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Justice in a Globalised World: Revising the reciprocity-based account of global justice

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BACHELOR THESIS

B.Sc. International Relations and Organizations

Justice in a Globalized World

Revising the reciprocity-based account of global justice

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INTRODUCTION

‘*The one per cent winners take all*’ is a striking illustration of growing inequality within and among countries, highlighting how the gap between the richest and the poorest continues to widen (UN News, 2020). These inequalities are shaped in part by economic, political and social frameworks - laws, institutions, and policies - that determine how benefits and burdens are distributed across members of societies. These frameworks are not fixed but result from human political processes and evolve over time and place. Their arrangements have deep societal significance as distributions fundamentally affect people’s lives in their development (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017). However, the distribution of benefits and burdens is not only a matter of social consequences, but also a central concern in political philosophy, addressed through the concept of distributive justice, exploring which institutional arrangements and distributions can be considered fair and morally justifiable. To answer this concern, philosophers have developed different justificatory approaches to distributive justice, most notably *non-relational* and *relational* theories, which offer distinct perspectives on justice’s requirement and to whom it is owed.

On the one hand, *non-relational* theories justify principles of distribution based on shared characteristics of a being argued to be morally significant (Caney, 2011; Singer, 1972). On the other hand, *relational* theories argue that justice’s obligations arise from specific kinds of social or institutional ties that individuals share (Blake, 2001; Sangiovanni, 2007). Scholars have identified different kinds of relationships that can ground duties of justice, with two of the most prominent being *coercive* and *reciprocal* relations. *Coercion-based* accounts of distributive justice argue that individuals who are subject to the coercive power of political and legal institutions are owed special duties of justice (Blake, 2001; Nagel, 2005). *Reciprocity-based* accounts hold that justice’s obligations arise from relations of mutual contribution within a cooperative institutional framework (Maffettone, 2014; Sangiovanni, 2007). Reciprocity, in this context, is understood as a relationship of mutual obligation and shared benefit among agents who co-sustain and co-benefit from the same institutions.

This thesis will centre on reciprocity-based accounts and follow Andrea Sangiovanni’s (2007) *Reciprocity-Based Internationalism* (RBI), as it stands as the most influential account of this branch. Sangiovanni’s theory rests on the normative premise that distributive justice arises from reciprocal relations within political institutions, and on the empirical claim that such reciprocity exists only at the state level, limiting the application of distributive justice to co-citizens.

Although Sangiovanni's (2007) theory contributes significantly to the discussion on distributive justice, his normative and empirical premises have been considerably critiqued. Some scholars have normatively questioned Sangiovanni's conceptualisation of reciprocity itself, claiming it is too narrow or inadequately capturing the moral dimensions of cooperation and suggested an alternative conceptual framework that could lead to very different conclusions about who is owed what (Hartley, 2014; Lister, 2011). Others have empirically challenged Sangiovanni's claim that reciprocal cooperation is exclusive to domestic institutions pointing to extensive interdependence at the global level as evidence that similar patterns of mutual support and contribution exist internationally (Heaney, 2016; Maffettone, 2014).

These debates give rise to the following research question: *What does a plausible version of reciprocity-based account of justice demand from us?* By plausible, I mean a version of reciprocity anchored in both normative principles and real-world social conditions to allow for obligations of justice to emerge. To answer this question, this thesis critically examines both the normative and empirical claims of Sangiovanni's RBI. It is crucial since the way we conceptualise reciprocity determines where we might empirically locate it and therefore what scope of distributive justice we are prepared to endorse. This thesis aims to offer a reciprocity-based explanation of justice that is plausible considering the contemporary context by reevaluating both the concept of reciprocity and its institutional manifestations.

The paper will be structured as follows: the first section will provide an extensive explanation of Sangiovanni's RBI theory, from the conceptualisation of reciprocity and its institutional location to the implications for distributive justice. The second section will shed light on the academic debate surrounding RBI by highlighting the main challenges generated by both the normative and empirical premises. Finally, the last section of this thesis will aim to revise the RBI approach by offering a nuanced conception of reciprocity, investigating its potential existence in institutional contexts other than the domestic one, and exposing its consequences for distributive justice.

SECTION I - SANGIOVANNI RBI THEORY

Issues such as global inequality, poverty and redistribution have generated extensive theoretical reflection aimed at understanding their moral significance and the role that principles of justice should play in addressing them. In political philosophy, various theories have sought to ground duties of justice in either relational or non-relational principles. While relational

approaches are the overarching topic of this thesis, this section will focus on a specific position within this tradition, namely the institutional-relational account of justice, and explore the *Reciprocity-Based Internationalism* (RBI) theory proposed by Sangiovanni (2007), who used the concept of reciprocity as the foundation for justice's obligations.

Institutional-relational account of justice and the reciprocity principle

Relational theories start from a common ground saying that what we owe to others in terms of justice is shaped by specific kinds of social and political relationships we share with them and not because of non-relational moral principles like a commitment to humanity or utility. Different types of relationships have been identified as morally significant generating demands for justice. Among them, those structured by political and legal institutions occupy a central place for theories of justice as they have an important impact on individuals' lives in regulating how individuals interact, how power is exercised and how resources and opportunities are distributed. Scholars from the branch known as institutionalism concentrate on this kind of relationship in order to justify obligations of justice. This perspective shifts the focus of justice away from simply distributing goods, toward the moral significance of social relationships and institutional structures through which people interact. In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls (1971) serves as a foundational reference point for contemporary theories of justice defending an institutionalist view. In this writing, Rawls (1971, p. 7) explains that the 'basic structure of society', referring to major social institutions that distribute rights, duties and the benefits of social cooperation, must be arranged according to principles of fairness, where all citizens are guaranteed an equal set of basic civil liberties (p. 53). Thus, institutional accounts of justice explain an obligation of justice from the mutual assistance that citizens provide to the basic structure as this structure consequently ensures an equal distribution of rights and liberties (Barry & Valentini, 2009, p. 491). Hence, relations of justice are shaped by the shared commitment to a cooperative scheme that delivers basic goods to all its members. This cooperative scheme is not interpersonal but institutionally mediated. Indeed, individuals rarely interact with one another directly in the provision of collective goods. Institutions stand in the relation and function as the intermediaries of reciprocity. According to this theory, people support institutional structures with the understanding that others would follow accordingly, and everyone will gain from the social goods produced by these institutions in exchange.

When examining this kind of interaction between people with the intervention of institutions, the principle of justice called reciprocity emerges as one of the sub-branches of the institutionalist approach to justice. In this context, reciprocity is not only a norm of mutual

respect but also a practical mechanism by which individuals contribute to and benefit from cooperative arrangements. Rawls (2005, pp. 16-17) adds that ‘the idea of reciprocity lies between the idea of impartiality, which is altruistic (being moved by the general good), and the idea of mutual advantage understood as everyone’s being advantaged with respect to each person's present or expected future situation as things are’. This means that reciprocity is a middle ground. It is not purely altruistic where individuals act only for the common good without self-interest, neither it is purely self-interested thus seeking mutual gain based on current advantages. Instead, reciprocity involves fair cooperation where individuals contribute with the expectation that others will do the same under fair terms. Therefore, what makes claims of justice applicable in the first place is the fact that individuals stand in institutionally structured relations of interdependence. Furthermore, the capacity and structure of the institutions that mediate these reciprocal relations determine the extent of justice under this normative principle. This vision of justice, consequently, creates debates over how to conceptualize reciprocity and identify the institutions that legitimately mediate them.

Hence, this thesis falls into the institutional-relational account of justice tradition, which uses the concept of reciprocity to justify justice obligations, and it will focus on the academic dispute that this principle has sparked. More specifically, it will centre on Andrea Sangiovanni’s (2007) theory of Reciprocity-Based Internationalism (RBI) who articulated this principle and became an essential figure in the academic debate.

Sangiovanni’s RBI

In his theory, Sangiovanni (2008) builds on the institutional core of the Rawlsian framework while also opposing practice-independent theories of justice of global justice which derive obligations of justice from universal moral norms rather than existing social and political structures. Instead, his theory develops a practice-dependent approach, where principles of justice must emerge from the character and function of the institutions and practice in which people are embedded (Sangiovanni, 2008, pp. 137-138). Hence, he rejects the idea that we can defend moral entitlements independently of the institutional and historical contexts that shape them, as this would fail to reflect real social relations and instead rely on idealized assumptions (Sangiovanni, 2008, pp. 137-140).

As a result, Sangiovanni’s (2007) RBI theory argues that obligations of justice should develop only within significant reciprocal relationships, such as shared participation in the state's political and legal institutions. He defines reciprocity as ‘the mutual provision of [...] collective goods [...] necessary for developing and acting on a plan of life’ (p. 4). He identifies

this type of reciprocity as a morally relevant relationship to establish obligations of justice. Under an egalitarian conception of reciprocity which treats individuals as free and equals (p. 27), Sangiovanni argues that demands of justice arise among citizens who contribute to the provision of essential collective goods which are needed to act on one's plan of life. Thus, these goods include protection from physical harm, access to legally regulated markets, and a stable system of property rights (p. 20). Since such goods can only be secured by political, legal and economic institutions, what constitutes individuals' effort is the sociological and financial contribution citizens make to sustain these institutions. In this view, the basic structure, which is the core set of political, legal and economic institutions, depends on the active input of its members to provide the collective goods necessary for a just society. Thus, those who help uphold this structure are owed a fair return for their participation. This participation takes the form of paying taxes, complying with the law, trusting public institutions, voting or engaging in civic life. Everyday acts that contribute to the institutional framework that allows collective goods to exist are consequently considered forms of participation. Hence, this definition of contribution contrasts with merit-based theories of justice that reward individuals according to their contribution to the economy. Sangiovanni argues that one's ability to develop and deploy their talents depends heavily on the institutional infrastructure supported by others. Therefore, monetary rewards do not reflect independent merit but the social and institutional context that makes such rewards possible. According to him, justice, thus, demands reciprocity not in terms of productivity or market value but in terms of the shared effort to sustain the socio-political infrastructure that enables individuals to function as citizens and pursue their plan of life. This allows the extension of the scope of justice beyond productive workers to all individuals helping to sustain the basic institutional order including for example individuals not able to work or the elderly. Additionally, Sangiovanni (2011, pp. 571-572) rejects the moral arbitrariness argument defended by Rawls (1971), which argues that natural inequalities, such as being born with fewer opportunities, should be corrected globally even in the absence of institutional ties. Sangiovanni's theory emphasizes that such correction is owned only within specific types of reciprocal relationships. Hence, in his view, justice is not grounded in brute luck, as Dworkin (1981) calls it, but in mutual institutional contribution. Therefore, Sangiovanni's (2008, p. 156) RBI theory embeds the idea that politics is prior to morality. This means that the conditions of order, trust, and cooperation are preconditions for justice in international relations, and that reciprocity plays a key role in establishing these conditions.

Sangiovanni (2007, p. 4), then, empirically observes that only a modern state has the institutional characteristics required to uphold demands for justice. He argues that it is the only

entity with the regulatory, extractive, and distributive capabilities necessary to provide collective goods that support reciprocal relationships (p. 20). These state-specific capabilities include personal security, legal rights, market access, healthcare, and property protection, all of which are enabled by state-based institutions such as a system of courts, administration, police and military. Those institutions exist and are well-functioning because of citizens' and residents' ongoing contributions such as taxation, legal compliance and political participation (p. 20). In contrast, he argues that the global order lacks for the moment those features. Although, the global order, through mechanisms and international institutions such as the global markets, the European Union and the United Nations (UN), can influence individuals' life plans and opportunities, for example by recognizing states as legal actors or providing external sources of finance through IMF loans, it is not the main provider of the basic institutional framework that allow individuals to function as citizens, economic agents or biological beings capable of pursuing their life plans. Indeed, Sangiovanni points to the fact that the global order remains dependent on the authority, enforcement mechanism, participation and financing of sovereign states. They do not have sufficient coercive and distributive power to generate and uphold the same kind of collective goods that states do. He uses the European Union (EU) as an example to support his point. While the EU has political influence on individuals, its budget is a fraction of that of its member states and it lacks its own, independent police and military forces. Therefore, even if its transnational structure fosters individual compliance, trust and participation in the same way that the state does, it is comparatively narrow and limited, thus not generating the kind of reciprocal institutional relationships necessary to ground obligations of justice (p. 21). Sangiovanni concludes that the state is currently the ultimate agent responsible for the provision of such goods but adds that this does not exclude the emergence of other global organizational forms which could be more efficient at providing basic collective goods, and thus demands for distributive justice may shift from domestic to global (p. 38). Furthermore, he emphasizes that justice is relational rather than reactive, which means that being affected by the actions of others, as we are in the global interdependent system, does not create the type of reciprocal relationship that supports claims based on justice (pp. 34-35). Consequently, justice arises only when individuals are joint participants in a shared institutional scheme which is able to provide collective goods.

Based on these normative and empirical analyses, Sangiovanni reaches the conclusion that distributive justice requirements apply solely at the domestic level between citizens and residents who have reciprocal interactions under the existing institutional structure. As a result, global inequality does not create duties for justice that would require redistribution

or compensation across states. Nevertheless, his account doesn't fully reject distributive justice beyond the state in a strict manner. He accepts that certain types of duties of justice are owed outside the state but denies that the form of justice owed outside is similar to the one owed domestically. The author acknowledges that a minimum threshold of basic goods exists for survival and should be accessible to all persons globally (p. 4). These basic goods entail sanitation, food, shelter and clothing but are not derived from reciprocity-based justice but rather from a broader moral concern with humanitarianism.

SECTION II - ACADEMIC DEBATE AROUND RBI

Sangiovanni's (2007) RBI theory grounds duties of justice in the principle of reciprocity among co-citizens and residents of a state. While this theory is persuasively argued and seeks to offer a middle path between statist (advocating for domestic justice) and cosmopolitan (advocating for global justice) accounts, it has triggered several critiques of his normative and empirical premises thus challenging its conclusion. The following section will detail these criticisms around four elements: the nature of reciprocity, contribution, collective goods and the scope of reciprocity.

The nature of reciprocity

1. Conception of reciprocity

Several authors have raised criticisms against Sangiovanni's (2007) conceptualisation of reciprocity in RBI's account of justice. At the core of his theory is the idea that reciprocity is the fair contribution and return among members of an institutional system. He emphasises the importance of mutual provision of a set of collective goods necessary for individuals to pursue their plan of life (p. 4). Hence, while his account emphasises a fair contribution of all members with equality as a guiding principle (p. 4), his approach leans towards a transactional and mutual benefit conception of reciprocity where individuals mainly participate to secure personal benefits and ensure that other people will do the same with respect to them (p. 21). Therefore, the cooperative frame of reciprocity becomes a strategic exchange which can be referred to as reciprocity as *mutual advantage* (Lister, 2011, p. 95). Critics expose that this conception of reciprocity prioritizes proportional return and self-interested behaviour over more inclusive and demanding forms of cooperation (Hartley, 2014, p. 411; Lister, 2011, p. 96). Hence, this conception of reciprocity can be controversial because it risks excluding members

of society who cannot contribute proportionally like children, elderly or disabled persons thus undermining the inclusivity of the theory (Lister, 2011, p. 96).

In contrast, a conception of reciprocity called reciprocity as *mutual recognition as equals* (MRE) exists and refers to individuals relating to one another with mutual respect and a shared sense of responsibility (Hartley, 2014, p. 425). They see themselves not just as isolated actors but as participants in a cooperative relationship where each one contributes their fair share as free and equal members of society (p. 425). Individual's incentive to contribute to society is not instrumental, compared to reciprocity as mutual advantage, but intrinsic, where citizens are motivated by a desire to connect with others on an equal footing and defend the values of justice that govern their common life. The MRE approach is therefore less output-oriented compared to Sangiovanni's (2007) conceptualization of reciprocity. This moral shift broadens the scope of justice by including those who may be unable to contribute proportionally, such as children, the elderly, or persons with disabilities. Instead, MRE advocates for inclusive and solidarity-based institutions, where justice is grounded in respect, not merely in exchange. Therefore, society organizes itself around inclusive recognition and shared responsibility instead of exclusionary transactions.

MRE conception of reciprocity echoed Moellendorf's (2011) theory of justice, which holds that justice is derived from the principle of associative duties and meaningful forms of membership in social institutions, rather than a logic of contribution and return. In this case, duties of justice exist in strong, non-voluntary relationships that shape public life and are guided by human-created norms (p. 537). These associations, which include both states and the global economy, create justice obligations not for mutual benefit but for the moral significance of shared membership (p. 536). Therefore, authors defending MRE approaches (Brooks, 2012; Hartley, 2014; Lister, 2011; Moellendorf, 2011) argue that Sangiovanni's (2007) model fails to account for the social and moral dimensions of reciprocal relations consequently defending a weak form of reciprocity.

2. Fairness in reciprocity

Another question regards Sangiovanni (2007) interpretation of fairness in the principle of reciprocity. He argues that fairness resides in the process of mutual contribution from citizens and residents and return from the institutional state. For him, fairness means that individuals who participate in sustaining the basic institutional structure of a state are owed a fair return from this state (p. 24). This idea of fairness is inherently tied to mutual contribution within a

shared political order and serves as the normative basis to limit the scope of distributive justice to those who engage in such reciprocal relations.

However, some have challenged Sangiovanni's (2007) use of fairness by questioning its coherence, reliability and moral utility (James, 2012, pp. 4-5). The argument is that fairness is often misused in political discourse to mask national self-interest or commercial gain and that it loses its credibility when co-opted by power. Due to this ambiguous and contested nature, there are questions about whether fairness is the right moral concept to guide discussion about justice (p. 4). Furthermore, the complexity of the global stage, both economically and ethically, raises concerns about the potential application of the idea of fairness, rendering it hard to apply it meaningfully to a comprehensive theory of justice (pp. 4-5). Indeed, the interdependence and ever-shifting dynamics of the global markets make it difficult to grasp who contributes to what and who benefits (p. 4). Similarly, the tension between many different values and meanings attached to them (such as freedom, equality, welfare, identity) means that there is not one single moral perspective balancing the different values (p. 5). Hence, there is no correct way to say what is fair. A generalized simplification of fairness in a theory of justice would compromise the diversity of issues and viewpoints and not be appropriate in all situations.

The nature of the contribution

1. Reciprocity between whom

Furthermore, a debate has emerged around who is the relevant actor in reciprocal relationships therefore questioning who is considered a subject of justice. Sangiovanni (2007, pp. 26-27) claims that duties of distributive justice apply only between individuals jointly contributing to the provision of certain collective goods. This means that it is the contribution to the provision of collective goods that generates claims for justice and this contribution includes compliance, trust, resources and participation (p. 20). However, Armstrong (2009, p. 305) has raised two concerns about this statement. First, Sangiovanni's account suggests that the type of individuals covered in this definition must be able-bodied and/or economically productive people. This criterion considerably reduces the range of people eligible for distributive justice. It notably excludes people severely disabled who are involuntarily not contributing to any provisions but are by consequence not owed distributive justice. It also excludes from distributive justice the politically inactive, the untrusting, untrustworthy and uncompliant of various hues (Armstrong, 2009, p. 306). Hence, there is a danger in tying justice as firmly to the contribution as RBI does. Second, Sangiovanni (2007) specifies that the argument of reciprocity and justice's duties is intended to apply to both residents and citizens,

but it raises concerns due to the complex relationship between residency, citizenship and contribution (Armstrong, 2009, p. 305). This formulation ‘citizens and residents’ suggests that all citizens deserve justice but there is therefore a need to strongly explain why citizens who don’t live in the country (non-residents) and don’t contribute (if they don’t pay taxes or participate) are due distributive justice if contribution is the basis of justice (p. 306). Following this logic, non-contributing citizens should not qualify for duties of justice or if citizenship alone qualifies someone, then contribution should not be a core argument in the definition of reciprocity. Moreover, shifting the basis of justice from citizenship to residency raises a new challenge. It fails to explain why non-resident contributors like migrant workers or taxpayers abroad would not also deserve distributive justice (p. 306).

2. Type of contribution

Sangiovanni (2007, p. 20-21) argues that contribution to the basic structure of the society is done through compliance with the legal system, taxation and political participation. However, for the sake of inclusion and the recognition that every individual is equal in status, he explains that the minimum contribution that gives rise to duties of justice is compliance with the legal system (p. 28). However, this minimalistic approach has been subject to criticism. Scholars have argued that such a thin notion of contribution is problematic for a claim of distributive justice and objectionable because it is too minimal (Barry & Valentini, 2009, p. 492). This would imply the redistribution of resources from capable and hardworking individuals to those who just comply with the law to uphold state institutions (p. 492). However, because citizens only complying are no longer actively maintaining the basic structure through financial and sociological means, no fair return is owed to them and no obligations of distributive justice arise. Yet, scholars do not argue that persons who simply comply with the law are not entitled to justice at all, but rather that it does not involve distributive duties (p. 492). Furthermore, such a minimalist conception of contribution makes it difficult to justify excluding foreigners from a claim of distributive justice as they also comply with the international system of law and norms that sustain the global economic order and shape access to resources (p. 492). In other words, if mere compliance is enough to ground justice claims, then foreign contributors may also be owed egalitarian duties which challenge the domestic limitation of Sangiovanni’s (2007) framework (Barry & Valentini, 2009, p. 493).

Similarly, Duus-Otterström (2021, p. 168) criticizes RBI theory for its reliance on compliance as the minimal condition for reciprocity, because it fails to accommodate inequalities in benefits and burdens. He argues that in Sangiovanni’s (2007) conception of

contribution, only legal compliance is equally required of all citizens and is thus non-gradual, while taxation and participation are gradual and vary across individuals (p. 168). However, Duus-Otterström (2021, p. 168) defend a more proportional conception of reciprocity where contributions and returns should be proportional and citizens' contributions equal in order to establish egalitarian principles of justice. Defending fair reciprocity means that it should treat people differently depending on how much they gain from or give to society. Hence, people who benefit more should give more back and people giving less should benefit less.

The nature of the collective goods

Sangiovanni's (2007, p. 20) account of reciprocity emphasizes the role of collective goods provided by the state as the foundation for reciprocal obligations among citizens such as protection from physical harm, access to legally regulated markets and a stable system of property rights and entitlements. However, Armstrong (2009, p. 305) challenges this view arguing that the goods necessary to *act on a plan of life* extend beyond material provision and state-centric services. He notes, for example, that marginalized groups such as disabled individuals require not only access to collective resources but most importantly protection from prejudice and exclusion. Indeed, if such persons encounter prejudice or exclusion from society, we would consider this as a kind of inequality and that is exactly this type of inequality that we should rectify. Armstrong (2009, p. 305) argues that reciprocity must also address social, structural and systemic inequalities and not only material goods. Similarly, Maffettone (2014, p. 183) notes that Sangiovanni's (2007) list of collective goods that allow citizens to act on their life plans is insufficient. He argues that many other items would be necessary for individuals to develop such as clean air, climate stability, financial security, or global health (p. 183). However, those goods are not produced solely within national borders but are a result of cooperation beyond the state, shaped by global institutions and cross-border dynamics. Therefore, Maffettone (2014, p. 183) explains that this undermines Sangiovanni's (2007) assumptions that reciprocal obligations can be grounded only in national relationships of co-citizenship as the core aspects of a person's well-being are shaped by good procured at the international level. In this case, the intermediate of the reciprocal relations as argued by Sangiovanni (2007) that provide the most important and relevant goods is not the state institutions but international institutions and global interdependence mechanisms.

The scope of reciprocity

In opposition to previous criticism, some scholars accept the normative foundations of reciprocity but challenge the empirical claim that reciprocity is confined to the state and therefore justice too. Most criticisms have converged on the idea that reciprocity and thus justice obligations extend beyond national borders.

If we take reciprocity to arise from actual practices of cooperation, as a practice-dependent view would suggest, then it becomes clear that such cooperation is not confined to domestic institutions (James, 2012). Our world is shaped by deeply interconnected global systems (trade, finance, labour, and regulatory regimes) that generate interdependence across borders. In this sense, reciprocity should not be seen as a uniquely national phenomenon (Heaney, 2016; James, 2012). For example, Heaney (2016, p. 14) argues that global capital flows and ownership structures affect how benefits and burdens are distributed worldwide, suggesting that individuals and states alike are embedded in transnational relationships of mutual influence. States themselves participate in reciprocal exchanges through trade agreements, regulatory alignment, and diplomatic relations, forming patterns of cooperation that mirror the kind of obligations Sangiovanni (2007) attributes only to domestic institutions (Heaney, 2016).

This also raises questions about the origin of citizens' contributions (Maffettone, 2014). Due to the deep interconnection between domestic economies and the global economic system, much of what individuals earn and thus contribute to their governments through taxes is linked to international economic transactions (Maffettone, 2014, pp. 183). For example, citizens in export-oriented economies earn incomes through global trade, meaning that foreigners are indirectly helping to finance domestic institutions (p. 184). Hence, it seems problematic to exclude foreigners from any reciprocal claims to justice simply because they fall outside national borders.

Moreover, Armstrong (2009, p. 298) has argued that the ability of a state to maintain domestic justice depends not only on internal structures but on the broader international context. He argues that a state's capacity to enforce rights and uphold legal order is not determined solely by its internal institutions, but also by the external recognition of its sovereignty and territorial integrity by other states and international actors (p. 311). This interdependence reveals that the provision of domestic collective goods is embedded in a broader global framework. As such, restricting the scope of justice to intra-state reciprocity overlooks the international foundations that make domestic justice possible.

SECTION III - REVISING THE RECIPROCITY-BASED ACCOUNT OF JUSTICE

In the following chapter, I critically assess the normative foundation of Sangiovanni's (2007) reciprocity-based theory of justice and challenge some of his underlying assumptions particularly regarding the scope of collective goods and the boundaries of reciprocity. This reassessment results in the first place in a revision of his normative premise, which then leads to a modification of his empirical premises. The goal is to reformulate a reciprocity-based account of justice that supports the obligations of global distributive justice.

Revising the nature of reciprocity

As mentioned previously, Sangiovanni (2007, p. 4) conception of reciprocity within his RBI account can be interpreted primarily through the lens of *mutual advantage* (Lister, 2011, p. 95). By defining reciprocity as the exchange of goods between people who contribute to and gain from shared institutions, his approach leans towards a transactional and mutual benefit logic where individuals mainly participate to secure personal benefits and ensure that other people will do the same with respect to them (p. 21). While this perspective helps explain institutional cooperation from a pragmatic standpoint, it however rests on a vision of human nature as inherently selfish and portrays individuals as primarily motivated by self-interest, constantly seeking to maximise their own benefits while minimising costs. Hence, people are rational actors engaged in continuous cost-benefit calculations, choosing actions that best serve their personal goals. It also implies that human interaction is centred on competition rather than shared concern or solidarity, because cooperation and social behavior are not ends in themselves, but rather strategic tools to achieve individual gain.

However, as many scholars have shown, human beings are not fundamentally self-interested and this belief misunderstands the profound nature of humans and the conditions necessary for social life (Sen, 1999; Taylor, 1989). It presumes a transactional notion of justice rather than recognising the moral dimensions of reciprocity. Instead, I advocate for a conception of reciprocity based on *mutual recognition as equals* which aligns with the true nature of human beings and social interaction. On this account, reciprocity is not a strategic exchange, but a moral commitment grounded in respect for others as co-equal participants in shared institutions. Hence, we do not owe others because of what they do for us, but because of who they are, in this case moral equals with the capacity to shape and pursue a plan of life. To reciprocate in this moral sense is to respect the autonomy, dignity and life possibilities of others by acknowledging their equal worth and affirming their entitlement to the same opportunities and protections we expect for ourselves.

As mentioned, this view rests on a more accurate conception of the human being who is not an isolated, self-sufficient actor but a social being. Indeed, human development is possible only through social interaction, care and mutual support. From birth, an individual is embedded in networks of relationships within families, communities, institutions and global structures. Sangiovanni (2007, p. 24) himself, argues that our identities, capabilities and life chances emerge not in isolation but through our dependence on others. Even early human societies and remaining indigenous communities are not structured around individual self-interest but around collective wellbeing and shared responsibility. These societies thrive through cooperation and mutual recognition, not strategic exchange. They prove that reciprocity at its core is about sustaining relationships of equality, care, and respect not extracting advantage. Even in more individualistic contemporary societies, personal success is never truly autonomous. Interests, goals and success are always embedded in social relations. The pursuit of one's plan of life depends on the existence of stable and just institutions, collective goods and the cooperation of others. Language, trust, public health, legal systems or education are all examples of goods that we all rely on and contribute to our development but that we cannot produce alone. Their continued existence depends on mutual contributions and shared commitment which are conditions that only a conception of reciprocity as mutual recognition can normatively justify. The obligations we hold towards one another should therefore not be seen as transactions but as acts of recognition where we acknowledge our shared role in creating and sustaining the world we inhabit together. This vision of reciprocity affirms both our interdependence and our equal moral standing. It provides a conception of justice that more accurately reflects the inherently social and moral nature of human beings and offers a more ethically grounded foundation for understanding the duties of justice than a framework based solely on mutual advantage.

Consequently, the need for a more thorough investigation into the nature of the contribution, essential to creating a reciprocity-based explanation of justice, emerges when the nature of reciprocity is revised.

Revising the nature of the contribution

In RBI, the contribution that ground obligations of justice include compliance with the law, taxation and political participation with the aim of sustaining the institutions which give back the collective goods. Compliance is presented as the minimal threshold necessary to generate such obligations. While I disagree with the criticisms mentioned in the debate that this threshold is too minimal to justify egalitarian redistribution, I also do not fully align with

Sangiovanni's (2007) conception of contribution. The issue, I argue, does not lie in the threshold he sets nor in the absence of proportionality between contribution and return. Rather, the core problem is that Sangiovanni's list of contributions is paradoxically both too narrow and too broad, ultimately reducing its relevance. It is narrow because it relies on a limited and fixed list of what counts as significant contributions to duties of justice. Yet, it is paradoxically broad in lowering the threshold to include more people as entitled to justice. Moreover, reducing significant contribution to simple compliance to the law in order to include more individuals in the scope of justice challenges Sangiovanni's (2007) conclusion that obligations of justice apply only within the state and not globally. As a result, the nature of contributions required in a reciprocity-based account of justice must be revised. Based on the revised nature of reciprocity as mutual recognition of equals, the new conception of contributions can be constructed around three main points.

First of all, the new conception of contributions needs to reflect the diversity of ways individuals contribute to society. As human beings possess unique characteristics, skills, and abilities, they produce different kinds of contributions. Therefore, limiting recognition to formal acts such as taxation or political participation neglects the wide range of essential but less valued or visible forms of contribution that sustain institutions and societies.

Second, the concept of contribution must be understood more broadly, detached from a materialist and economic framework to include non-tangible contributions that are also significant for sustaining institutions. Indeed, when we equate contribution solely with measurable outputs like taxes or labour, we overlook entire sectors of human effort that are indispensable yet undervalued. A just theory of justice based on reciprocity must acknowledge that societies are built not just on economic output but on emotional, relational and moral forms of contribution. A compelling example is the 'care economy', a concept revaluing in the economy both paid and unpaid work related to care including support for children, the elderly and people with disabilities (Folbre, 2006). These contributions are fundamental to the health and well-being of any society, yet they are frequently undercompensated and insufficiently recognised as legitimate forms of social contribution. If we consider, for example, a family caregiver who assists an elderly relative with daily tasks such as bathing or eating, their labour sustains another person's dignity and quality of life thus indirectly supporting the healthcare system and well-being of the society. However, such efforts go unnoticed in political or economic-oriented conceptions of contribution. Similarly, a severely disabled person might be considered a contributor not through economic productivity or political action but by serving as a source of emotional support to others who consider them as important beings (like a

relative) or by necessitating care work that creates jobs and nurtures relationships. Hence, contribution needs to be decoupled from capacity, productivity or skill level to allow the inclusion of non-tangible forms of support without which the vital, often invisible, foundations of society risk being overlooked or devalued.

Finally, if we accept the view defended earlier of reciprocity as mutual recognition, which was grounded in the idea that humans are inherently social and always developing within a network of relationships regardless of the scale, then a new conception of contributions must be seen through the lens of interdependence. On this account, individuals are so interwoven with others in their development and well-being that justice cannot rely on a narrow or fixed list of “valid” contributions sustaining institutions. Indeed, in both local and global contexts, it is impossible to clearly trace back who contributes to what and who benefits. Hence, contributions cannot be understood in a limited and fixed significant list to ground duties of justice.

As such, the new and relevant contributions for reciprocity and thus obligations of justice should be solely based on membership in a shared social framework as an equal among others. This inclusive view acknowledges and values all forms of contribution, even those that may not traditionally be recognised but are nonetheless crucial to sustain the fabric of society. It affirms the equal moral worth of every person regardless of their talents, capacities or social position, and rejects the exclusionary tendencies that arise from tying justice to narrow definitions of contribution, therefore aligning with the revised nature of reciprocity as mutual recognition of equals.

This revision of the nature of contribution leads us to revisit the concept of collective goods in Sangiovanni’s reciprocity-based account of justice and specifically which good is necessary to develop and pursue a plan of life.

Revising the nature of collective goods

Sangiovanni’s (2007) normative premise grounds obligation of distributive justice in the principle of reciprocity and defines it as the following:

“the mutual provision of a central class of collective goods, namely those goods necessary for developing and acting on a plan of life” (p.4).

This central class of collective goods includes a system of law protecting individuals, security and access to a legally regulated market (p. 20). All these goods are provided by the

modern state through institutions such as courts, administration, police and military (p. 20). According to him, these goods serve as the basic necessities for individuals to carry out their plan of life since they are products that continuously safeguard us (p. 20). However, I would like to raise two points challenging Sangiovanni's (2007) conceptualisation of the collective goods: first, the use and selection of collective goods is normatively unjustified; second, his list of necessary goods to *act on a plan of life* is too narrow. These criticisms need to be addressed to reach a stronger and more accurate version of the nature of collective goods in a reciprocity-based account of justice.

It is crucial to start by examining why Sangiovanni's (2007) conception of collective goods is limited, being both unjustified and narrow. Firstly, his account of collective goods is limited because he does not justify it normatively. Indeed, he fails to offer a clear definition of what counts as collective goods. He invokes this term without specifying the criteria that distinguish such goods from other types of resources, services and rights. Moreover, while the selected goods (law enforcement, market access, and security) appear to fit a basic functional understanding of what states provide, he does not explain why these particular goods are collectively necessary for justice or why they are sufficient to ground moral obligations of distribution. Therefore, the absence of an explicit definition and justification leaves his account vulnerable to the objection that it rests on an arbitrary or overly narrow selection.

Secondly, Sangiovanni's (2007) list of collective goods is limited because it is narrow and does not accurately align with what is necessary for individuals to *act on a plan of life*. In fact, his selection of collective goods is primarily skewed towards legal and economic infrastructures. While these goods can be important, they only capture a limited subset of the conditions necessary for individuals to exercise genuine autonomy and develop and *act on a plan of life*. Sangiovanni's account omits social, educational and symbolic goods such as recognition, freedom from discrimination, basic education and health that are essential for enabling persons to participate meaningfully in political, economic and social life (Anderson, 1999; Fraser, 1995; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1979; Young, 2006). These are not optional enhancements to autonomy but foundational conditions for its very possibility. In failing to include these broader enabling goods, Sangiovanni's (2007) conception of collective goods excludes precisely those factors that determine whether individuals can enjoy the status of equal moral and political agents. This omission is particularly problematic for a theory grounded in reciprocity, as it neglects the underlying social structures inequalities that condition whether individuals can genuinely reciprocate in shared institutional arrangements.

In view of these limitations on the nature of collective goods, I will begin by establishing a framework to justify the use of collective goods as necessary elements to *act on a plan of life*. This requires first clarifying the concept of collective goods and determine whether they are best understood as public or club goods, which has different implications for justice (McNutt, 1999, p. 930). While both categories of goods are non-rivalrous meaning that one person's use does not diminish availability for others, they differ in excludability. Public goods are accessible to all while club goods are limited to selected groups (p. 928). Based on these two categories, Sangiovanni's (2007) account of collective goods would refer to public goods as club goods often linked with clientelism and elite favouritism (Lindberg, 2012, p. 946). The implications of club goods contradict the principle of reciprocity central to his theory of justice by privileging a few over those equally contributing (Sangiovanni, 2007, p. 4). Hence, in a reciprocity-based account of justice, collective goods must be understood as shared and essential preconditions for individuals to develop as full members of a political and moral community aligning with the concept of public goods (Sangiovanni, 2007, p. 4).

Second, we need to clarify what Sangiovanni (2007, p. 4) means by 'developing and acting on a plan of life'. In Rawls' (1971) language, this would be associated with the ability to form and pursue a conception of the good: individuals must have both the freedom and the resources to identify their values and goals to strive in realising them over the course of their lives. This definition could be linked with more recent accounts of autonomy which distinguish between two essential dimensions of autonomy: agency and capability (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1979). According to this perspective, agency refers to the internal power to make meaningful choices and take deliberate action (skills, reasoning, self-respect), while capability refers to the real opportunities available to a person to achieve these choices (education, health, recognition) (Sen, 1979). These concepts emphasise that autonomy is not about having formal rights or intentions but also about having the substantive freedom and resources to live a life one values. Together, these definitions are relevant in reciprocity-based account of justice because they highlight the multidimensional nature of what is required to *act on a plan of life* and be able to engage as equal participants in a shared institutional framework. They show that acting on a plan of life involves both internal agencies to make choices and external capability to realise them. The revised conception of reciprocity presumes *mutual recognition as equals*: this requires that all members have access to the conditions necessary for autonomy, including collective goods such as education, recognition, healthcare and freedom from discrimination, to be able to develop and function as free and equal members of a political and moral community.

Therefore, acting on a plan of life requires access to a broader range of collective goods than Sangiovanni’s account permits.

Good	Why Necessary?	Supports Role As...
Security	Prevent harm	Citizen, economic agent
System of property rights	Uphold rule of law	Citizen, biological being
Market access	Enables economic participation	Economic agent
Education	Develops reasoning and literacy	Citizen, economic agent
Health	Maintains basic functioning and agency	Biological being, economic agent
Recognition	Ensures self-respect and identity	Citizen, social being
Freedom from discrimination	Guarantees equal standing and opportunity	Citizen, economic agent
Environmental conditions	Ensures long-term health and survivability	Biological being, global agent

Table 1. Necessary collective goods for reciprocity-based justice

To make this list more comprehensive, I will use Nussbaum’s (2000) capabilities list which outlines a set of essential human capabilities that every person must be guaranteed to live a life with dignity. This list includes both internal abilities (such as emotional, health and thinking) and external conditions (such as education, bodily integrity and political participation). This serves as a comprehensive framework for evaluating what people need to function as full human beings. Moreover, it helps identify which goods are necessary for the autonomy of individuals. Nussbaum’s (2000) list is particularly relevant as a standard for rethinking collective goods in a reciprocity-based account of justice because it centres on what individuals need to participate meaningfully in society and to *act on a plan of life*. These capabilities reveal which goods are necessary preconditions for people to achieve meaningful autonomy. In other words, while not every public good is enough to ensure justice, some are absolutely necessary and cannot be left out. Without access to all necessary goods, individuals cannot develop or exercise their autonomy even if legal institutions and regulated markets are in place. For example, structural injustices such as systemic racism or gender exclusion can continue to impair individuals’ functioning and contribution to the society: it demonstrates that justice requires more than access to minimal legal or economic infrastructure. A reciprocity-based theory of justice that recognises interdependence must therefore incorporate these goods as collective necessities.

Table 1 presents the revised list of collective goods by identifying which items from Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities list are essential for individuals to *act on a plan of life*. These goods are organised and justified in Sangiovanni's (2007) own tripartite framework, which recognises individuals as citizens, biological beings and economic agents (p. 21). By aligning each good with one of these roles, the table demonstrates how the new items are not merely desirable but necessary preconditions for autonomy within a reciprocity-based account of justice. This review list thus expands Sangiovanni's narrow conception of collective goods and grounds it more firmly in the lived realities and interdependent nature of human development.

Implications on the scope of justice

Having developed a more plausible and inclusive version of reciprocity-based justice which redefines reciprocity as mutual recognition of equals, reconciles contribution in terms of individuals capacity rather than productivity and expands the notion of collective goods through the capability's framework, we can now turn to the consequences for the scope of justice. These revisions reshape what counts as significant reciprocity and where it occurs. Hence, the level of moral and institutional boundaries within which justice must apply need to be reconsidered.

In this revised framework, individuals do not contribute solely to the foundation of the state but also sustain and benefit from a wide range of transnational and global institutions. Their contributions, whether through labour, compliance, knowledge-sharing or mutual care, support other actors such as international organisations, advocacy networks, international regimes, etc... These institutions, in turn, participate in the provision of essential collective goods such as healthcare (e.g. global vaccine sharing), education (e.g. transnational scholarship programs), environmental protection (e.g. climate agreements), human-rights (e.g. anti-discrimination program) that no single state can provide alone.

Therefore, as the revised definition of reciprocity suggests its global nature by underlining the overall interconnectedness of individuals, obligations of justice based on reciprocity principle cannot be limited to national boundaries. The very conditions that enable individuals to develop and *act on a plan of life* are increasingly co-produced across borders and maintained through the global cooperation of individuals. Interdependence is not just a theoretical feature of human relations, but a lived reality embedded in institutional material structures that transcend the state.

As such, if reciprocity is the principle that generates obligations of justice and reciprocity in its revised form operates at the global level, then justice must likewise extend beyond the state. The revised reciprocity-based justice supports a global scope of distributive

justice not by abandoning the core foundations of reciprocity or relational approaches to justice but by refining them to reflect current institutional realities and the nature of human beings. This revision reveals that our interdependence when recognised and properly justified demands a justice that is not national but also global. I thus aim to contribute to the debate by offering a coherent revision of reciprocity, extending the scope of justice without collapsing into abstract universalism.

CONCLUSION

In light of increasing inequalities globally, I decided to research on reciprocity-based principles of global justice that may serve as a moral ideal for governing our societies. I focused on analysing the normative definition and moral implications of the principle of reciprocity which has been the subject of much discussion, using the following research question: *What does the most plausible version of a reciprocity-based account of justice demand from us?* I drew on Sangiovanni's (2007) Reciprocity-Based Internationalism theory, as it is the most influential account in the academic field, and critically assessed his normative conception of reciprocity leading to a national scope of justice. Reflecting on criticisms brought by other scholars, I revised reciprocity as mutual recognition of equals, redefined contributions in light of individual capacities and interdependence and expanded the notion of collective goods using the capabilities framework. These adjustments, I argue, allow for a more inclusive and institutionally relevant version of reciprocity-based justice. This revised account shows that significant forms of reciprocity with mutual contribution already occur across borders through transnational cooperation and global institutions and therefore impact the scope of obligations of justice. Consequently, I find that obligation of distributive justice cannot be confined to the domestic sphere alone but must be extended globally.

Due to the restrictive scope of this thesis, several limitations remain. Firstly, the thesis focuses mainly on the normative significance and implications of the reciprocity principle in a theory of justice rather than empirical validation. Hence, further research could investigate how global institutions operationalise such revised conceptions of justice in practice. Secondly, while this work reached a global obligations conclusion, it did not fully explore mechanisms of implementation or enforcement which would be necessary for a feasible theory of global justice. Nonetheless, developing a feasible theory of justice rests on rethinking what a plausible theory of justice entails, work to which this thesis contributed. It is indispensable for a theory of justice to rest on an accurate understanding of what being human means if it hopes to contribute to create in practice more equal societies.

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