which generation we are members of, we should assume that we are all members of the same generation. Why would this matter, since we do not know which generation we are in anyway? The reason invoked by Rawls—that it would otherwise ‘stretch fantasy too far’ (1971: 139)—is not very convincing and we should therefore not give too much importance to this ‘present time of entry’ assumption. What about the second specification? Rawls sidesteps the key assumption according to which the actors in the original position are to be regarded as ‘mutually disinterested’. Instead, in the intergenerational context, we should regard ourselves as ‘heads of families’ having a ‘desire to further the welfare of their nearest descendants’ (1971: 128). This aims at solving the problem that previous generations may not have saved at the appropriate rate, that there is no way we could now force them to do so, and that—as a result—current generations, were they mutually disinterested, would not be willing to save at the appropriate rate either. It may also be hard to account for the obligations of the first generation on a mutual disinterest basis. Rawls subsequently abandoned this specification, however, assuming that, in an ideal world, previous generations are supposed to have saved at the appropriate rate (1993: 274). This, of course, does not solve the problem of how to account for the obligations of
a mutually disinterested first generation, even in such an ideal world. It is significant, however, of the difficulties involved in justifying our intergenerational obligations from a ‘mutual disinterest’ perspective.

It is now time to turn to Rawls’s substantive proposal, the just savings principle. Let us briefly look at how utilitarians would deal with the issue of just savings (see Ramsey 1928/1978; Fleurbaey and Michel 1999). Utilitarianism is concerned with maximizing the aggregate intergenerational utility, whatever the possible intergenerational inequalities that may follow. In an intertemporal context, there is a key fact: capital is productive, at least once you invest it properly. If you defer to next year (or century) the consumption of part of your capital, and if you invest it, you may well turn out being able to consume much more then. To put things simply, utilitarians tend systematically to defer consumption and invest in the future with the aim of increasing the intergenerational utility pie. This results—even in finite-number-of-generations models—in a sacrifice of early generations to the benefit of later ones—or to no one’s benefit if the horizon is indefinite and if there is no satiety level (never-ending sacrifice). Utilitarians will thus call for the adoption of positive intergenerational savings rates, at least for the first generations, to the benefit of later generations, which either will never come (infinite horizon with no satiety level), or will be much better off as a result of this early saving. Is this not shockingly incompatible with (maximin) egalitarianism—that is, the idea that we should care in priority for the worst off and that inequalities are acceptable only when they are necessary to improve the situation of the worst off?

Rawls himself proposes a two-stages model. On the one hand, there is an accumulation phase where generations are required to adopt a positive savings rate—that is, to leave more than they received. Referring ambiguously to reciprocity language, he writes:

the process of accumulation, once it is begun and carried through, is to the good of all subsequent generations. Each passes on to the next a fair equivalent in real capital as defined by a just savings principle... . This equivalent is in return for what is received from previous generations that enables the later ones to enjoy a better life in a more just society. (Rawls 1971: 288; emphasis added)

Then comes a steady-state stage where each generation is required only to leave at least as much as it received from its predecessors: ‘once just institutions are firmly established, the net accumulation required falls to zero. At this point a society meets its duty of justice by maintaining just institutions and preserving their material base’ (Rawls 1971: 287–8). Rawls adds: ‘all generations are to do their part in reaching the just state of things beyond which no further net saving is required’ (1971: 289). We thus have a clear two-stage model with an accumulation phase where net savings are required, followed by a steady-state stage where no net savings are expected.

A comparison with Ramsey’s utilitarian model reveals that such a two-steps approach may be reached on strictly aggregative grounds, at least under the
assumption of the existence of a satiety level or 'bliss point' beyond which further consumption does not bring more utility. And one key difficulty with Rawls's model is clearly the existence of such an accumulation phase. Why does Rawls resist from adopting a one-stage (maximin) egalitarian position on the issue? The idea of an accumulation phase seems in clear violation of maximin: not only would the earlier (poorer) generations be bound to larger efforts than later (richer) generations, but the worst-off people in a model without accumulation would certainly be better off than the generations finding themselves in such an accumulation phase, at least for the first of these generations. The superficial reason why Rawls abandons maximin is that, as he puts it, 'there is no way for the latter generation to improve the situation of the least fortunate first generation. The principle is inapplicable and it would seem to imply, if anything, that there be no saving at all' (1971: 291). The idea is thus that, since the worst-off generation is now dead and therefore out of reach, there is no way we will ever be able to satisfy the requirements of maximin. There is, however, a simple answer to this worry. We should simply shift to a less strict version of maximin called leximin (Sen 1970: 138). It says that, if the situation of the very worst off cannot be improved, we should then care about the next worst off, and so on. This in fact amounts to saying that the realm of intergenerational justice is between accessible generations—that is, cohorts whose situation can still be changed.

There is a more serious reason why Rawls abandons a single-phase theory. Without an accumulation phase, we would remain stuck at the level of wealth of prehistoric generations. The reason why Rawls advocates an accumulation phase is, however, not due to strictly aggregative motives. Instead, positive savings should stop as soon as we are in a situation capable of 'bringing about the full realization of just institutions and the fair value of liberty' (1971: 290). This rests, however, on the twofold empirical claim that, in the absence of such accumulation, the level of wealth of successive generations would be unacceptably poor and that such a level of wealth would be incompatible with the existence of just institutions and a just distribution. It is beyond the scope of the current chapter to provide a detailed examination of the validity of these two claims. However, it is far from excluded that Rawlsians be able to justify the need for an accumulation phase. (For further developments, see Gosseries 2001.)

3.3 Requiring a Zero Rate of Savings, in any Circumstances?
There is a second difficulty, however, with Rawls's substantive proposal. Even if we were able to justify on non-aggregative grounds the need for an accumulation phase, we would still need to know whether humanity is still in a state that requires accumulation. And we would also have to examine whether the prohibition of non-dis-savings proposed by Rawls as a principle to rule the steady-state phase is the one
that maximin egalitarians should defend. This is the question we shall be briefly focusing on now.

Egalitarianism, be it of the ‘strict’ or the ‘maximin’ form, does not only prohibit dis-savings at steady-state stage. It should also prohibit net positive savings. As long as we remain within the ambit of a reciprocity-based approach, there is in principle nothing wrong with leaving to the next generation more than what was left to us by the previous generation. But as soon as we adopt a properly distributive theory, we should prohibit not only dis-savings, but also savings (‘zero-rate’ rule). Is there anything wrong, however, with freely sacrificing ourselves for our children? Were a generation unanimously deciding to do so, the egalitarian answer would certainly be ‘no’. However, in the absence of such unanimity (which is likely), the surpluses transferred to the next generation could instead be transferred to the worst-off people of our own generation. And this is the key move. In other words, were maximin egalitarian redistribution effectively to take place within each generation (intra-generationally), the ‘zero-rate’ rule would be such that the worst-off under it (whatever generation they are members of) would be better off than under any alternative rule. The next generation, inheriting just as much as we initially received ourselves, will be able in turn to apply maximin egalitarianism intra-generationally, so that the worst off in the next generation will not be worse off than the worst off in the current generation. Thus, in contrast with Rawls, being concerned for the worst off trans-generationally, hence for those of our own generation as well, leads us to prohibit both dis-savings and savings in steady-state stage.

As for any principle, the prohibition of both dis-savings and savings (‘zero-rate’ rule) suffers exceptions. We have already mentioned that, if a generation unanimously decided to adopt a positive savings rate or if maximin egalitarianism were not being applied intra-generationally, the principle should not necessarily be followed. There is, moreover, the striking fact that the amount of uncertainties as to what we in fact do transfer to future generations may call for a rate of positive savings, for the sake of prudence (on uncertainty issues, see Birnbacher 1988). Still, prudence should not be excessive, for it may well take place to the detriment of the currently worst off. Moreover, intergenerational maximin egalitarianism may require a departure in some cases from our ‘zero-rate’ rule, as long as an increase in intergenerational inequalities may be required for the sake of improving the condition of the worst-off people trans-generationally. Let us focus, however, on two further exceptions that are of special interest in so far as they illustrate differences between an egalitarian and a reciprocity-based rule.

First, there is the ‘exogenous-disadvantage’ exception. It refers to a hypothesis where—as a result of extremely reliable predictive models—the current generation can expect the next one to undergo a major climatic disaster (due, for example, to the fall of a meteorite) that will greatly reduce opportunities available to the next generation. Ex hypothesi, this impact is in no sense due to human activities (exogeneity). Under a reciprocity-based model, this should not change anything to our
intergenerational obligations, for, as soon as we have given back as much as we received, that is it! The egalitarian view is different. If two countries exhibit great differences in natural resources, egalitarianism requires international redistribution. If two generations are likely to come across radically different environmental circumstances, it will similarly require intergenerational redistribution. Thus in our hypothesis of a 'predictable exogenous disadvantage' affecting the next generation, a positive rate of savings will be expected from the current generation, so that the worst-off generation of these two be better off than under an alternative distributive scheme. Of course, in the reverse situation—a temporary and non-repeatable exogenous disadvantage affecting the current generation—a negative rate of savings will be allowed and even required from the present generation.

The other interesting exception results from the fact that egalitarians should adopt a 'per capita' proviso. As soon as we have a growing population, transferring to the members of the next generation as much as we received ourselves will require the adoption of a positive savings rate. Conversely, when population declines, we should adopt a negative savings rate such that the worst off under this scheme would be better off than under any alternative scheme. Again, this contrasts with a reciprocity-based perspective: as long as we gave back as much as we received, it does not matter how many people will benefit from it. But the requirement of a positive savings rate in case of a growing population also raises the question as to the extent to which egalitarians should allow a population to grow, for a positive savings is necessarily adopted at the cost of the worst off in our generation. To what extent do we not have the obligation to deal with the existing worst off first before we procreate? Intergenerational ethics is therefore inevitably connected with population and procreation ethics, at least once we reject a reciprocity-based account of intergenerational justice.

3.4 From Theories...

So far, we have explored and discussed only the 'folk' reciprocity-based and the (maximin) egalitarian accounts as well as—to a lesser extent—the utilitarian account of our intergenerational obligations. There have been developments in the literature as well about how 'mutual advantage' (Gauthier 1986: 298–9; Sauvé 1995; Heath 1997; Arrhenius 1999) or 'communitarian' (de-Shalit 1995: 13–65) theories would deal with the matter. But it is probably on Lockean theories of legitimate appropriation that a few additional words are needed (see Elliott 1986; Wolf 1995). It is misleading to regard them as mere 'first-come, first-serve' theories. One of the so-called 'Lockean provisos' states that, for an original appropriation to be legitimate, 'at least as much and as good' should be left for others (Locke 1690/1980). How should this be interpreted in the intergenerational context? Does it mean that we should leave to the following generation at least as much as the first generation on
earth appropriated per head? Or does it mean instead that we should leave our followers at least as much as they would have had in the absence of any earlier generation? The environment may well have changed quite a lot since prehistoric times, for reasons that partly have nothing to do with the activities of preceding generations. Still, there is another possible baseline. There is no reason—for a Lockean—why the current generation should make up for early degradations for which it would not be responsible, nor why it should be allowed simply to spoil for its own pleasure the whole product of historical accumulation. Should not Lockeans then simply advocate the rule according to which the current generation has to leave to the next generation at least as much as it received from the previous generation? More precisely, it should then transfer to its followers at least as much as they would have had had the current generation (as opposed to all the generations so far) neither degraded, nor improved, what it inherited. (For further developments, see Gosseries 2001). Interestingly enough, such a Lockean principle exhibits a surprising convergence with the reciprocity-based maxim.

This provides only an overview of a few competing theories on the matter. Further exploration is needed on a series of (practically relevant) theoretical issues. First, to what extent does the fact of intergenerational overlap affect the possibility and/or content of different theories? For example, it is essential in allowing for some forms of intergenerational contractarianism. Secondly, the exogenous disadvantage hypothesis provides a good example against which to test the behaviour of these various theories. The reciprocity-based and the Lockean theories of intergenerational justice are on the same side in this respect. And it helps to understand the idea that what the next generation ends up with is not strictly the result of what was transferred to it by the current one. Thirdly, the population dimension is a key element for any comprehensive intergenerational theory (see Narveson 1967; Parfit 1984: ch. 17; Wolf 1997; Fehige and Wessels 1998; Arrhenius 2000). While the indifference of reciprocity-based theories to the matter is patent, it is less clear how Lockeans should look at it (Vallentyne 2000: 13). And, as we have seen, once we realize that a growing population requires an egalitarian to adopt a positive savings rate, the morality of such a demographic growth is being brought under question. Fourthly, how can an egalitarian accept the possibility of development and growth, if she is not ready to endorse a ‘two-stage’ approach to intergenerational justice or if she adopts a ‘zero-rate’ rule at steady state? This is where intergenerational and international justice meet each other.

3.5 ...to Practice

So far, we have discussed only the general ‘shape’ that intergenerational transfers should take, based on the idea of savings rate, defining when a generation should transfer more or less than it received. It is, of course, important to define a metric
allowing us to compare what is left by a generation with what it initially inherited. It is clearly beyond the scope of this contribution to provide a detailed analysis of the possible metrics. Roughly, there are welfarist and resourcist metrics. The problem—for example, for an egalitarian—is that, as soon as we have to compare resources of a very different nature, we need some account of the respective value of these resources. One avenue consists in relying on hypothetical auctions with non-envy tests or notions such as undominated diversity (for example, van Parijs 1995: eh. 3).

The issue is always to assess the extent to which two baskets of heterogeneous (internal and external) resources can be regarded as equivalent.

Heterogeneity is thus not a problem that occurs only in the intergenerational context. Is there, however, anything special about that context? We can mention three types of issues. First, it is clear that the heterogeneity of goods available for distribution is increased by a specific cause in the intergenerational context. Some resources are indeed exhaustible. And, unless we consider that they should, therefore, never be exploited, it is clear that at some point we have to substitute, for example, oil resources with equivalent technologies. This brings us to our second problem. To assess whether these substitution resources or technologies are equivalent, we need the possibility of an auction, be it a hypothetical one. Once we introduce the idea of non-contemporaneity, the intergenerational overlap opens the possibility of a (hypothetical) auction involving both the current and the next generation. Of course, there is an additional peculiarity: the preferences of the next generation’s members are heavily influenced by the current generation, both through the education provided and through the fact that what is left and not left by the current generation will also influence the formation of the future generation’s preferences. The third point is about the whole debate in environmental economics on ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ sustainability (for example, Norton 1999). Roughly, the question is whether there should be limits to substitutability, and whether we should apply our criterion of intergenerational justice (whichever it is) separately to natural and human-made capital, requiring that it be satisfied in each of these spheres. In fact, there are two angles from which to approach this difficult issue. On the one hand, we can try to develop some moral argument according to which specific objects should be preserved for future generations, and therefore treated separately in the ‘equivalence’ accountancy. It could be a chunk of virgin forest, a given species, or some remarkable cultural productions such as Brussels’ Grand Place or the Tage bridge in Lisbon. The dividing line does not, therefore, have necessarily to do with a natural–cultural one. On the other hand, what one can value is the diversity of (types of) objects as such, whatever they are. Whether we let this or that species or monument disappear would not matter at all as long as a certain diversity of goods and options remains. This can in turn be justified on various grounds—for example, because the existence of a diverse world is essential for future generations to be free to form their preferences. Both strategies—the ‘irreplaceable-object’ and the ‘diverse-world’ ones—are extremely difficult ones.
But, unless at least one of them can be successfully brought to fruition, it does not seem that any limits to substitutability could meaningfully be defended.

Another important question is how we connect our theories of justice with practices such as 'generational accounting' (for example, Kotlikoff 1993) or the adoption of a 'positive social discount rate' in cost–benefit analysis. As to the former, the key point is whether we can use it without necessarily implementing a reciprocity-based strategy. As the 'exogenous-disadvantage' example illustrates, justice does not always require a benefit ratio from each generation that would be equal to zero (implying the absence of net transfers between the generations at stake). And it is even less acceptable to phrase things in terms of equivalent benefit ratios from one generation to the next, as the example of generations who would have the same but higher than one benefit ratio suggests. This could be the case of a succession of cohorts depleting resources to the same extent and without compensation. As to the adoption of a positive social discount rate, the key question is: to what extent does adopting such a positive discount rate entail giving less moral importance to future people than to present ones (for example, Cowen and Parfit 1992)?

4. Age, Justice, and the Complete-Life View

Oil-resources depletion and age discrimination in employment both raise intergenerational issues. Is it enough, however, to claim that the former has to do with justice between birth cohorts and the latter with justice between age groups? Age-based reforms (as any reforms) always have a cohortal impact. Raising the age for pension eligibility or cancelling age-based mandatory retirement, like cancelling compulsory military service, will advantage some birth cohorts over others. Similarly, ageing societies raise problems both of justice between cohorts (for example, what would be a fair evolution of the active population's contribution rate across different cohorts?) and of what can be called justice between age groups (for example, is there something like a fair contribution rate, assuming that each cohort would have the same active/inactive ratio?) (see Scharlach and Kaye 1997).

This just shows that the mere invocation of age does not help us define the specific field of justice between age groups, as opposed to justice between birth cohorts. Given the continuous correlation between age and date of birth, it is not obvious that such a task can ever be brought to fruition. One meaningful task to be assigned to 'justice between age groups' can, however, consist in a critical investigation on the complete-life view—that is, the (egalitarian) view, according to which, as long as people receive the same amount of a good over their whole life, justice will be met (for example, McKerlie 1993). To grasp the underlying intuition, let us compare
age-based discrimination with, for example, racial discrimination. Both age and 'skin colour' are clearly unchosen features. However, under certain conditions (including the constancy of the discriminatory practice through time), the age-based discrimination may turn out not to be discriminatory over complete lives, because of the simple fact that we all age—while we generally do not change the colour of our skin during our life. Imagine two job applicants, Eileen and June, the latter being much younger. At first sight, one may be shocked by an employer who would prefer June for the mere reason that she is younger. However, it may well be that Eileen herself benefited from such a discriminatory practice ten years earlier, when she was then younger than the other applicants for another job. Transporting ourselves to the end of both Eileen's and June's lives, it may well turn out that they will have had equal access to employment over their life. Age discrimination is thus very different from other types of discriminations, as the former may turn out not to discriminate at all between people once we adopt a longitudinal, complete-life approach.

A full theory of justice between age groups needs to address two broad types of issue. First, we have to assess the extent to which age-based and seniority-based practices are in line with the complete-life view. And in doing so, we may well have to take into account the cohortal impacts of such practices (see Section 4.1). Secondly, can the complete-life view fully account for our intuitions as to how goods should be allocated between people of different age and therefore as well along people's lives? There are several reasons why it may not. Either we may adopt the radical view that the basic units of ethical concern are not whole lives but segments of people's lives (see Section 4.2). Or, assuming that complete-life egalitarianism is being complied with, the way some goods are allocated along people's lives may still raise extra problems of justice. In other words, equality over complete lives may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for a just allocation between age groups (see Section 4.3). We may also consider that, while some types of goods (for example, jobs) should be allocated on a complete-life egalitarian basis, others should not (for example, basic political rights) (see Section 4.4). Let us consider each of these issues in turn.

4.1 Life Profile and Lifespan

Even for those adopting the plainest complete-life (egalitarian) view, age-based practices will still constitute a whole field of investigation. It may well be that such practices would entail direct or indirect violations of complete-life egalitarianism. Let us begin with a distinction between lifespan and life-profile issues. Suppose that there is a policy of age rationing applied to a life-extending type of health care (for example, heart surgery). People who suffer from a given deadly disease will not be provided with access to surgery if they are above a certain age, say 65. This age-rationing practice does not allocate goods in a certain way along people's lives. What
it does instead is to allocate directly lengths of life. It may be justified on at least two very different grounds. For utilitarians, this age-rationing policy will be the right one if and only if we can show that age is a good proxy for additional life expectancy and if this is likely to increase the aggregate utility in a given society. For egalitarians, based on the amount of resources that it is fair to allocate to life-extending intervention, we should try to equalize people’s life expectancies, ceteris paribus and as long as those who have a poorer life expectancy cannot be held responsible for it. Age rationing in health care might be one way of equalizing lifespans, but not necessarily the best one. What matters is not the age of the respective candidates at the moment of the medical intervention. What matters, ceteris paribus, is how many years each of them will eventually turn out to have lived. To get a proper prognosis, other proxies might be better than age. Moreover, the complete-life account cannot simply aim at equalizing people’s length of life regardless of huge differences in the quality of these lives. Age rationing would be acceptable only to the extent that it would serve complete-life maximin egalitarianism. This contrasts with, for example, Callahan’s support (1987) to age rationing that relies, not on a reference to scarcity, but on the intuition that, for the elderly to have a meaningful life, they should serve the young, which implies also the sacrifice of their lives (for a critique, see Daniels 1996: 277). As to Daniels, he is reluctant to justify age rationing on egalitarian grounds. His reluctance rests with the example of two competing candidates for the same life-extending intervention (1996: 276). Suppose that none of them is more responsible than the other for her now fragile physical condition. The old person has never relied so far on medical services for which she has been paying her whole life, while the younger candidate has already benefited from several earlier interventions. To a ‘desert-based’ view claiming that the old should be chosen, egalitarians should respond that the old person was simply lucky enough never to have needed health care so far and that the younger candidate, if he had reached such an advanced age, may also have contributed in the same way to the financing of the health-care system. Daniels’s reluctance may therefore not be justified.

In contrast to life-extending health-care rationing, when employment benefits are being allocated on the basis of age or seniority (that is, in-company age), it does not directly affect the (professional) lifespan of the people at stake. It primarily allocates access to employment benefits in a certain way along people’s life. This is why age rationing of life-extending health care and age-based or seniority-based discrimination in employment raise different types of issues. Whereas the former ‘merely’ raises an issue of allocation of lifespans, only the latter raises a problem of allocation across the lifespan (what I call a ‘life-profile’ issue). With this distinction in mind, we can understand at least two things. Since age-based rationing of life-extending health care and age-based discrimination in access to employment benefits raise different issues, judgements on the former should not automatically be transposed to the latter (and conversely). Moreover, we are now able to perceive how egalitarians can assess age-based practices on a complete-life basis. Taking the
case of employment benefits, they will want to assess when discriminatory allocations across the (chronological) lifespans result in an unequal allocation of (professional) lifespans—that is, of the amount of years of access to employment benefits. One will then typically try to debus the various ways through which age-based or seniority-based allocation of employment benefits can entail in certain circumstances inequalities over complete lives between workers. Take, for example, age-based mandatory retirement. It is clear that, from the point of view of access to employment benefits, it disadvantages those who either had to start working later than others, or who had to interrupt their career for longer periods than others (for example, because of repeated diseases). Take as well the ‘last-in, first-out’ seniority-based layoff rule. It clearly disadvantages those who underwent external mobility more frequently than others for reasons that they cannot be held responsible for. We can thus identify categories of workers who are more affected than others by a given age-based or seniority-based rule, through no fault of their own. From an egalitarian point of view, such ‘involuntary victims’ constitute a prima facie case against these practices.

Egalitarians should not stop here, however, for they are only halfway. Whatever the metrics they choose (for example, resources), complete-life equality of access to employment benefits is not the only thing that matters. Maximin egalitarians could support such age-based or seniority-based practices if the latter are capable of—and necessary for—improving the situation of the worst-off people in society (be they workers or not) from the point of view of equality of resources in general, even if this means that some workers will have a lesser access to employment than others, for reasons beyond their control. For such a maximin argument to be successful, several conditions are to be fulfilled. One of them is that there should be an efficiency case for such discriminatory practices. However, if we take, for example, the age–productivity relationship, the empirical evidence is mixed (Levine 1989: 108–17). Moreover, these efficiency gains (if any) should be effectively redistributed in line with maximin egalitarianism. Suppose that age-based discrimination effectively increases the productivity of companies, but that states are incapable of taxing these gains to redistribute them to society at large. In this case, egalitarians may well be forced to advocate second-best policies aiming at prohibiting such age-based or seniority-based discriminatory practices.

4.2 What Are the Fundamental Units of Ethical Concern?

So far, we have remained within the ambit of the complete-life paradigm. Let us now turn to one radical way of questioning such a paradigm. It requires a fundamental anthropological shift towards considering that we are in fact not necessarily the same person during our whole life, that our physical continuity is not all that matters in that respect (Parfit 1984: chs. 10–12). We can thus contrast the ‘complete-life’ view
with an 'inter-segment' one, according to which the real units of ethical concern should not be persons as we generally see them, but smaller units that can be called 'segments'. Thus, the reason why we should regard intra-life allocation as a genuine problem of justice is simply because it is about allocating resources, welfare, and so on between different segments that are the true units of ethical concern.

Several egalitarian 'segment-based' views have been proposed (McKerlie 1989, 1993; Daniels 1996: 264–9), the most consistent among them being the 'total-segments' one. It values equality between all segments of all lives. This means that equality should reign between the segments both from one period to the next one of the same person and between the different people at each period (for example, McKerlie 1989, 1993). This could require, for example, a flat income profile across people's lives, no age limits for access to education or employment, and so on. However, as Cupit puts it, 'it is hard to see that there is any inherent injustice in a system where people take their leave at different times, or receive presents celebrating their births on different days' (1998: 714). As such this is an objection more against an egalitarian 'inter-segment' view than against the view that segments should be regarded as the core units of ethical concern. Parfit has rightly noted that, for a utilitarian, the plausibility of inter-segmental sacrifice in common-sense ethical views would then logically entail the plausibility of interpersonal sacrifices for the sake of utility maximization (Parfit 1984: 340). In other words, the acceptability of sacrificing the life of an innocent to increase the well-being of twenty other people would get further credibility from considering that there is nothing wrong with working like mad at one moment of one's life for the sake of enjoying relaxed holidays later in one's life. Still, the idea that the fundamental units are 'segments' as opposed to 'full persons' is hard to swallow. Its defenders try to give it plausibility by providing examples such as the following one: suppose that a couple decides that each of them will take turns in having a dominant position, in a manner compatible with complete-life equality of powers (McKerlie 1993: 222). Does it mean that complete-life egalitarians could have nothing to object to such a 'switching-places' case? On egalitarian grounds perhaps not. But there may be something else going wrong with this domination relationship, notwithstanding the fact that it is equally shared. Hence, Daniels (1996: 269) is right when he says that such an example does not necessarily force us to shift to an inter-segment view. Do we not then dispose of any alternative to a fundamental anthropological shift to account for our moral intuitions for which the complete-life view cannot account?

4.3 Daniels's Prudential Lifespan Account

If we reject the reductionist strategy, do we fall back on a plain complete-life view? Two people may well have received the same amount of resources at the end of their lives. Still is it not the case that the fact that they would have received them
differently across time might raise an additional problem of justice? This seems to be Daniels’s view (1988, 1996: ch. 12). Equalization over complete lives certainly makes sense and it may entail that we be treated differently at different ages. Still, the way we may treat each age group differently should itself be subject to some additional constraints that cannot be derived directly from the complete-life view itself. How could we define and justify such constraints? For Daniels, justice between age groups should be dealt with not directly as an interpersonal issue. Instead, it should be looked at as a problem of intra-life allocation between age stages. What is just between the young and the old can then be defined by exploring what a prudent intra-life allocation would consist in. He specifies procedural constraints that should lead us to adopting a given substantive theory. The procedural approach consists in a ‘veil-of-ignorance’ strategy, including three specific informational restrictions. First, we should assume that we do not know our age. Secondly, we should act as if we ignored our current conception of the good life and of the good life plan. Thirdly, we should ignore our actual life expectancy and assume that we shall have a normal lifespan—that is, that we will go through each of the age stages (for example, Daniels 1988: 67). With these three informational constraints in mind, people in a hypothetical original position, knowing what their lifetime fair share of resources would be, are being asked to define what a prudential intra-life allocation would consist in.

The key outcome that is supposed to follow from such a procedure is the ‘keeping-options-open’ principle. As Daniels (1988: 58) puts it,

I want to assure myself at each stage of life of having an adequate chance to pursue whatever my plan of life is then. I must assure myself that at each stage of life I shall have a reasonable share of basic social goods which serve as the all purpose means of pursuing what I think is good. Keeping options open implies that I must be neutral or unbiased toward the different stages of life that I shall go through.

This principle of neutrality allows for some revisability of conceptions between the different age stages, hence for differences in conceptions between different age groups. As Daniels recognizes, this principle is not without its difficulties. Being committed to a single conception of the good life (1988: 58–9) or to a given insurance plan (1988: 55) may be required across different age stages, which is to a large extent incompatible with strong revisability. Otherwise, we would respectively have painstakingly invested in future realizations that would never take place, or have enjoyed life carelessly with the idea that we could always contract an insurance when the time of great risks would come. Daniels in fact restricts his ‘keeping-options-open’ view to requiring that, at each age stage, a normal opportunity range be guaranteed—that is, the array of life plans reasonable persons…are likely to construct for themselves’ in a given society (1988: 69). Unexpectedly, it also implies an ‘income preservation principle’ requiring that ‘post-retirement income levels (or standard of living) should approximate pre-retirement income levels (or standard of living), across the board for all levels of fair income shares’ (1988: 122–3).
No doubt, the shift to an intra-life approach to justice between age groups has its merits. There are, however, at least two types of difficulties involved in Daniels’s prudential lifespan account. First, why would a prudent intra-life allocation be a proper guide to a just inter-personal allocation (for example, Daniels 1996: 267)? It is clear that the shift to an intra-life approach helps us see the problem ‘from the inside’. And envisaging the tragic choices that society has to make as if they were our own (painful) choices for our own life may render them more acceptable to us. What is less clear, however, is the extent to which, for example, the requirement of intra-life revisability underlying the ‘keeping-options-open’ principle adds any independent support to the liberal idea of neutrality towards the various conceptions of the good life plan. Is not the need for such neutrality already present at the outset behind the second informational restriction that will in turn lead to the ‘keeping-options-open’ principle? Secondly, on the substance of Daniels’s account, to what extent is the ‘keeping-options-open’ principle acceptable and why would it require an equality between pre-retirement and post-retirement income levels? As we have said, some conceptions of a good life (plan) may not be compatible with this in so far as they require sacrificing an earlier or later part of one’s life to the benefit of a given lifelong project. Egalitarians—contrary to utilitarians—are in principle not ready to sacrifice one person to the benefit of others. At the same time, why would they see anything wrong in a person sacrificing a part of her life to the benefit of achieving something greater over her life as a whole?

4.4 Articulating Three Intuitions

There is probably still a long way before a full theory of justice between age groups can be proposed. For such a theory to be plausible—and assuming that we leave the inter-segment view aside—at least three basic intuitions should be articulated: the ‘complete life’, the ‘just profile’, and the ‘continuist’ one. We have already been focusing explicitly on the (egalitarian) complete-life view—that is, on the intuition according to which for certain goods (for example, jobs) egalitarians should primarily focus on equalizing the access to such goods over people’s complete lives. The just-profile intuition entails that this is not enough, for there can be good reasons for promoting a given type of allocation of certain goods along people’s lives. Daniel’s prudential lifespan view is one example: to each age, a certain option set should be attached. Child labour might provide another illustration, for, beyond concerns as to working conditions, there is a certain view that childhood should be preserved for playing and learning. A variety of considerations may lead us to promote a certain type of income or education profile over another. Some might be efficiency based (for example, for investing early in life in education) or paternalistic (favouring regular instalments over lump-sum allocation). There might also be a perfectionist view according to which there is a prime of life that corresponds with
adulthood and that successes during the prime of life will determine the general success of one’s whole life (Wilkinson 1994). Finally, there is the continuist view, according to which some rights and/or goods should be guaranteed to people at any moment in their life. Sufficientarians—that is, those concerned with the coverage of basic needs—will in principle adopt such a view. People should be guaranteed food and shelter whatever the reasons why they are unable to pay for themselves (for example, because they have consciously lost everything at the lottery). If this relies on a certain understanding of what respect for basic human dignity entails, it should be the case all along the person’s life, even if shelter, for example, is not required for the person’s physical survival. Similarly, voting rights may be considered so fundamental (and non-scarce) that—contrary to jobs—there is no valid reason (except competency-based ones) why voting rights should be restricted on an age basis (for example, Daniels 1996: 268; cf. van Parijs 1999). In the same line, what should we then think of the allocation of political power on a seniority basis? Not only do we need to clarify the connections and articulations between these three intuitions. We should also try to find out what non-egalitarian theorists (for example, utilitarians, libertarians) think about age-based practices.

5. Conclusion

Theories of intergenerational justice are clearly still at an early stage. A lot of focus has been devoted to issues such as the non-identity problem, which clearly raises fascinating puzzles that touch upon moral concepts as fundamental as the one of ‘harm’. Justice between birth cohorts is a complex field where a great deal of research is still needed on issues such as the justification of an accumulation phase, the articulation with population ethics, the critical assessment of various notions of environmental sustainability, or the ethically aware use of tools such as generational accounting. But it is probably the domain of justice between age groups that is in need of the strongest research effort. We are still far from working out clearly why some goods should be allocated all along our lives while others need to be equalized only over complete lives. Whether connections between prudence and justice can be meaningfully drawn is still to be found out. And difficult problems such as care of the elderly and children’s rights need to be precisely defined before being integrated in a full theory of justice between age groups. What is at stake is the variety of reasons why differential treatment may be attached to different ages. For each of them, we need to put into operation the tools of ethical assessment. Finally, while the theoretical challenges are numerous and fascinating, the practical relevance of such a theoretical debate is equally so. A whole set of policies, ranging from population to employment, health care, resource management, and environmental
issues, are potentially affected by theoretical discoveries in this relatively new field of ethical research.

References


