

Reading Response I (total word count: 333)

The Case for Strong Longtermism
Hillary Greaves and William MacAskill

Argument Reconstruction (word count: 191)

Greaves and MacAskill make an argument for strong longtermism, which is the idea that the most important aspect of the actions today are the impacts of those actions in the distant future. The paper makes arguments defending Axiological Strong Longtermism (ASL) and Deontic Strong Longtermism (DSL).

ASL

- I. The number of future human lives is vast ($\sim 10^{24}$ lives).
- II. We have the capability to carry out actions today that can improve the distant future.
- III. (Implied) A good action can be characterized by how many lives are saved with a set amount of resources (such as money).
- IV. Actions that impact the distant future save more lives per unit of resource (ie per dollar spent), than actions that are focussed on the near future.
- V. Therefore, the most important aspect of the actions we carry out today is the impact they have on the far future (ASL).

DSL

- I. ASL is true. And hence some actions are better than others.
- II. The personal cost of carrying out the 'better' actions is small.
- III. The 'better' actions do not go against the morality of the agent.
- IV. Therefore, one ought to choose actions that are near-best for the far future (DSL).

Objection (word count: 142)

My biggest problem with premise IV of the ASL argument. Greaves and MacAskill rely on the fact that events with low probability but extremely large consequences occur in the distant future to give more 'value' to certain actions. The problem I have with this premise is the way in which they arrive at the probabilities of certain actions. For example, they claim that a well invested \$1 billion can reduce catastrophe from AI by 0.001%, but there is no evidence for that probability or monetary value. It is nearly impossible to know for certain if \$1 billion worth of funds will indeed reduce AI catastrophe by 0.001% in the future. And so you cannot argue that investing \$1 billion into an uncertain future action is better than investing \$1 billion into a current, more certain action such as fighting malaria.