

# The Case for (Strong) Longtermism



PHIL 1561 Ethics, Economics, and the Future  
Ryan Doody

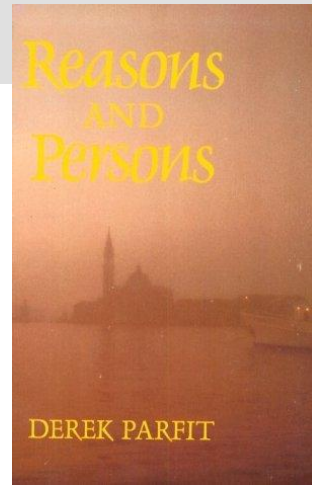
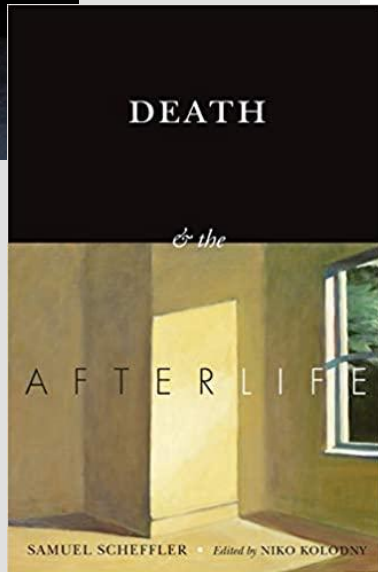
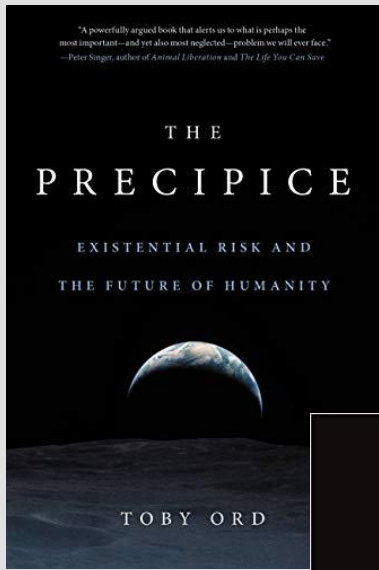
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## Course Syllabus

PHIL 1561 Ethics, Economics, and the Future

Spring 2022

TTh 1-2:20pm

**Instructor:** Ryan Doody

**Location:** 45 Prospect St-Corliss Brackett 106

**Office hours:** TTh 2:30-3:30pm

**Course Website:** <https://canvas.brown.edu/courses/1087781>

**Email:** [ryan\\_doody@brown.edu](mailto:ryan_doody@brown.edu)

### Required Readings:

[\*The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity\*](#), Toby Ord (Hachette Books, 2020)

[\*Death and the Afterlife\*](#), Samuel Scheffler (Oxford University Press, 2013)

Other required readings will be posted on Canvas

### Recommended (but not Required) Readings:

[\*Reasons and Persons\*](#), Derek Parfit (Oxford University Press, 1984)

[\*Why Worry About Future Generations?\*](#), Samuel Scheffler (Oxford University Press, 2018)

[\*Intergenerational Justice\*](#), ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer (Oxford University Press, 2009)

# The Case for (Strong) Longtermism



# The Case for (Strong) Longtermism

Impact on the **far future** is the most  
important feature of our actions today



# What Is (Axiological Strong) Longtermism?

## Axiological Strong Longtermism:

In the most important decision situations facing agents today,

- (i) Every option that is near-best overall is near-best for the far future.
- (ii) Every option that is near-best overall delivers much larger benefits in the far future than in the near future.



# What Is (Axiological Strong) Longtermism?

## Axiological Strong Longtermism:

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- (ii) Every option that is near-best overall delivers much larger benefits in the **far future** than in the **near future**.



## *The Far Future?*

Everything after some time  $t$  (where  $t$  is, e.g., 100 years after the point of decision).

## *The Near Future?*

Everything before  $t$  and after the point of decision.



# What Is (Axiological Strong) Longtermism?

**Axiological Strong Longtermism:**  
In the most important decision situations facing agents today,

- (i) Every option that is **near-best overall** is **near-best for the far future**.
- (ii) Every option that is **near-best overall** delivers **much larger benefits** in the far future than in the near future.



***Near-best overall / for the far future***

Proportional distance from zero benefit to the maximal available benefit.

***Much larger?***

***Multiplicative factor***

***Benefits?***

Increases in value relative to the *status quo*



# Why Think Longtermism is True?

# Why Think It's True?

## (Temporary) Assumptions:

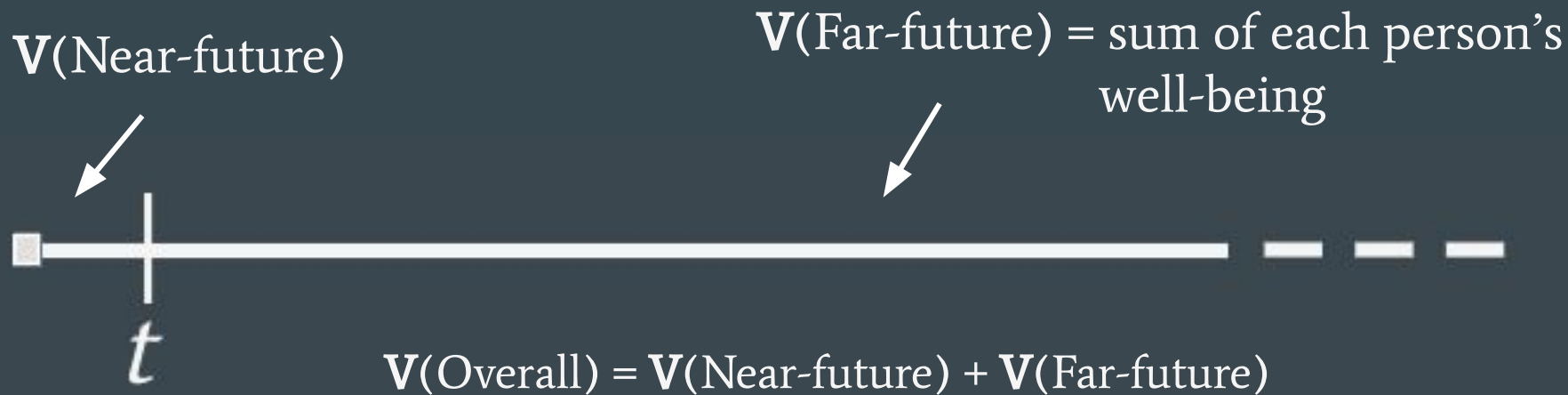
1. *Ex Ante* Value of an option is its *expected value*.
2. Value is *total welfare*.
3. Time-separability for benefits.  
So,  $V(\text{Overall benefits}) = V(\text{near-future benefits}) + V(\text{far-future benefits})$ .

The *expected value* of an option is the weighted sum of the values of its outcomes, where the weights correspond to the probability that that outcome results.

**Total Welfarism:** The value of a complete world-history is the total sum of well-being in that world-history.

Roughly, *time-separability* means that the value of one period of time is independent of (or “separable” from) the values of other times.

# Why Think It's True?



# Why Think It's True?

*There is (in expectation) a vast number of lives in the future of human civilization.*

$V(\text{Near-future})$

$V(\text{Far-future}) = \text{sum of each person's well-being}$



There is (in expectation) a  
*vast* number of lives in the  
future of human  
civilization.

How vast?!

# How vast the number of lives in the far-future?

Scenario	Duration (centuries)	Carrying capacity (lives per century)	Number of future lives
Earth (mammalian reference class)	$10^4$	$10^{10}$	$10^{14}$
Earth (digital life)	$10^4$	$10^{14}$	$10^{18}$
Solar System	$10^8$	$10^{19}$	$10^{27}$
Solar System (digital life)	$10^7$	$10^{23}$	$10^{30}$
Milky Way	$10^{11}$	$10^{25}$	$10^{36}$
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# How vast the number of lives in the far-future?



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Milky Way (digital life)	$10^{11}$	$10^{34}$	$10^{45}$

Estimate:  $10^{24}$

(Low estimate:  $10^{18}$ )

# **Objection 1: The Washing-out Hypothesis**



# The Washing-out Hypothesis

The far-future effects of one's actions are very hard to predict. So, in expectation, the effects of one's decision on the near-future carry more weight than the effects on the far-future.

We're often *clueless* about our effects on the far-future, and it's not clear that our actions even affect the very far-future.

# The Washing-out Hypothesis

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## **Response:**

There are things we can do now that we can be fairly confident will affect the far-future in positive ways.

Namely, *mitigating the risks of premature human extinction.*

# The Washing-out Hypothesis

The far-future effects of one's actions are very hard to predict. So, in expectation, the effects of one's decision on the near-future carry more weight than the effects on the far-future.



**Objection 2: The  
argument rests on many  
controversial assumptions**

# Controversial Assumptions

## (Temporary) Assumptions:

1. *Ex Ante* Value of an option is its *expected value*.
2. Value is *total welfare*.
3. Time-separability for benefits.  
So,  $V(\text{Overall benefits}) = V(\text{near-future benefits}) + V(\text{far-future benefits})$ .

What about risk-aversion?

Making people happy vs. making happy people?

Assuming a 0% rate of pure time preference.

# **Objection 3: Epistemic worries**

**We will discuss these more  
later on.**

**What Do You Think about  
Longtermism?**