

# Redmond Response to Longtermism

## Some Reservations about Longtermism

What do we owe to future generations? Longtermism suggests that our moral responsibilities extend beyond ourselves, our families, and our communities. It argues that we should consider the needs and interests of future people, even those living in distant times. The reasoning is that our actions today will inevitably affect future generations, and if morality has any meaning, it must include considering the impact of our actions on others.

In a now famous parable, Peter Singer argued that physical distance does not diminish moral responsibility.<sup>1</sup> MacAskill builds on this idea, suggesting that distance-in-time is also irrelevant. He offers an example: if we carelessly throw a broken bottle in the woods and someone injures themselves on it, we bear responsibility for that injury. Does it matter if the injury happens tomorrow, next week, or next year? Regardless of the timeline, our carelessness remains the cause. What, then, do we owe future people? Perhaps more than we initially realize.

The core insight of longtermism—that we should consider the future impacts of our actions—seems intuitively correct. However, the practical application of this idea becomes complicated. Can we accurately predict the consequences of our actions on those living in the distant future? Even if we could, should their interests carry as much weight as ours? Should we also be concerned with future potential persons, such as those who might exist due to advances in reproductive technology? Or should our moral focus be limited to those who will definitely exist? Moreover, is the central claim of longtermism—that moral responsibility remains unaffected by the passage of time—actually true? These are just some of the complex questions that arise when we consider longtermism.

My mother-in-law once scolded my wife and me for deciding not to have children, calling us selfish. While we understood her disappointment about not having grandchildren, she also believed we were being selfish by not sharing our lives with children and using our resources solely for ourselves. But how could we be selfish toward a child that did not exist and never would? To be fair, MacAskill focuses only on future actual people, not potential ones. Still, the line between the two is not easily drawn. The distinction between who will and will not exist is

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–243.

constantly shifting based on our actions. Furthermore, as a utilitarian, MacAskill might argue that we have a moral obligation to bring more future people into existence. Yet, this argument becomes shaky when it rests on the notion that future potential people have a claim on us.

This objection may be too abstract, and MacAskill might successfully sidestep it by just insisting that we need consider only actual future persons. For the sake of argument, then, let's accept two assumptions: (1) we should focus only on future people who will actually exist, and (2) these future people, in principle, have some moral claim on us. But is it really true, as MacAskill argues, that distance-in-time does not weaken this claim? One could argue, as I do, that our obligations depend partly on the relationships we have with others. I might reasonably claim, for example, that I have a greater obligation to my child than to another person's child simply because the child is mine. Determining what kind of relationship we have with future people is difficult the more distant they are to us, and it seems that the passage of time does affect that relationship. If it doesn't, the burden of proof lies with those who claim it doesn't.

There are two key concerns here. First, can we realistically assess the long-term impact of our actions, especially when considering the distant future? Even in the present, we often struggle to predict the consequences of our actions. How can we expect to do so reliably when those consequences are far removed in time? There are simply too many variables. Second, while I can envision a meaningful connection with my children, grandchildren, and perhaps even their children, it becomes much harder to imagine such a bond with generations far removed from me. Without such a bond, does my responsibility to them diminish?

Let's assume, however, that this objection can be overcome. It might be argued that my failure to form bonds with distant future generations is merely a lack of imagination. Perhaps advances in technology, such as AI, will allow us to trace the long-term consequences of our actions with more confidence, enabling us to form meaningful moral connections with distant generations. Even if that happens, how do we balance their interests with our own? Can their interests ever outweigh ours? MacAskill does not claim they do, but we are left without a clear method for determining the degree of responsibility we owe. If we cannot meaningfully assign responsibility, then it becomes difficult to see how longtermism can serve as a reliable guide for present actions.

The issue becomes even more complicated when we revisit Singer's original parable. He asks what we should do if we come across a small child drowning in a shallow pond, and we could save the child at the cost of some muddy shoes or wet pants. Refusing to help would be morally reprehensible, and no one could reasonably disagree. From this example, Singer derives a demanding moral principle: "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought to do it."<sup>2</sup> Yet, longtermism often calls for significant sacrifices to prevent potential long-term harms that may never come to pass. With limited resources, focusing too much on distant risks could mean neglecting urgent problems in the present.

In essence, longtermism belongs to a tradition of expanding the circle of moral concern. It deepens our sense of responsibility to others, suggesting that we are all, in some sense, our brother's keeper. However, if the circle expands too far, the bonds that connect us may stretch to the point of breaking. We may wonder whether longtermism imposes such a heavy burden of moral responsibility that it becomes unmanageable. As Kant argued, it is unreasonable to claim we ought to do something we cannot possibly do.

Michael D. Redmond

October 1, 2024

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.