

THE THREAT OF LONGTERMISM: IS ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE AN EXISTENTIAL RISK? DISILLUSIONED IDEALS FOR A BOLD, NEW FUTURE

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In a world of rapidly advancing technological innovation, a case has been made to prioritize potential long-term benefits to future generations over the interests of those currently alive. Proponents of this approach, called longtermists, support investments in technology to avoid existential risks. They claim technology will eventually “solve” climate change, while ignoring technopower reduction as a potential solution to global environmental catastrophe. Democratic control over technology mitigates some of these harms, yet falls short of the authors’ proposed level of oversight. In this paper, we consider the ethical hazards of longtermists’ stance. An ethical dilemma emerges from the devastating effect some technological advancements have on the environment. While we recognize the merits of long-term thinking, we argue longtermists’ prioritization consolidates power among few technocrats. This prioritization exacerbates existing inequalities instead of redistributing economic and political power to communities most affected by climate change. We posit this trade-off to be unethical.

Keywords: Longtermism – Ethics – Effective altruism – William MacAskill – Martha Nussbaum – Existential risk

Introduction

We currently live in a time of rapid social and technological advancements. In the age of the Anthropocene humanity has had an increasing effect on our environment, often to the detriment of the climate. Through this time of societal advancement, we have prioritized man-made achievements in the pursuit of a better life over the long-term preservation of ecosystems. The longtermist philosopher, Toby Ord, in his book *The Precipice*, discussed the impact humanity has had on the environment, which increased dramatically in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ord points out that in the past 50 years humans have developed the power and means to wipe out humanity through events like engineered pandemics and nuclear war (Ord 2000).

Ord, similarly to other prominent longtermist thought leaders, argues that the decisions society makes in the upcoming decades could determine the survival of our species (Ord 2000). Longtermists argue for tipping the odds in the favor of human preservation, at the same time claiming that climate change does not pose an existential risk, as the likelihood of it causing a mass extinction of humanity is assessed to be quite low. In this paper, we argue that climate change poses a greater existential risk than longtermist philosophers want to admit. We will consider the potential effect climate change will have on future generations and the threat it may pose to humanity, concluding that longtermism makes a fatal error by neglecting environmental conservation, as priority ought to be placed on preventing ecological disasters that threaten the lives of the world's most vulnerable populations.

In this paper, we will consider the tension between technological advancement and preservation of the environment. We will critically engage with the emerging ethic of longtermism, which justifies the benefits of risky developments such as AI and space exploration (by colonizing other planets) for the sake of future generations. In order to weigh the risks to future generations, we argue that Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach is a more sustainable theory. We will turn now to look at the arguments presented by longtermism.

I. What is Longtermism?

The direct implication of longtermism's key arguments is that the interests of future generations ought to be prioritized over the interests of people in the present. The framework is based on the calculus that, while every person has equal moral worth and their lives count equally, the Earth's population in the future will far exceed the current population, and, therefore, future generations ought to be prioritized. The philosopher William MacAskill defines longtermism as follows: if we want to do the most good, we should focus on bringing about those changes to society that do the most to improve the very long-term future (MacAskill, 2020). He supports this thesis with four premises:

Future people matter, morally; 2. There are (in expectation) vast numbers of future people; 3. Future people are utterly disenfranchised; they have no say in what happens today; 4. There are ways (in expectation) to positively impact the very long run (MacAskill, 2020).

Longtermists build on Derek Parfit's estimation of the quality of life of future generations in his book *Reasons and Persons*. In considering acts that benefit future generations, we can look to Parfit's argument that an act benefits a person when the consequence is that a person is benefited most (Parfit 1986, 69). By this metric, an action

is morally justifiable if the consequence of the action is what would benefit a person the most. The burden of proof rests on the longtermists to prove that the measures they propose in prioritizing future generations will benefit them more than it will harm current people. This is an impossible claim to prove.

Further, the longtermists derive their moral theory from the ethical framework of Effective Altruism, a phrase coined by a group of people around the organizations Giving What We Can and 80000 Hours, including Toby Ord and William MacAskill, who build on Peter Singer's moral argument in *The Expanding Circle* that an ethical standard is progressive if it expands our circle of moral consideration (Singer 1993, 12 – 14; Singer 2011, 96 – 124). Longtermists base their arguments on the view that we ought to maximize our ability to do good using a utilitarian calculus. But, importantly, they also claim that our circle of moral concern ought to be expanded to include future people extending hundreds if not thousands of years in the future (Beckstead 2019; Greaves – MacAskill 2021). Since there could be significantly more people in the future, we have an ethical obligation to make sacrifices in the present that will benefit people in the far distant future. However, longtermists use this ethical argument to justify risky technological advancements. We will look more into this trade-off later on in this paper.

Effective Altruists, through statistical analysis, try to quantify how much good a charitable action will cause and encourage people to maximize the good they do. Longtermism expands this idea of doing the most good to their ideas about the future, claiming each person has equal moral worth, and the time in which they live is irrelevant in considering our ethical obligations towards them. Therefore, we have a moral obligation to do the most good for people in the far-off future.

Effective Altruism, as defined by Ord and MacAskill, is the use of evidence and reason to help others as much as possible with our time and money – with a particular concentration on how to act given moral uncertainty (Centre for Effective Altruism). But as longtermism goes, it consolidates the decision-making processes among a few technocrats and ends up disenfranchising present people. In *What We Owe the Future*, MacAskill says that:

Longtermism, the idea that positively influences the long-term future is a key moral priority of our time. Longtermism is about taking seriously just how big the future could be and how high the stakes are in shaping it. If humanity survives to even a fraction of its potential life span, then, strange as it may seem...[w]hat we do now will affect untold numbers of future people (MacAskill 2022, 4 – 5).

If human beings live the lifespan of a typical mammalian species, billions and billions of future people remain to be born, and their interests swamp our own (MacAskill 2022, 3). To the objection “Why should I care about that? I care about my family and friends, not possible people in the far future,” MacAskill responds with disarming moderation:

Special relationships and reciprocity are important. But they do not change the upshot of my argument. I’m not claiming that the interests of present and future people should always and everywhere be given equal weight. I’m just claiming that future people matter significantly” (MacAskill 2022, 11).

However, MacAskill contradicts this statement in his 2021 paper “The Case for Strong Longtermism” in which he argues for “the view that impact on the far future is the *most* important feature of our actions today” (MacAskill 2021). Further, MacAskill does little in the way of explaining what exactly it would look like to prioritize future generations. An analogy MacAskill gives in *Doing Good Better* is the comparison that it costs roughly \$50,000 to train a seeing eye dog, whereas that same amount could be used to buy 4,000 schoolbooks for kids in another country. MacAskill argues the Effective Altruist should buy the schoolbooks because they would be doing better for more people (MacAskill 2015, 71 – 72).

A. Counter Arguments to Longtermism

To the calculus that there will be more people in the future, therefore, we ought to prioritize future generations more highly. We have three main objections: 1. It is impossible to know what the needs of future generations will be, thus making it impossible to accurately arrive at an effective strategy to meet their needs. 2. Governments make decisions based on an understanding of reciprocal agreements, making governments’ consideration for future generations complex. 3. We would argue that longtermists’ agendas of permitting disastrous technological advancements are not the most helpful action for future generations, but are, in fact, potentially very hazardous for present people.

First, it’s impossible to accurately assess the needs of future generations, which makes it difficult to take effective actions to adequately meet the needs of future generations. Technological advancements quickly become outdated, infrastructure breaks down, and engineers develop methods of accomplishing the same goals in more effective ways. During the industrial revolution concern arose over whether the world would run out of coal in the near future. However, technological advancements shifted energy dependence on to fossil fuels and the concerns they had in the 1890s for the future people became irrelevant. We could invest billions of dollars into Elon Musk’s

Boring Company to build freight tunnels to transport goods, but in a hundred years freight transportation may be obsolete. In this scenario, arguments justifying the damage to the environment caused by burrowing underground for hundreds of kilometers for the sake of future generations falls flat. Likewise, over the past century per capita GDPs in developed countries have risen substantially and tens of millions of people have been raised out of extreme poverty. Standards of living have changed so drastically in the past century it would have been impossible for people at the time to know what it would take for people today to live at a median level of subsistence. Given the limitations of the government to accurately anticipate the needs of people in the future, it is unconvincing to say, with absolute certainty, that X action or behavior will be in future generations' best interest.

Second, a government's obligations to the present people who voted them into office makes it difficult to justify prioritizing future generations or acting in a way that is against the interest of present people. Longtermism contradicts previously held understandings of democracy and the understanding of John Locke's social contract theory (Locke 1980, 52 – 65). Locke argues that the government has authority to rule because people consent to being ruled in exchange for certain benefits from the government. Further, governments have a monopoly on violence because citizens cede their power to their government in exchange for protection. Therefore, governments have an obligation to protect the interests of those who are submitting to its power. What's more, politicians' salaries are funded from taxpayers' dollars and so citizens are entitled to a return on their investments: it follows that politicians would discourage behaviors that benefit future generations at the expense of present people.

Third, technological advancements that are destructive to the environment will not be in the best interest of future generations because humans exist in an ecosystem dependent on the longevity of the environment around them. Longtermists' claims that environmental disaster will not harm future generations can't be guaranteed. On the other hand, we can estimate with a marginal degree of variance the extreme effects that certain behaviors will cause the environment. For example, if the world continues with the current output of CO₂-emissions, scientists have projected that it will cause the global temperature, on average, to increase between 1.5 – 4.5 degrees Celsius this century (Burke – Diffenburt 2019). The effects of climate change are already apparent with irregular rainfall patterns causing increased flooding in some areas and drought and forest fires in other areas. This change alone will cause hazardous climate events claiming people's lives, increasing food scarcity, and famine. Further, we will point to what Parfit refers to as the *Social Discount Rate* (Parfit 1984, 357). In response to the claim that we ought to be concerned about effects on future people. Parfit says: "we are morally justified in being less concerned about effects in the further

future...[a] cost-benefit analysis. On this view, we can “discount” the more remote effects of our acts and policies, at some rate of n per cent per year” (Parfit 1984, 357).

It is undeniable that future generations matter, morally speaking, but we can justifiably place limits on the extent to which we prioritize people in the future. Because longtermists’ arguments for prioritizing future generations are vague and difficult to justify, it is understandable that some governments don’t take these claims seriously. Yet, some politicians, like the UK, are incorporating the language of longtermism into their policies, as demonstrated by Rishi Sunak’s “Long-Term Decisions for a Brighter Future” slogan. We will turn instead to focusing on ecological preservation. We argue that, at least for the foreseeable future, humans are an Earth-bound species, and thus dependent on the well-being of our planet.

II. Existential Risks

Due to its claims about the importance of artificial general intelligence (AGI) in determining whether the immensity of the future will be realized or erased, longtermism is seen as a set of efforts aimed at ensuring that the power of AI is harnessed toward long-term ends generally understood as “good.” Longtermists argue that humanity should be investing far more resources into mitigating the risk of future catastrophes in general and extinction events in particular. Longtermism assumes that events categorized as existential risks could wipe out humans altogether or cause the irreversible collapse of industrial civilization.¹ However, when it comes to climate change, longtermists believe it is unlikely to directly cause an existential catastrophe, although they see it as a factor that may increase the probability of other existential risks. In this section we will explore the concepts of existential risks, and look into how the prioritization of *what futures are worth taking which risks* relies on a notion of value.

For longtermists, existential catastrophes and existential risks are concepts of special concern. One popular definition of “existential risk” is an event that threatens the premature extinction of Earth-originating intelligent life or the permanent and drastic destruction of its potential for desirable future development (Bostrom 2002ab). Similarly, existential catastrophes are events which irrevocably destroy what is perceived by them as humanity’s long-term potential. Fin Moorhouse, defending longtermists’ position says that, in the case of climate change, it is not clear that it is among the most plausible causes of an existential catastrophe (Moorhouse 2021).

¹ Longtermists refer to “existential risk” also as probability; e.g., “an existential risk is a chance of a terrible event occurring,” as particular scenarios; e.g., “the existential risk of AGI destroying humanity,” or “humanity faces numerous existential risks this century.”

Toby Ord, in *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*, is concerned about large-scale threats we have created for ourselves, especially about two possibilities: empowered artificial intelligence unaligned with human values and engineered pandemics. Ord claims the chance of an existential catastrophe caused by climate change directly over the next century at around 1 in 1000; risk from engineered pandemics is 1 in 30, and the risk from rogue artificial intelligence (AI) is roughly 1 in 10 (estimates which are not supported by any kind of methodology) (Ord 2020, 295). This does not mean that longtermists are climate change denialists. In fact, they often highlight that climate change is an ongoing global emergency, however, given our present state of knowledge, it seems unlikely for them to cause human extinction, and as such is not a primary concern. Longtermists are, therefore, not oblivious to the fact that there are many challenges and problems that the world faces. However, if we are taking a long-term view, we should establish a method that can help us choose which are the most important from the perspective of thwarting extinction of the human race. The issue of prioritization of existential risks is also explained by MacAskill. He claims that our focus should not necessarily be on the risks we are currently paying most attention to: predominantly because of how many other people are focusing on them at the same time. He breaks that down into categories of significance, persistence, and contingency (MacAskill 2022, 57 – 58). The significance of an event is how big a difference it makes at any time to how “good” or “bad” the world is; persistence is how long the event lasts; and contingency is whether that event would’ve happened otherwise.

Definitions of existential risk are quite abstract, failing to incorporate insights from risk assessment in relevant fields, ultimately preventing us from clarifying whether climate change and ecological catastrophes can be classified as existential risks. In our opinion, the particularly faulty ones are representing the techno-utopian approach (TUA), that not only chooses arbitrary categorizations of risk, but also advocates for dangerous mitigation strategies. TUA relies heavily on total utilitarianism and strong longtermism: its moral as well as empirical assumptions might be particularly vulnerable to misuse as subject of securitization. TUA definitions conflate the study of global catastrophe and subsequent human extinction with that of the longtermist ethics of existential risk. This perception of existential risk has serious consequences for our argument. In the case of extinction-level existential threat event (that longtermists want to avoid) the people who survive are the people who can afford to take care of themselves; this means there are better and worse equipped groups (by privilege of wealth or being born in a state that is taking care of all the citizens). Supporting longtermists’ logic in this case means implicitly agreeing with worse-off people dying.

At the same time they are the most vulnerable people who are not able to escape the effects of climate change.

The longtermists' prioritization of two particular kinds of events as existential risk is ultimately deciding which life is worth living. Techno-optimists claim new technologies can create better life, but the implication is that disadvantaged people are going to die *en masse*, rather than creating an environment in which lives can flourish. By not taking care of the planet now and in the shorter time horizon, as well as by not considering the climate emergency as existential risk, we make future generations suffer and live with our decisions. Deciding what qualifies as an existential risk means deciding what kind of sacrifice future generations can or would consent to: it is therefore more than "giving voice to the voiceless," as proposed by MacAskill.

III. Martha Nussbaum and Capabilities Approach

We argue a better approach than longtermism to consider the interests of future generations is Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, which primarily concerns the conditions for human flourishing and what it means for individuals to lead a good life. The Capabilities Approach is motivated by the concept of human dignity. Unlike longtermism – with its potential to consolidate decision-making among a few technocrats, – Nussbaum's approach inherently advocates for a redistribution of power; emphasizing the importance of political freedoms, control over one's environment, and non-discrimination. Nussbaum defines the Capabilities Approach as "an approach to comparative quality-of-life assessment and to theorizing about basic social justice...when comparing societies and assessing them for their basic decency or justice, is, "What is each person able to do and be?" In other words, Nussbaum takes each person as an end, asking not just about the total or average well-being, but about the opportunities available to each person" (Nussbaum 2011, 47). This approach entails two normative claims: (1) the freedom to achieve well-being is of utmost moral importance and, (2) that well-being ought to be considered in terms of people's capabilities and functions. Nussbaum provides a list of such core capabilities (Nussbaum 1992) and justifies this choice with the fact that selected capabilities promote human dignity (Nussbaum 2011). Nussbaum goes on to use these criteria as a framework in determining the freedoms a person is entitled to and how society and government can best promote each person's interests. In this way we can consider the well-being of future generations to the extent that we understand the effects that actions have on the future. However, this model would stop short at requiring current people to sacrifice their well-being for the sake of future generations. Nussbaum acknowledges the complexity of discussing the well-being of non-sentient entities (like plants). However, the primary thrust of her extension of the Capabilities

Approach to non-human entities is geared towards sentient animals, as sentience provides a more evident grounding for considerations of well-being and flourishing.

Nussbaum does not explicitly address the topic of risks to future generations, ecological catastrophes, or environmental sustainability. That said, there are aspects of her capabilities list that are relevant to these topics, such as life, bodily health and integrity, senses and thought, affiliation, and finally relevance of other species. Nussbaum understands the capability of life as being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length. In this sense environmental catastrophes could pose a direct threat to being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length by creating conditions that reduce life expectancy. Ecological catastrophes further jeopardize sources of clean water and nutritious food, that are included in the good health capability; the capability of bodily integrity includes having safe places to move, which could be interpreted as safe from environmental hazards. Part of the affiliation capability emphasizes living with and toward others, which may be at risk if communities become fragmented due to environmental displacement. Similarly, the other species capability directly talks about being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature. While less direct than previous capabilities, if resources are redirected away from education due to ecological crises, the capability of senses, imagination, and thought (emphasizing the importance of education and freedom of expression) could be at risk. Finally, the *Control Over One's Environment* can be understood as political (i.e. the right of political participation), but also material: in essence, ecological disasters threaten the very fabric of what it means to have "control over one's environment" in Nussbaum's framework. Disrupting both the material and political spheres of this capability, ecological disasters are leaving individuals and communities struggling to reclaim a sense of agency, security, and dignity in their interactions with their environment.

Looking at the potential implications of these capabilities in the context of environmental sustainability, one could argue that the Capabilities Approach is deeply concerned with the well-being of current and future generations in the face of ecological challenges. Martha Nussbaum has further extended the Capabilities Approach to consider non-human animals, emphasizing that it is not only humans who possess intrinsic dignity and are deserving of a life worth living. In essence, Nussbaum's extension of the Capabilities Approach to animals is grounded in the belief that all sentient beings have inherent worth, and this worth demands recognition in ethical, legal, and societal considerations. This capability, identified by Nussbaum as "Other Species" implies a recognition of the intrinsic worth of non-human entities. In this case, the criteria for flourishing are not based on a human standard but rather on what is suitable for the particular species in question. Nussbaum's approach moves beyond

the basic welfare considerations of minimizing suffering. While preventing suffering is vital, the Capabilities Approach asks a more comprehensive question: what does this animal need to flourish and live a life in accordance with its species-specific capabilities? Nussbaum also criticizes utilitarian approaches to animal ethics (such as Peter Singer's perspective), which are primarily focusing on maximizing utility or pleasure and minimizing suffering. Nussbaum however believes this is too limiting and does not capture the full range of what is essential for a dignified life.

While arising from distinct philosophical contexts, both Capabilities Approach and longtermism deal with ethical considerations concerning well-being and flourishing: we argue that Nussbaum's framework is more appropriate to apply while considering the interests of future generations, however there are areas where their concerns intersect.

First, in theory both the Capabilities Approach and longtermism prioritize the well-being of individuals. Crucial difference is that while Nussbaum focuses on conditions for human flourishing in the present and near future, longtermism extends the sphere of moral concern to encompass the well-being of countless future generations. Second, both perspectives understand that certain conditions and capacities are interconnected. Just as Nussbaum sees health, education, and political freedoms as mutually reinforcing, longtermists see the well-being of present and future generations as interconnected, especially when it comes to addressing what they see as global catastrophic risks. Third, both approaches offer normative frameworks for guiding policy decisions. In Nussbaum's framework the list of central human capabilities is what policies should promote; longtermism, on the other hand, is less precise, but it does guide policy toward considering the long-term impact and ensuring that the interests of future generations are represented.

In order to contrast Nussbaum's approach with longtermism, we examine how the Capabilities Approach relates to some of the philosophical perspectives fundamentally incompatible with longtermism. The starkest contrast is represented by the temporal aspect: the Capabilities Approach, in its essence, concentrates on the well-being of people alive today by focusing on what people are currently capable of doing or being, while still considering their future interests. In this way, it shares presentism's concern for the immediate and tangible needs of living individuals. Secondly, while Nussbaum's approach emphasizes human capabilities, it also contains a capability related to "Other Species" suggesting the importance of living with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature, which overlaps with priorities of deep ecology. Saying that, deep ecology's emphasis on the intrinsic worth of all living entities goes beyond the anthropocentric focus of the Capabilities Approach. Thirdly, both the Capabilities Approach and ecofeminism

challenge structures of oppression. Nussbaum's framework, especially her emphasis on bodily integrity, health, and control over one's environment, aligns with eco-feminism's critique of patriarchal structures and their ties to environmental degradation, that are particularly visible in longtermism's potential to consolidate decision-making among a few technocrats. Furthermore, the Capabilities Approach values the idea of individuals having control over their environment, both politically and materially. This can align with the precautionary principle's emphasis on avoiding harm, especially if actions might compromise an individual's capability to have such control. Similarly, Nussbaum's approach values social affiliation, including having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation, and being able to live with others. This overlaps with communitarian values. However, while communitarianism places strong emphasis on the community, Nussbaum's approach remains primarily centered on individual capabilities.

In direct opposition to longtermism's origin, the Capabilities Approach can be seen as a critique or alternative to utilitarianism. Instead of focusing on utility maximization, Nussbaum emphasizes a list of specific capabilities as essential for human dignity. Her framework resonates more with a rights-based or deontological perspective than with utilitarian calculations. Unlike longtermists, Nussbaum recognizes the importance of cultural and contextual specificities in realizing her capabilities. Thus, while her framework provides a general guideline, it also leaves room for particularities in its application. Finally, while this perspective isn't directly addressed in Nussbaum's framework, her emphasis on present capabilities implicitly recognizes the challenges and uncertainties of predicting future outcomes.

In summary, while the Capabilities Approach and longtermism differ in their primary focuses and methodologies, they both harbour ethical concerns for ensuring that individuals – whether in the present or future – can lead lives of dignity, value, and well-being. We posit the Capabilities Approach is preferable to longtermism because it is comprehensive and considers not only the interests of humans, but of animal and non-sentient beings as well. The central emphasis of the Capabilities Approach on promoting conditions for human flourishing provides a rich ground for dialogue and integration with other ethical and philosophical ideas. We don't agree that there needs to be a trade-off between human interests and environmental conservation. We argue instead that environmental conservation is in humans' interest in the long term.

IV. Arguments Countering Longtermism

There are a number of potential shortcomings when longtermism is applied to considerations of ecological disasters. In this part of the article, we will attempt to

broadly characterize them, in order to show how Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach addresses longtermism's limitations.

As demonstrated in the previous sections, the most serious weaknesses of longtermism include its disproportionate prioritization of a few randomly chosen *existential threats* (like potential risks from superintelligent AI) over more immediate and tangible ecological risks, such as climate change or biodiversity loss, under the premise that existential threats have a more significant potential to impact the vast future. This leads to overemphasis on future generations. While it is praiseworthy to consider the well-being of future generations, we argue that longtermism leads to an overemphasis on the distant future at the expense of pressing issues in the present, including current ecological challenges. Some philosophers have used "Pascal's Mugging" to illustrate the problems with longtermist's focus on the future (Bostrom 2009). "Pascal's Mugging," as described by Nick Bostrom, is a thought experiment of a man who is stopped by a mugger who demands he give him his wallet. The man refuses to give the mugger his wallet because the mugger doesn't have a gun. The mugger tells the man if he gives him his wallet today he will bring the wallet tomorrow with twice as much money. The man still refuses and the mugger increases the amount he promises to bring the man. The man refuses and again the mugger increases the amount. Bostrom argues if this exchange continues with increased promises of return and added threats, eventually the man will give the mugger his wallet even though the chance of the mugger returning is nearly non-existent. The man does so in hopes of the minuscule chance for a huge return. It would seem foolish for the man to give the mugger his wallet no matter the promised return. In the same way, making massive sacrifices for the promise benefit in a future that does not exist would be imprudent.

Longtermist perspective underweights the significance of localized and immediate ecological harms in favor of broad, future-focused strategies, ideally solved with the use of technological innovations. Focus on new and emerging technologies is further raising a concern that longtermism might place undue faith in exotechnology solutions to issues of sustainability and ecological problems. For instance, believing that future technologies will "solve" climate change might downplay the urgency of present-day actions or overlook the potential benefits of non-technological solutions, such as changes in consumption patterns or cultural shifts. This ties directly with disproportionate harm to developing and less well-off countries. While longtermists intend to build their case for focusing on the well-being of future generations, ignoring the effects of climate change on present people. We posit this to be irresponsible at best and unethical at worst. Investing in technological innovations that contribute to carbon emissions and rising temperatures only serves to widen the divide between Higher and Lower Income Countries. According to research done by Stanford University, "The increase in

inequality between countries has resulted primarily from warming-induced penalties in poor countries, along with warming-induced benefits in some rich countries” (Burke – Diffenborg). This is where the Longtermist calculus breaks down. The effect on a nonexistent future generation may seem greater than the effects on present people, but longtermist obscure the moral obligations we have to present people.

In some interpretations of longtermism, there is a focus on maximizing economic growth now to ensure greater resources for future generations, with the belief that a richer future society would be better equipped to handle challenges. This could lead to undervaluing ecological preservation in the present if it is seen as a hindrance to economic growth.

Longtermism presents an ethical argument to justify de-prioritization of using up finite resources to mitigate effects of climate change by building a case for future generations. However, in the past decade the impact the environment has on human’s lives has become more apparent and poses an increasing threat on our way of life. The World Health Organization released a statement estimating that a total of 7 million people die each year as a result of climate related crises (Kluge 2023). As the planet continues to warm, it is safe to assume this number will only rise in forthcoming years. But beyond causing increases in death, climate change poses other risks such as food and water shortage, poor air quality, and frequent extreme weather events, to list a few. All of these effects threaten the quality of human lives and their livelihoods. Furthermore, if the primary focus is on ensuring the distant future is as abundant as possible, it could lead to decision paralysis, especially in the face of complex ecological challenges. The argument might be that taking action now could have unforeseen negative consequences for the far future.

It’s essential to note that longtermism is a broad and varied philosophical viewpoint, with different proponents emphasizing different aspects and strategies. Not all longtermists would agree with or fall into the potential pitfalls mentioned. Making decisions that heavily weigh the interests of future generations introduces moral complexities. There’s a challenge in determining how to balance the known needs of the present against the uncertain needs of the future, especially in ecological contexts where actions (or inactions) today have lasting consequences. With its emphasis on the conditions necessary for human flourishing, Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach offers tools that might address some of the concerns raised about longtermism, especially in the context of disproportionate harm to developing countries and ecological risks.

Central to Nussbaum’s approach is the idea that every individual, regardless of where they are from, has the same intrinsic dignity and deserves the same opportunities to flourish. This contrasts with any form of utilitarian thinking that might sacrifice

the well-being of some (e.g., those in developing countries) for the greater good of future generations or the majority. Unlike longtermism, the Capabilities Approach does not just look at one dimension of well-being (e.g., economic growth or technological solutionism). Instead, it assesses a wide range of areas. This comprehensive view ensures that the interests of less well-off countries are not reduced to mere economic metrics but encompass the broader spectrum of human flourishing. The Capabilities Approach is sensitive to local contexts. While it provides a list of central capabilities, how these are realized might differ across cultures and regions. Thus, it would resist any one-size-fits-all solution that longtermism might inadvertently promote, especially if these solutions overlook local needs or impose undue burdens on specific regions (like developing countries). Finally, one of the core capabilities Nussbaum emphasizes is “Control over one’s environment,” which includes both political and material control. This implies that individuals and communities should have a say in the decisions that impact their lives. If longtermism leads to decision-making concentrated among a few technocrats, the Capabilities Approach would challenge such a concentration of power and call for broader democratic engagement.

Nussbaum’s capability of “Other Species” directly addresses the relationship humans have with the environment. This capability asserts the importance of environmental sustainability. Thus, any technological or economic advancement that compromises ecological balance would be viewed critically within this framework. The Capabilities Approach, as extended by Nussbaum, pushes back against any version of longtermism that might prioritize human interests in the distant future over the immediate well-being of sentient beings.

In conclusion, while the Capabilities Approach and longtermism both exhibit concern for well-being and flourishing, albeit with completely different understanding of what flourishing is or who shall experience it, Nussbaum’s framework provides specific tools to ensure that the quest for a better future doesn’t compromise the dignity and well-being of individuals and communities today, especially in vulnerable regions. It also explicitly integrates environmental concerns into its vision of a just and flourishing society.

V. Conclusion

We claim that Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach, which directly includes the capability to live with concern for and in relation to nature, can guide policy toward considering the long-term impact much better than longtermism, as it is inherently concerned with environmental issues. Given that environmental sustainability has long-term implications, addressing ecological threats becomes crucial in ensuring a good life for future generations. We argue that prioritizing ecological preservation is in fact in

their best interest. Likewise, compromising climate impact by focusing on technological advancements could have disastrous effects that will be borne disproportionately by lower income countries. Developed countries can largely avoid these effects because they are better positioned to benefit from the technology advancements.

A thought experiment that MacAskill uses to illustrate longtermist calculus is: imagine you're in a museum and a fire breaks out. You are the only person in a room with a child who is about to burn to death. You are the only person who can save this child. But then you see a Van Gogh that would also burn. You know you could sell this painting for \$15 million and use the money to save the lives of tens of thousands of children. You can only save either the child or the painting (Intelligence Squared 2015). MacAskill claims you should save the painting because it would be wrong to deny thousands of children the help you could provide them. It is easy to get swept up in this example such that you ignore the reality that you would be doing something morally reprehensible by turning your back on a child when you are the only person who can save them. Could you live with the knowledge that you let this child burn? Let's not fall into MacAskill's trap of trying to calculate the "most good" that we forget what it means to be a decent person.

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