

LONGTERMISM

Longtermism

Longtermism

'Longtermism' refers to a set of ethical views concerned with protecting and improving the long-run future.

This view rests on the idea that future people matter morally, that there could be a very large number of future people, and that there are actions we can take now to affect how good or bad the future is.

There are multiple more precise definitions of longtermism.

In his forthcoming book ["What We Owe the Future," Will MacAskill](#) offers two distinct definitions of longtermism:

Longtermism: the view that positively influencing the longterm future is a key moral priority of our time.

Strong Longtermism: the view that positively influencing the longterm future is the key moral priority of our time.

Toby Ord offers a longer discussion of longtermism in his book "The Precipice":

"the possibility of preventable existential risks in our lifetimes shows that there are issues where our actions can have sustained positive effects over the whole longterm future, and where we are the only generation in a position to produce those effects. So the view that people in the future matter just as much as us has deep practical implications. We have a long way to go if we are to understand these and integrate them fully into our moral thinking. Considerations like these suggest an ethic we might call longtermism, which is especially concerned with the impacts of our actions upon the longterm future. It takes seriously the fact that our own generation is but one page in a much longer story, and that our most important role may be how we shape—or fail to shape—that story. Working to safeguard humanity's potential is one avenue for such a lasting impact and there may be others too."

Ord writes that "longtermism is animated by a moral re-orientation toward the vast future that existential risks threaten to foreclose."

These definitions are not exhaustive, and how best to define longtermism is a live discussion. What all these definitions share is a recognition that the long-run future matters morally, and that this should bear on our priorities today. The future seems like it could be vast: if humanity stays at its current size and lasts as long as the typical mammalian species — one million years — then future people will outnumber us ten thousand to one.

It seems there are some things we can do to ensure the long run future goes well. For instance, we can try to avoid catastrophes that could cause human extinction or otherwise lock humanity into a negative future, such as mitigating risks posed by artificial general intelligence that is not aligned with human values or synthetic pathogens that could cause destructive pandemics.

These points together are powerful, and have led many researchers, advocates, entrepreneurs, and policymakers to focus their efforts on ensuring that the long term future goes well. You can learn more about their work, and how to get involved, at the links below.

To learn more see:

- Longtermism.com
- <https://80000hours.org/articles/future-generations/>
- <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/articles/longtermism/>
- <https://www.finmoorhouse.com/writing/longtermism>
- <https://www.forethought.org/longtermism>
- [The Precipice](#) by Toby Ord
- [Toby Ord on why the long-term future of humanity matters more than anything else, and what we should do about it](#) on the 80,000 Hours podcast
- [Why our impact in millions of years could be what most matters](#) on the 80,000 Hours website
- [Posts tagged 'longtermism'](#) on the Effective Altruism forum
- [Jess Whittlestone's article on longtermism](#) on effectivealtruism.org

Join us in building a network
dedicated to doing good