

Strong Longtermism and the Challenge from Anti-Aggregative Moral Views¹

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Abstract

Greaves and MacAskill (2019) argue for *strong longtermism*, according to which, in a wide class of decision situations, the option that is ex ante best, and the one we ex ante ought to choose, is the option that makes the very long-run future go best. One important aspect of their argument is the claim that strong longtermism is compatible with a wide range of ethical assumptions, including plausible non-consequentialist views. In this essay, I challenge this claim. I argue that strong longtermism is incompatible with a range of non-aggregative and partially aggregative moral views. Furthermore, I argue that the conflict between these views and strong longtermism is so deep that those in favour of strong longtermism are better off arguing against them, rather than trying to modify their own view. The upshot of this discussion is that strong longtermism is not as robust to plausible variations in underlying ethical assumptions as Greaves and MacAskill claim. In particular, the stand we take on interpersonal aggregation has important implications on whether making the future go as well as possible should be a global priority.

¹ This essay was originally written in spring 2021, before the publication of the updated version of Greaves and MacAskill's "The Case for Strong Longtermism" in June 2021. Because of this, I refer to the 2019 version of Greaves and MacAskill's paper throughout this essay. While the timing is unfortunate, I do not think anything important in my argument depends on which version of Greaves and MacAskill's paper I respond to. That said, the reader should note that some citations in this essay may not accurately represent the way Greaves and MacAskill now prefer to present their arguments. I am currently working towards an updated version of this essay, so any feedback would be greatly appreciated — please see the email address above. For comments I have already received, I thank Joe Horton, Dilara Küçük, and the audience at the UCL MPhil Thesis Preparation Seminar in October 2021.