

Instructions for Longtermism

Instructions

For the seminar, please explore the materials and links below, and then write a response of at least 200 words. There are some discussion questions at the end that you may use as writing prompts, but feel free to respond as you wish. Email your written response to lewesseminar@gmail.com no later than Monday October 7. Please read all the other posted responses prior to the seminar meeting.

In his book “What We Owe the Future” William Macaskill believes that we can create a future that our descendants will be thanking us for. He describes Longtermism as a worldview that expects us to do much more to assure we have future generations of Homo sapiens. Put simply, it is based on these principles:

1. Future people matter, morally.
2. There could be a lot of future people.
3. Future people are de facto disenfranchised.
4. We in the present have the power to make their lives better or worse.

To understand Macaskill’s perspective, read the excerpt from his book, “What We Owe The Future.” (A copy is posted on our website.) To further understand the concept of Longtermism, watch a lecture by Macaskill

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCpFsvYI-7Y>

An important aspect of long-term thinking is the idea of Effective Altruism (EA). This is a philosophical and social movement that aims to use evidence and reasoning to determine the most effective ways to benefit others and improve the world. The Center for Effective Altruism provides an overview of their mission. <https://www.centreforeffectivealtruism.org/ceas-guiding-principles>

Peter Singer wrote a seminal article in 1971 on EA entitled “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” which is available at:

<https://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil308/Singer2.pdf> Singer revisited his original article with updates in 2017. The following video lecture by Singer fully explains his current thinking on EA.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbgFbZmldeY>

Recently, a more radical approach has evolved for defining the priorities of EA from among the tech elite. They see earmarking their contributions focused on reducing existential risks that could have a devastating effect on the future

existence of humanity, rather than focusing on the present needs. The future is considered much more important if we consider Homo sapiens surviving both this planet and the galaxy over the next billion years. (yes, billion) Reducing the possibility of an existential catastrophe in the present and near future that avoids the extinction of Homo sapiens could save the lives of hundreds of trillions of future beings. Non-extinction devastating events in the near term, though inflicting much pain-and-suffering, must be weighed against the protection of the billions (or trillions) of people who will live in the future

Tony Ord is a member of the EA movement. He describes the major existential threats in his publication “The Precipice Revisited.” (A copy of his paper is posted on our website.) He describes, in some depth, the threats of climate change, pandemics, artificial intelligence and nuclear weapons. He gives his best guess probabilities for each of the extinction events over the next 100 years. He ends his paper by writing that efforts to avoid extinction “...also includes the work to establish the norms and institutions to make sure things never get out of control as they are this century: establishing the moral seriousness of existential risk; establishing the international norms, then international treaties, and governance for tackling existential risk.”

Emile Torres presents a dissenting argument in his paper, “Against Longtermism,” claiming it to be a fringe philosophical theory that has now gained \$46 billion in committed EA funding. He sees the movement as a rather elitist enterprise that dangerously diverts funding from the near future to some distant and unknowable future. (A copy of his paper is posted on our website.)

Emile Torres has also done a podcast interview, which is available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7QI8qaJmz0>

Following are some questions to contemplate for our discussion. Please feel free to discuss other issues you may feel are more compelling.

What is the moral obligation for helping people that you do not know, but could help?

What is the moral justification for helping people who are alive today as opposed to helping people who will be alive in the far future? What is the moral justification for the opposite?

We are living in a time that Homo sapiens never experienced before, as we have existential threats that could terminate our species. If you believe this gives us a

special responsibility for the future, then what actions can be taken collectively in the present to reduce the possibility of extermination?

If you believe that at the level of morality everyone is equally important, then should all lives, both present and future, be treated as having equal value? If yes, how do you envision this being done?

Macaskill is thinking about Longtermism not in decades but in centuries and beyond. If you consider the utilitarian model that it is important to maximize the good, is it fair or even possible to calculate the maximization of the good in terms of the people in the unknown distant future?

If you are walking on the banks of a stream and come across a situation where two toddlers are being carried away by the water. You know if you act quickly you can save one of them. You see that the one child, who is your nephew will be much harder to save than the second child, who is a stranger. Knowing that only one child can be saved, what do you do?

How do you see last month's seminar on Parahumanism relating to the discussion of Longtermism?

Submitted by Aram Terzian