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FUTURE PERFECT

# Effective altruism's most controversial idea

Longtermism is influencing billionaire philanthropy and shaping politics. Should it guide the future of humanity?

by **Sigal Samuel**

Sep 6, 2022, 3:00 AM PDT



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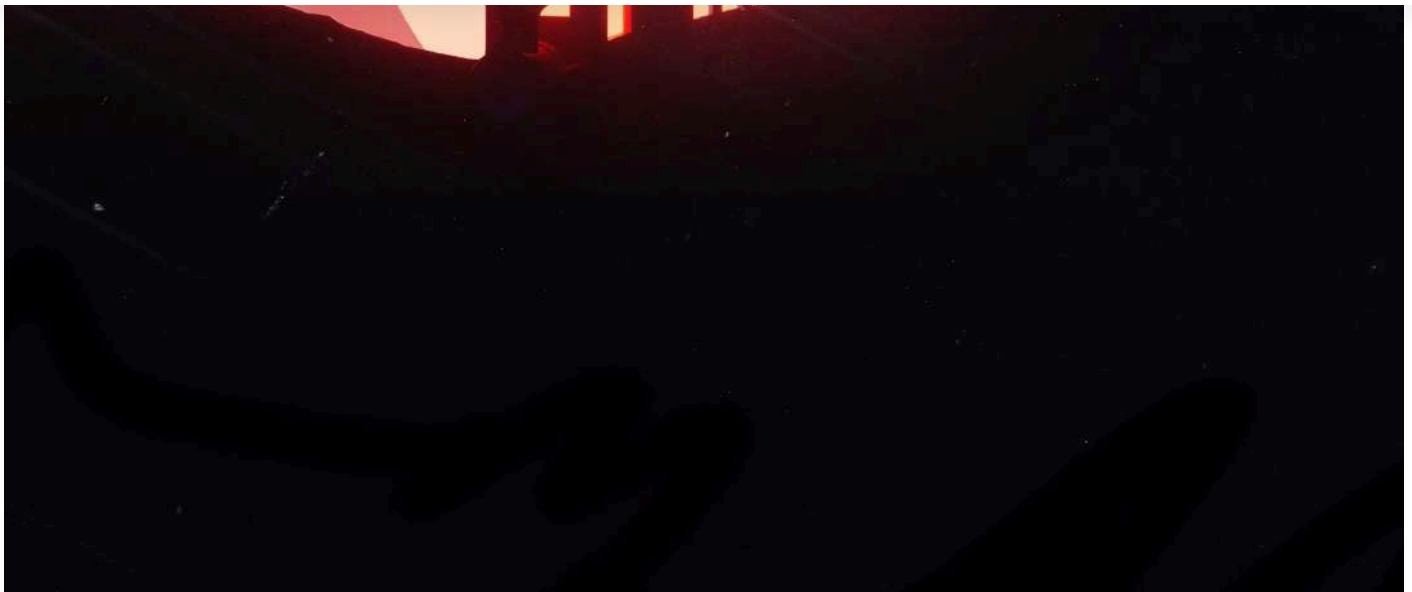
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Maybe the noise hasn't reached you yet. Or maybe you've heard rumblings as it picks up more and more and more steam, like a train gathering momentum. Now, in any case, you might want to listen closely, because some of the world's richest people are hopping on board this train — and what they do may change life for you and your descendants.

The “train” I’m talking about is a worldview called longtermism. A decade ago, it was just a fringe idea some philosophy nerds at Oxford University were exploring. Now it’s

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The idea emerged out of effective altruism (EA), a broader social movement dedicated to wielding reason and evidence to do the most good possible for the most people. EA is rooted in the belief that all lives are equally valuable — us, our neighbors, and people living in poverty in places we've never been. We have a responsibility to use our resources to help people as much as we can, regardless of where they are.

When it started out a dozen years ago, EA was mostly concerned with the biggest problems of today, like global poverty and global health. Effective altruists researched effective ways to help others — and then they actually helped, whether by donating to charities that prevent malaria or by giving cash directly to people in extreme poverty.

This work has been hugely successful in at least two ways: It's estimated to have saved

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And, hey, avoiding extinction sounds like a very reasonable goal! But this pivot generated controversial questions: How many resources should we devote to “longtermist” versus “near-termist” goals? Is the future *a* key moral priority or is it *the* key moral priority? Is trying to help future people — the hundreds of billions who could live — more important than definitely helping the smaller number of people who are suffering right now?

This is why it’s useful to think of longtermism as a train: We can come up with different answers to these questions, and decide to get off the train at different stations. Some people ride it up to a certain point — say, acknowledging that the future is a key and often underappreciated moral priority — but they step off the train before getting to

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The poster boy for longtermism, Oxford philosopher Will MacAskill, recently published a new book on the worldview that's been generating an astounding amount of media buzz for a work of moral philosophy. In its policy prescriptions, *What We Owe the Future* mostly advocates for weak longtermism, though MacAskill told me he's "sympathetic" to strong longtermism and thinks it's probably right.

Yet he said he worries about powerful people misusing his ideas and riding the train way farther than he ever intended. "That terrifies me," he said.

"The thing I worry," he added, "is that people in the wider world are like, 'Oh, longtermism? That's the Elon Musk worldview.' And I'm like, no, no, no."

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Some of the most vociferous critics are conflating different “train stations.” They don’t seem to realize that weak longtermism is different from strong longtermism; the former is a commonsense perspective that they themselves probably share, and, for the most part, it’s the perspective that MacAskill defends in the book.

But these critics can also be forgiven for the conflation, because longtermism runs on a series of ideas that link together like train tracks. And when the tracks are laid down in a direction that leads to Crazy Town, that increases the risk that some travelers will head, well, all the way to Crazy Town.

As longtermism becomes more influential, it’s a good idea to identify the different stations where you can get out. As you’ll see, longtermism is not just an intellectual trend; it’s an intrinsically political project, which means we shouldn’t leave it up to a few powerful people (whether philosophers or billionaires) to define it. Charting the future of humanity should be much more democratic. So: Want to take a ride?

## Station 1: Weak longtermism

If you care about climate change, you’re probably a weak longtermist.

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certain policies (like climate policies) by using an explicit “discount rate” that attaches less value to future people than present ones.

There’s a growing trend of people aiming to change that. You see it in the many lawsuits arguing that current government policies fail to curb climate change and therefore fail in their duty of care to future generations. You see it in Wales’s decision to appoint a “future generations commissioner” who calls out policymakers when they’re making decisions that might harm people in the long run. And you see it in a recent United Nations report that advocates for creating a UN Special Envoy for Future Generations and a Declaration on Future Generations that would grant future people legal status.

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coming decades and, if not aligned with our values and goals, could wreak havoc on human life.

Other risks, like a great-power war, and especially nuclear war, would also present major threats to humanity. Yet we aren't mounting serious efforts to mitigate them. Big donors like the MacArthur Foundation have pulled back from trying to prevent nuclear war. And as Ord notes, there's one international body in charge of stopping the proliferation of bioweapons, the Biological Weapons Convention — and its annual budget is smaller than that of the average McDonald's!

Longtermist thinkers are making their voices heard — Ord's ideas are referenced by the likes of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson — and they say we should be devoting more money to countering neglected and important risks to our future. But that raises two questions: How much money? And, at whose expense?



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Okay, here's where the train starts to get bumpy.

Strong longtermism, as laid out by MacAskill and his Oxford colleague Hilary Greaves, says that impacts on the far future aren't just *one* important feature of our actions — they're *the* most important feature. And when they say far future, they really mean *far*. They argue we should be thinking about the consequences of our actions not just one or five or seven generations from now, but thousands or even millions of years ahead.

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Their reasoning amounts to moral math. There are going to be far more people alive in the future than there are in the present or have been in the past. Of all the human

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That's how the argument goes anyhow. And if you buy it, it's easy to conclude, as MacAskill and Greaves wrote in their 2019 paper laying out the case for strong longtermism: "For the purposes of evaluating actions, we can in the first instance often *simply ignore* all the effects contained in the first 100 (or even 1000) years, focussing primarily on the further-future effects. Short-run effects act as little more than tie-breakers."

The revised version, dated June 2021, notably leaves this passage out. When I asked MacAskill why, he said they feared it was "misleading" to the public. But it's not misleading per se; it captures what happens if you take the argument to its logical conclusion.

If you buy the strong longtermism argument, it might dramatically change some of your choices in life. Instead of donating to charities that save kids from malaria today, you may donate to AI safety researchers. Instead of devoting your career to being a family doctor, you may devote it to research on pandemic prevention. You'd know there's only a tiny probability your donation or actions will help humanity avoid catastrophe, but you'd reason that it's worth it — if your bet does pay off, the payoff would be enormous.

But you might not buy this argument at all. Here are three of the main objections to it:

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To calculate a decision's expected value, you multiply the value of an outcome by the probability of it occurring. You're supposed to pick the decision that has the highest expected value — to “shut up and multiply,” as some effective altruists like to say.

Expected value is a totally logical tool to use if you're, say, a gambler placing bets in a casino. But it can lead you to ludicrous conclusions in a scenario that involves truly tiny probabilities of enormous payoffs. As one philosopher noted in a critique of strong longtermism, according to the math of expected value, “If you could save a million lives today or shave 0.0001 percent off the probability of premature human extinction — a one in a million chance of saving at least 8 trillion lives — you should do the latter, allowing a million people to die.”

Using expected value to game out tiny probabilities of enormous payoffs in the far future is like using a butterfly net to try to catch a beluga whale. The butterfly net was just not built for that task.

MacAskill acknowledges this objection, known as the “fanaticism” objection in the

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longtermism surprisingly weak in practice.

**We can't reliably predict the effects of our actions in one year, never mind 1,000 years, so it makes no sense to invest a lot of resources in trying to positively influence the far future**

This is a totally reasonable objection, and longtermists like MacAskill and Greaves acknowledge that in a lot of cases, we suffer from “moral cluelessness” about the downstream effects of our actions. The further out we look, the more uncertain we become.

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strong longtermist actions — bounds endorsed by the leading champions of this worldview — you arrive, in practice, back at weak longtermism.

## **It's downright unjust: People living in miserable conditions today need our help now**

This is probably the most intuitive objection. Strong longtermism, you might argue, smacks of privilege: It's easy for philosophers living in relative prosperity to say we should prioritize future people, but people living in miserable conditions need us to help right now!

This may not be obvious to people who subscribe to a moral theory like utilitarianism, where all that matters is maximizing good consequences (like happiness or satisfying individuals' preferences). A utilitarian will focus on the overall effects on everybody's welfare, so even if poverty or disease or extreme weather is causing real suffering to millions today, the utilitarian won't necessarily act on that if they think the best way to maximize welfare is to act on the suffering of hundreds of billions of future people.

But if you're not a utilitarian longtermist, or if you acknowledge uncertainty about which moral theory is right, then you may conclude that aggregated effects on people's welfare aren't the only thing that matters. Other things like justice and basic rights

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However, he is willing to reallocate some spending on present people to longtermist causes; he told me he doesn't see that as violating the rights of present people.

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You might disagree with this, though. It clearly does in some sense harm present people to withhold funding for them to get health care or housing — though it's a harm of omission rather than commission. If you believe access to health care or housing is a basic right in a global society as rich as ours, you may believe it's wrong to withhold those things in favor of future people.

Even Greaves, who co-wrote the strong longtermism paper, feels squeamish about

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to throw all this altruistic effort at existential risk mitigation and probably do nothing, when you know that you could've done all this good for near-term causes."

We should note that effective altruists have long devoted the bulk of their spending to near-term causes, with far more money flowing to global health, say, than to AI safety. But with effective altruists like the crypto billionaire Sam Bankman-Fried beginning to direct millions toward longtermist causes, and with public intellectuals like MacAskill and Ord telling policymakers that we should spend more on longtermism, it's reasonable to worry how much of the money that would've otherwise gone into the near-termism pool may be siphoned off into the longtermism pool.

And here, MacAskill demurs. On the very last page of his book, he writes: "How much should we in the present be willing to sacrifice for future generations? I don't know the answer to this."

Yet this is the key question, the one that moves longtermism from the realm of thought experiment to real-world policy. How should we handle tough trade-offs? Without a strong answer, strong longtermism loses much of its guiding power. It's no longer a unique project. It's basically "intergenerational justice," just with more math.



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Nevertheless, it would be pretty easy for someone to get to that mistaken view if they were to proceed from the philosophical ideas he lays out in his book — especially an idea called the total view of population ethics.

It's a complex idea, but at its core, the total view says that more of a good thing is better, and good lives are good, so increasing the number of people living good lives makes the world better. So: Let's make more people!

A lot of us (myself included) find this unintuitive. It seems to presuppose that well-being is valuable in and of itself — but that's a very bizarre thing to presuppose. I care about well-being because creatures exist to feel the well-being or lack of well-being in

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There might be no other highly intelligent life elsewhere in the affectable universe, and there might never be. If this is true, then our actions are of cosmic significance.

With great rarity comes great responsibility. For thirteen billion years, the known universe was devoid of consciousness ... Now and in the coming centuries, we face threats that could kill us all. And if we mess this up, we mess it up forever. The universe's self-understanding might be permanently lost ... the brief and slender flame of consciousness that flickered for a while would be extinguished forever.

There are a few eyebrow-raising anthropocentric ideas here. How confident are we that the universe was or would be barren of highly intelligent life without humanity?

“Highly intelligent” by whose lights — humanity’s? And are we so sure there is some intrinsic value we’re providing to the universe by furnishing it with human-style “self-understanding”?

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future people will be sufficiently well-off, then a civilization that is twice as long or twice as large is twice as good. The practical upshot of this is a moral case for space settlement.

MacAskill's colleague, the philosopher Nick Bostrom, notes that humans settling the stars is actually just the beginning. He has argued that the "colonization of the universe" would give us the area and resources with which to run gargantuan numbers of digital simulations of humans living happy lives. The more space, the more happy (digital) humans!

This idea that humanity should settle the stars — not just can, but should, because we have a moral responsibility to expand our civilization across the cosmos — carries a whiff of Manifest Destiny. And, like the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, it's worrying because it frames the stakes as being so sky-high that it could be used to justify almost anything.

As the philosopher Isaiah Berlin once wrote in his critique of all utopian projects: "To make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious forever — what could be too high a price to pay for that? To make such an omelet, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken — that was the fate of Lenin, of Trotsky, of Mao."

Longtermists who are dead-set on getting humanity to the supposed multplanetary

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“That’s not the sort of person I want building AGI, because they are not responsive to the moral issues,” MacAskill told me. “Maybe that means we have to delay the singularity in order to make it safer. Maybe that means it doesn’t come in my lifetime.”

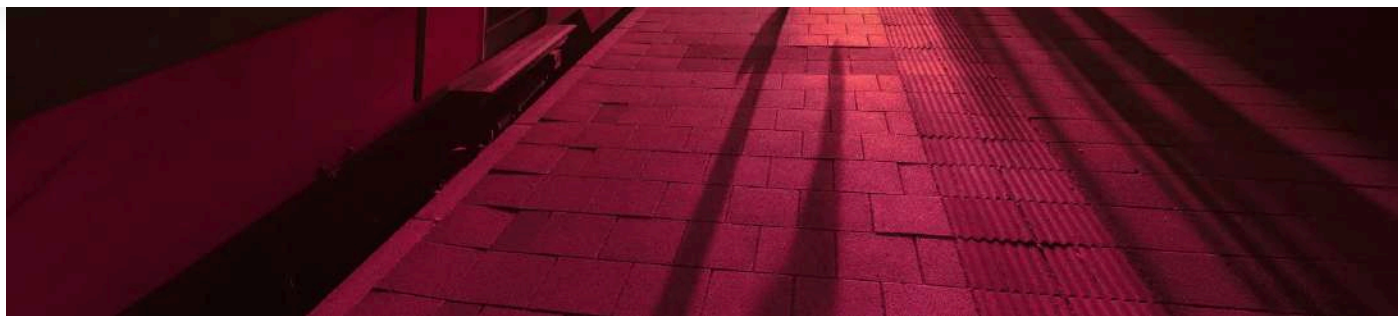
MacAskill’s point is that you can believe getting to a certain future is important, without believing it’s so important that it trumps absolutely every other moral constraint. I asked him, however, if he thought this distinction was too subtle by half — if it was unrealistic to expect it would be grasped by certain excitable tech bros and other non-philosophers.

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## A different approach: “Worldview diversification,” or embracing multiple sources of value

A half-dozen years ago, the researcher Ajeya Cotra found herself in a sticky situation. She’d been part of the EA community since college. She’d gotten into the game because she cared about helping people — real people who are suffering from real problems like global poverty in the real world today. But as EA gave rise to longtermism, she bumped up against the argument that maybe she should be more focused on protecting future people.

“It was a powerful argument that I felt some attraction to, felt some repulsion from, felt a little bit bullied by or held hostage by,” Cotra told me. She was intellectually open enough to consider it seriously. “It was sort of the push I needed to consider weird, out-there causes.”

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One of those causes was mitigating AI risk. That has become her main research focus — but, funnily enough, not for longtermist reasons. Her research led her to believe that AI risk presents a non-trivial risk of extinction, and that AGI could arrive as soon as 2040. That’s hardly a “long-term” concern.

“I basically ended up in a convenient world where you don’t need to be an extremely intense longtermist to buy into AI risk,” she said, laughing.

But just because she’d lucked into this convenient resolution didn’t mean the underlying philosophical puzzle — should we embrace weak longtermism, strong longtermism, or something else entirely? — was resolved.

And this wasn’t just a problem for her personally. The organization she works for, Open Philanthropy, had hundreds of millions of dollars to give out to charities, and needed a system for figuring out how to divvy it up between different causes. Cotra was assigned to think through this on Open Philanthropy’s behalf.

The result was “worldview diversification.” The first step is to accept that there are different worldviews. So, one split might be between near-termism and longtermism. Then, within near-termism itself, there’s another split: One view says we should care mostly about humans, and another view says we should care about both humans and animals. Right there you’ve got three containers in which you think moral value might

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treat the containers like they each might have something useful to offer, and divvy up your budget between them based on your credence — how plausible you find each one.

“There’s some intuitive notion of, some proposals about how value should be distributed are less plausible than others,” Cotra explained. “So if you have a proposal that’s like, ‘Everyone wearing a green hat should count for 10 times more,’ then you’d be like, ‘Well, I’m not giving that view much!’”

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After you figure out your basic credences, Cotra says it might make sense to give a “bonus” to areas where there are unusually effective opportunities to do good at that

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## Whoever has the power gets to define longtermism. That's the problem.

On an individual level, each of us can inspect longtermism's "train tracks" or core ideas — expected value, say, or the total view of population ethics — and decide for ourselves where we get off the train. But this is not just something that concerns us as individuals. By definition, longtermism concerns all of humanity. So we also need to ask who will choose where humanity disembarks.

Typically, whoever's got the power gets to choose.

That worries Carla Cremer, an Oxford scholar who co-wrote a paper titled "Democratising Risk." The paper critiques the core ideas of longtermist philosophy, but more than that, it critiques the nascent field on a structural level.

"Tying the study of a topic that fundamentally affects the whole of humanity to a niche belief system championed mainly by an unrepresentative, powerful minority of the world is undemocratic and philosophically tenuous," the paper argues.

To address this, Cremer says the field needs structural changes. For one thing, it should allow for bottom-up control over how funding is distributed and actively fund critical work. Otherwise, critics of orthodox longtermist views may not speak up for

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It's an understandable concern. Bankman-Fried's Future Fund is doling out millions to people with ideas about how to improve the far future, and MacAskill is not just an ivory-tower philosopher — he's helping decide where the funding goes. (Disclosure: Future Perfect, which is partly supported through philanthropic giving, received a project grant from Building a Stronger Future, Bankman-Fried's philanthropic arm.)

But to their credit, they are trying to decentralize funding: In February, the Future Fund launched a regranting program. It gives vetted individuals a budget (typically between \$250,000 and a few million dollars), which those individuals then regrant to people whose projects seem promising. This program has already given out more than \$130 million.

And truth be told, there's such a glut of money in EA right now — it's got roughly \$26.6 billion behind it — that financial scarcity isn't the biggest concern: There's enough to go around for both near-termist and longtermist projects.

**Because effective altruists are dealing with questions about how to distribute resources, their project is inherently political; they can't math their way out of that**

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So Cremer would like to see longtermists use more deliberative styles of decision-making. For inspiration, they could turn to citizens' assemblies, where a group of randomly selected citizens is presented with facts, then debates the best course of action and arrives at a decision together. We've already seen such assemblies in the context of climate policy and abortion policy; we could be similarly democratic when it comes to determining what the future should look like.

"I think EA has figured out how to have impact. They are still blind to the fact that whether or not that impact is positive or negative over the long term depends on politics," Cremer told me. Because effective altruists are dealing with questions about how to distribute resources — across both space and time — their project is inherently political; they can't math their way out of that. "I don't think they realize that in fact they are a political movement."

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