

# Introduction



PHIL 1561 Ethics, Economics, and the Future

What moral duties, if any,  
do we have toward **future  
generations?**

**What moral duties, if any,  
do we have toward **future  
generations?****

**(And what grounds  
those duties?)**

**The Hinge of History?**

# The Hinge of History

“We live during **the hinge of history**. Given the scientific and technological discoveries of the last two centuries, the world has never changed as fast. We shall soon have even greater powers to transform, not only our surroundings, but ourselves and our successors. If we act wisely in the next few centuries, humanity will survive its most dangerous and decisive period. Our descendants could, if necessary, go elsewhere, spreading through this galaxy.”



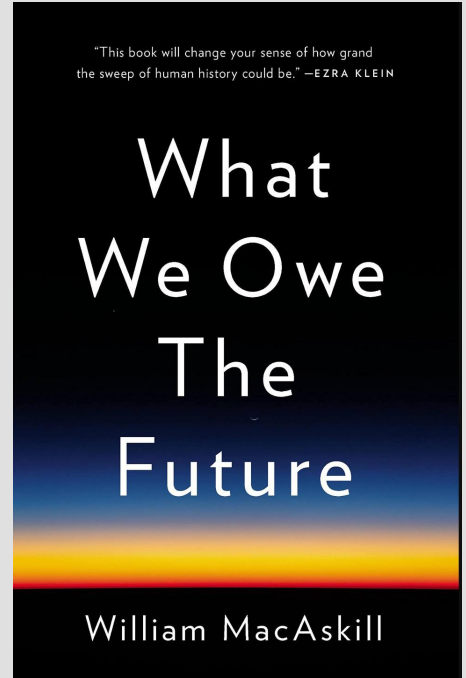
Derek Parfit, *On What Matters, Vol. II* (2011)

**Longtermism:** If we want to do the most good, we should focus on bringing about those changes that do the most to improve the very long-run future.

**Is Longtermism true?**

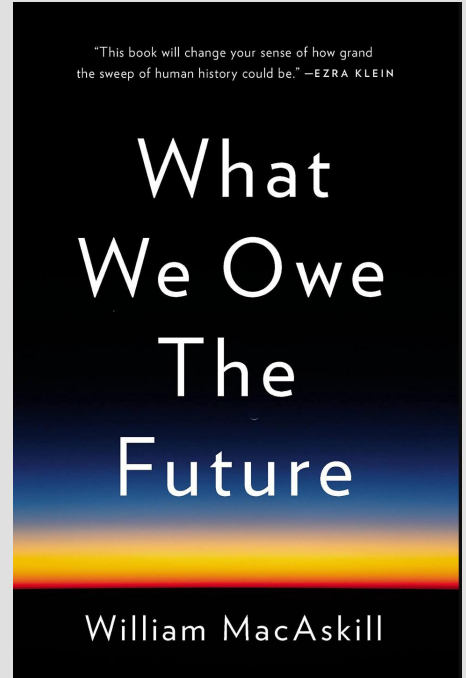
**Why think the future matters  
more than the present?**

“Future people count.  
There could be a lot of  
them. We can make their  
lives go better.”





**“Future people count.  
There could be a lot of  
them. We can make their  
lives go better.”**



# Future People Count

“Suppose that, while hiking, I drop a glass bottle on the trail and it shatters. And suppose that if I don’t clean it up, later a child will cut herself badly on the shards. In deciding whether to clean it up, does it matter when the child will cut herself? Should I care whether it’s a week, or a decade, or a century from now? No. Harm is harm, whenever it occurs.”

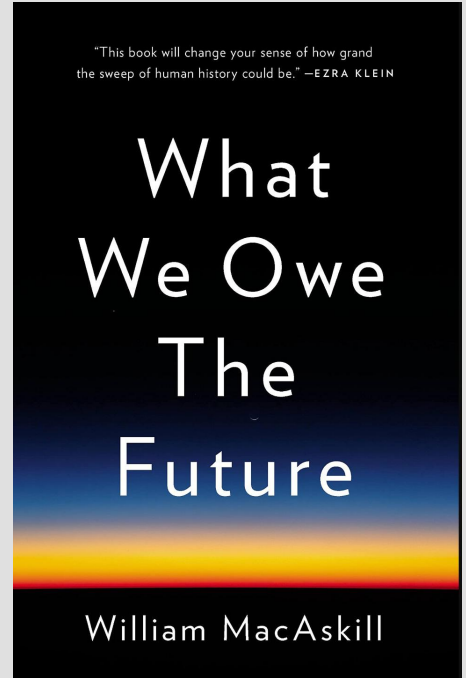
MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future* (2023)



“Distance in **time** is like distance in **space**. People matter even if they live thousands of miles away. Likewise, they matter even if they live thousands of years hence. In both cases, it’s easy to mistake distance for unreality, to treat the limits of what we can see as the limits of the world. But just as the world does not stop at our doorstep or our country’s borders, neither does it stop with our generation, or the next.”



**“Future people count.  
There could be a lot of  
them. We can make their  
lives go better.”**



# There Could Be A Lot of Them

*Homo Sapiens* have been around for 300,000 years.

The average mammalian species lasts for about one million years.

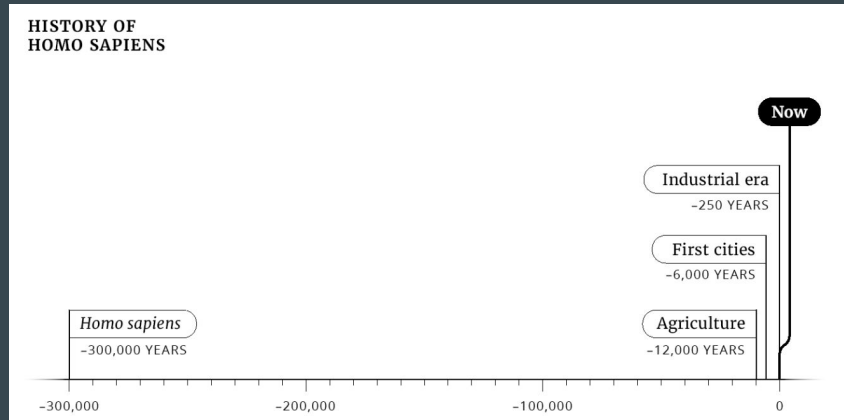
The earth could remain habitable for 600-800 million years.

That's (potentially) **21 million future generations.**

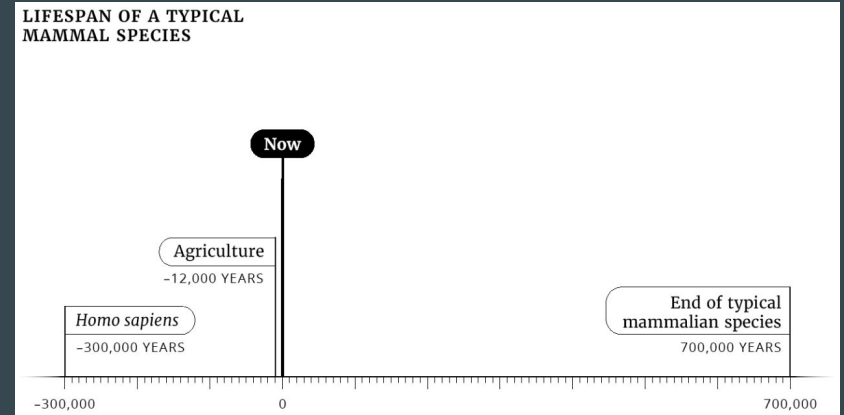


# There Could Be A Lot of Them

*Homo Sapiens* have been around for **300,000 years**.



The average mammalian species lasts for about **one million years**.



# Our potential future is *vast*

Every triangle in this chart (▼) corresponds to 7.95 billion people, the number of people alive today.

**Humanity's past** All the people who have died, 109 billion. These are 14 triangles - the dead outnumber the living by a ratio of 14 to 1.

**Humanity's present** All people who are alive today, 7.95 billion. Those of us who are alive now are about 6.8% of all people who ever lived.

**Humanity's future?** The 12,572 triangles below represent all people who might be born in the future - from 2022 onwards. This is a scenario in which humanity survives for another 800,000 years, in which the population stabilizes at 11 billion people and in which global life expectancy rises to 88 years.



The sun will exist for another 5 billion years. If we stay alive for all this time - and based on the scenario above - this would be a future in which 625 quadrillion children will be born.

How big would a chart be that shows this future? If you have a shelf with 30 books, each of which has 200 pages, then this same chart that you see here - showing the birth of 100 trillion future children - would be printed on each page of each book in your bookshelf.

And humanity could survive for even longer.

# There Could Be A Lot of Them

If we only last as long as the typical mammalian species (one million years), and our population continues at its current size (7.95 billion), there would be **80 trillion** people yet to come.



# Our potential future is *vast*

Every triangle in this chart (▼) corresponds to 7.95 billion people, the number of people alive today.

## Humanity's past

All the people who have died, 109 billion.  
These are 14 triangles – the dead outnumber the living by a ratio of 14 to 1.

## Humanity's present

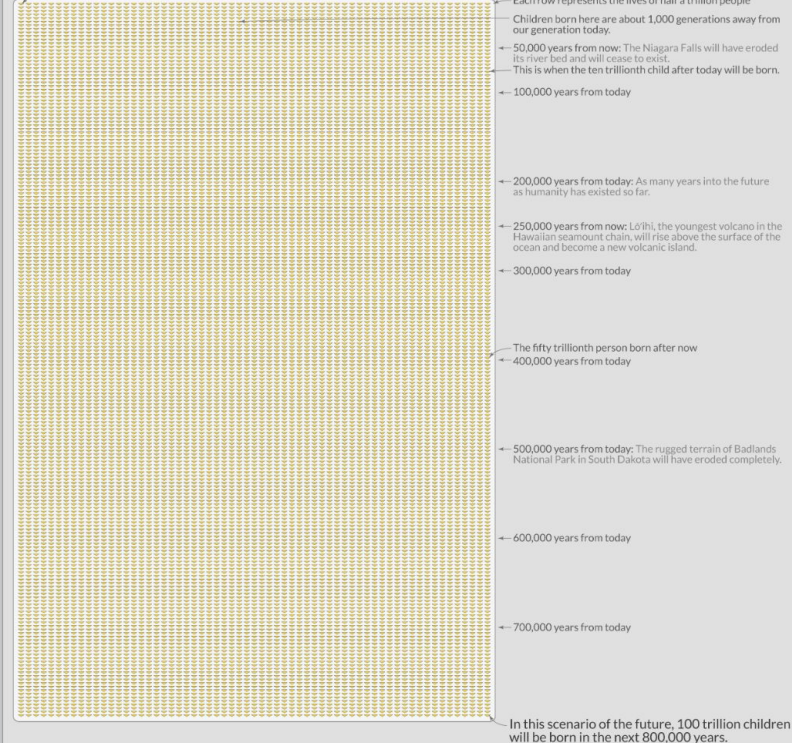
All people who are alive today, 7.95 billion. Those of us who are alive now are about 6.8% of all people who ever lived.

## Humanity's future?

The 12,572 triangles below represent all people who might be born in the future – from 2022 onwards.

This is a scenario in which humanity survives for another 800,000 years, in which the population stabilizes at 11 billion people and in which global life expectancy rises to 88 years.

The next 7.95 billion children – represented by the first triangle – will be born in the next 6 decades.



The sun will exist for another 5 billion years. If we stay alive for all this time – and based on the scenario above – this would be a future in which 625 quadrillion children will be born.

How big would a chart be that shows this future? If you have a shelf with 30 books, each of which has 200 pages, then this same chart that you see here – showing the birth of 100 trillion future children – would be printed on each page of each book in your bookshelf.

And humanity could survive for even longer.

# There Could Be A Lot of Them

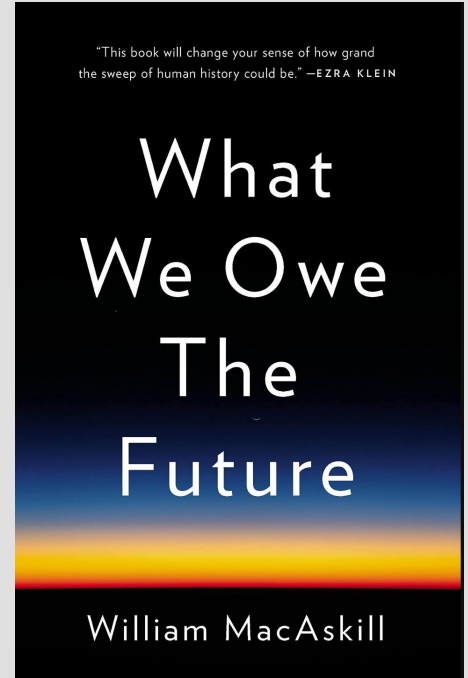
If we only last as long as the typical mammalian species (one million years), and our population continues at its current size (7.95 billion), there would be **80 trillion** people yet to come.

But we aren't a **typical** mammalian species—we could survive for much longer. And we could grow much larger.

**There Could Be A Lot of Them**



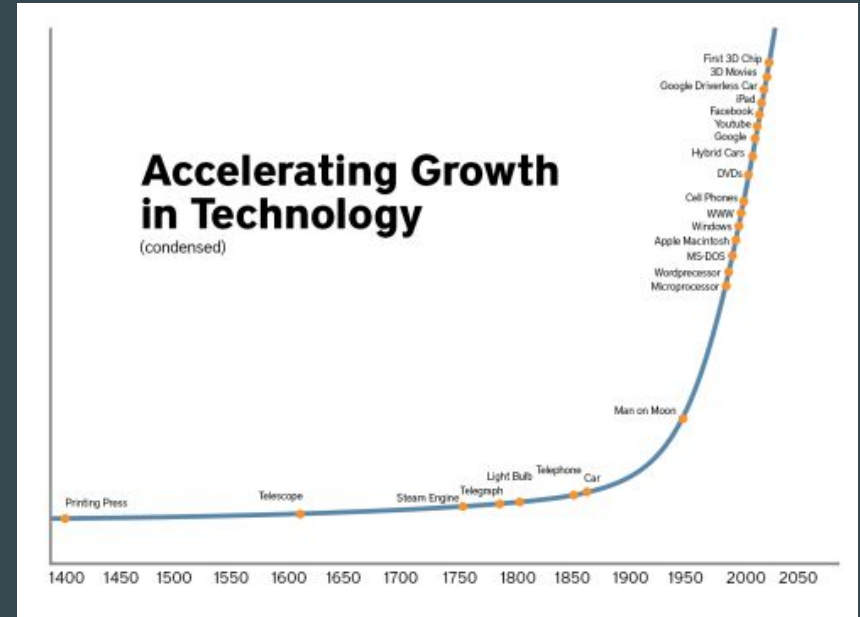
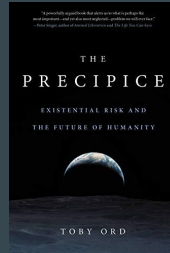
**“Future people count.  
There could be a lot of  
them. We can make their  
lives go better.”**



**What influence do we  
have?**

# We Can Make Their Lives Go Better

- (1) Accelerate **technological** progress.
- (2) Accelerate **moral** progress.
- (3) Reduce **existential risk**.





# Existential Risk

What influence do we have?



# Existential Risks

**The Observer**  
Health

## Arctic zombie viruses in Siberia could spark terrifying new pandemic, scientists warn

Threat of outbreak from microbes trapped in permafrost for millennia raised by increased Siberian shipping activity

**Robin McKie** *Science Editor*  
Sun 21 Jan 2024 02:00 EST

[f](#) [t](#) [e](#)



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## *Is Kim Jong-un Really Planning an Attack This Time?*

An intensification of nuclear threats from North Korea while the world is preoccupied with other wars has ignited an urgent debate over Mr. Kim's motives.

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## Ukraine war drives shift in Russian nuclear thinking - study

By Mark Trevelyan

January 22, 2024 4:04 AM EST · Updated 3 days ago

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Feedback





# Existential Risks

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## As the Israel-Hamas War Governs the World's Attention, Iran Is Quietly Marching Towards Nuclear Breakout





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OCTOBER 28, 2023 ✓ Editors' notes

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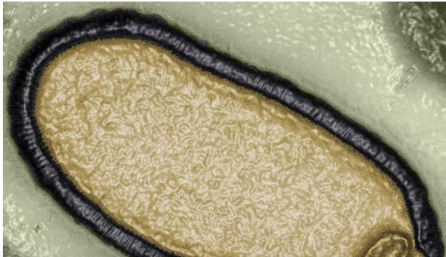
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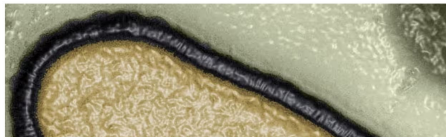
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### Arctic zombie viruses in Siberia could spark terrifying new pandemic, scientists warn

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### 'Doomsday Clock' calls AI existential threat, "disruptive technology" to humankind

AI joins nuclear threats and climate change as a key concern on the Doomsday Clock, highlighting its potential global impact and risks.

 1231  8   2:56

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January 22, 2024 4:04 AM EST · Updated 3

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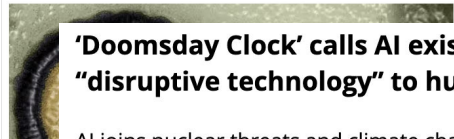
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# Existential Risks

OCTOBER 28, 2023 ✓ Editors' notes  
**Life on Earth under 'existential threat': climate scientists**  
by Kelly MACNAMARA

## Gigantic Valentine's Day asteroid could strike Earth in 2046, NASA says

The 160-foot-wide celestial object currently tops NASA's impact risk list.

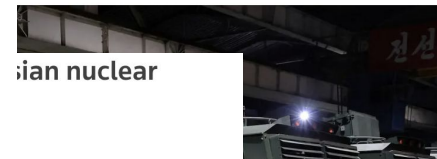
By **Ariana Garcia**

Updated Nov 13, 2023 4:51 p.m.



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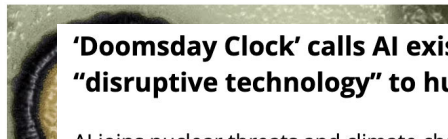


Iran nuclear

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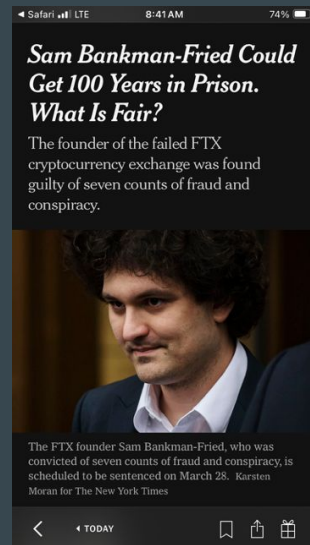
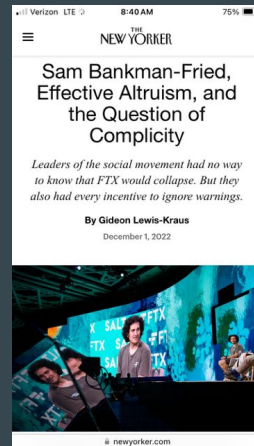


# What follows from these three claims? What should we do?

- Should we be willing to make **large sacrifices** to (potentially) benefit future people?
- Should we reallocate aid from those currently in need to those who've yet to be born?
- Should we be willing to **break the law**?

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# Syllabus



# Syllabus

## Course Syllabus

PHIL 1561 Ethics, Economics, and the Future

Spring 2024

9-10:20am

**Instructor:** Ryan Doody

**Location:** Sayles Hall 205

**Office hours:** Wednesday 1-2pm (and by appointment)

**Course Website:** <https://canvas.brown.edu/courses/1094611>

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

**Teaching Assistant:** Conrad Damstra ([Conrad\\_Damstra@brown.edu](mailto:Conrad_Damstra@brown.edu))

**Office hours:** by appointment

### Required Readings:

[\*The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity\*](#), Toby Ord (Hachette Books, 2020)  
[\$12.79]

[\*Death and the Afterlife\*](#), Samuel Scheffler (Oxford University Press, 2013) [\$21.47]

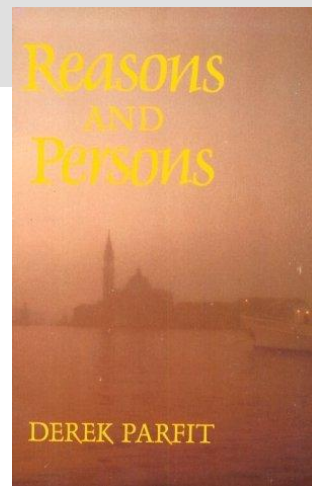
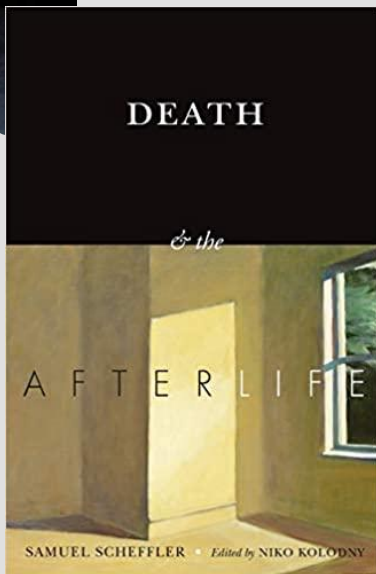
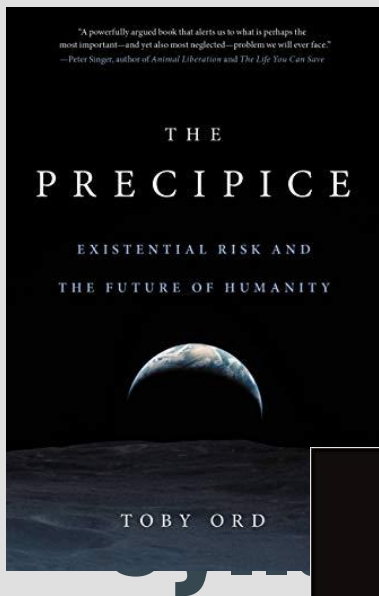
Other required readings will be posted on Canvas

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

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# Syllabus

## Week 0: Introduction to the Topics of the Course

- January 25

- William MacAskill, *What We Owe The Future*, Introduction, Chapters 1-2 [43 pgs.]



## Week 1: The Case for Longtermism and Avoiding Existential Risk

- January 30

- Greaves & MacAskill, "[The Case for Strong Longtermism](#)" [29 pgs.]



### OPTIONAL:

- Wildeford, "[Why I'm Skeptical About Unproven Causes \(And You Should Be Too\)](#)" *LessWrong* blog post. [11 pgs.]

- February 1

- Ord, Appendix E, *The Precipice* [4 pgs.]
- Thorstad, "[High Risk, Low Reward: A Challenge to the Astronomical Value of Existential Risk Mitigation](#)," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Focus on sections 1-4) [17 pgs]



### OPTIONAL:

- Ord, Chapters 1-2, *The Precipice* [53 pgs.]
- Beckstead, "[A Brief Argument for the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future](#)" in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed., Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer. [17 pgs.]



# Syllabus

## Week 2: Person-Affecting Views and the Non-Identity Problem

- February 6

- Parfit, "[Chapter 16: The Non-Identity Problem](#)", *Reasons and Persons* [29 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Harman, "[Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating?](#) ⇨" *Philosophical Perspectives* [20 pgs.]

- February 8

- Boonin, "[How to Solve the Non-Identity Problem](#) ⇨", *Public Affairs Quarterly* [26 pgs.]



*Reading Response #2 Due*

# Syllabus



## Week 3: Population Axiology

### • February 13

- Parfit, [Chapters 17 and 18](#), *Reasons and Persons* [37 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Greaves, "[Population Axiology](#) ⇨", *Philosophy Compass* [12 pgs.]
- Parfit, "[Overpopulation and the Quality of Life](#) ⇨." In *Applied Ethics*, ed. P. Singer, 145–164. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Sections 1-3)

### • February 15

- Huemer, "[In Defense of Repugnance](#) ⇨", *Mind* [32 pgs.]
- Ord, Appendix B, *The Precipice* [6 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Parfit, [Chapter 19](#), *Reasons and Persons* [23 pgs.]
- Venkatesh, "Repugnance and Perfection" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* [23 pgs.]

Reading Response #3 Due

# Syllabus

## Week 4: Existential Risk [Midterm Project]

- February 22

- Ord, Chapters 3-5, *The Precipice* [93 pgs.]
- Choose a topic for your midterm project

### OPTIONAL:

- Ord, Chapter 6, *The Precipice* [22 pgs.]
- Carlsmith, "[Existential risk from power-seeking AI](#) ⇨." In J. Barrett, H. Greaves, & D. Thorstad (Eds.), *Essays on Longtermism*. (Sections 1-5) [21 pgs.]
- Thorstad, "[Exaggerating the Risks](#) ⇨" *Reflective Altruism blog series*

## Statement on AI Risk

AI experts and public figures express their concern about AI risk.

### Contents

[Statement](#)

[Signatories](#)

[Sign the statement](#)

AI experts, journalists, policymakers, and the public are increasingly discussing a broad spectrum of important and urgent risks from AI. Even so, it can be difficult to voice concerns about some of advanced AI's most severe risks. The succinct statement below aims to overcome this obstacle and open up discussion. It is also meant to create common knowledge of the growing number of experts and public figures who also take some of advanced AI's most severe risks seriously.

# Syllabus

## Week 5: Primer on Expected Utility Theory

- **February 27**

- Weisberg, *Odds and Ends*, chapter 11, "[Expected Value](#) ➞"
- Weisberg, *Odds and Ends*, chapter 12, "[Utility](#) ➞"

- **February 29**

- Weisberg, *Odds and Ends*, chapter 13, "[Challenges to Expected Value](#) ➞"
- Weisberg, *Odds and Ends*, chapter 14, "[Infinity and Beyond](#) ➞"

*Reading Response # 4 Due*



# Syllabus

## Week 6: Social Discount Rates

- March 5

- Cowen and Parfit, “Against the Social Discount Rate,” in *Justice Between Age Groups and Generations*, ed. Peter Laslett & James S. Fishkin [16 pgs.]
- Ord, Appendix A, *The Precipice* [6 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Parfit, [Appendix F](#), *Reasons and Persons* [7 pgs.]
- March 7
  - Greaves, “[Discounting for Public Policy](#) ↗,” *Economics & Philosophy*, sec. 7, pages 404-9 [5 pgs.]
  - Mogensen, “[The Only Ethical Argument for Positive Delta](#) ↗” *GPI Working Paper* [32 pgs.]

*Reading Response #5 Due*

**Midterm Podcast Assignment Due [March 8]**



# Syllabus

## Week 7: Cluelessness

- **March 12**

- Greaves, "[Cluelessness](#) ⇨", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* [18 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Lenman, "[Consequentialism and Cluelessness](#) ⇨", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* [29 pgs.]

- **March 14**

- Mogensen, "[Maximal Cluelessness](#) ⇨" *The Philosophical Quarterly* [19 pgs.]



*Reading Response #6 Due*

# Syllabus

## Week 8: Very Small Probabilities

- **March 19**

- Bostrom, "[Pascal's Mugging ↗](#)", *Analysis* [3 pgs.]
- Balfour, "[Pascal's Mugger Strikes Again ↗](#)", *Utilitas* [7 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Cibinel, "[A dilemma for Nicolausian discounting ↗](#)", *Analysis* [10 pgs.]

- **March 21**

- Pettigrew, "[Should longtermists recommend hastening extinction rather than delaying it? ↗](#)" *Monist* [30 pgs.]

*Reading Response #7 Due*

# Syllabus

Week 9: SPRING BREAK - NO CLASS

Week 10: Deontology and Paralysis

- April 2

- Greaves and MacAskill, "[The Case for Strong Longtermism](#) ⇨," section 6 (pp. 25-29) [4 pgs.]
- MacAskill and Mogensen, "[The Paralysis Argument](#) ⇨" *Philosophers' Imprint* [29 pgs.]

- April 4

- Unruh, "[The Constraint against Doing Harm and Long-Term Consequences](#) ⇨" *Journal of Moral Philosophy* [18 pgs.]



Reading Response #8 Due

# Syllabus

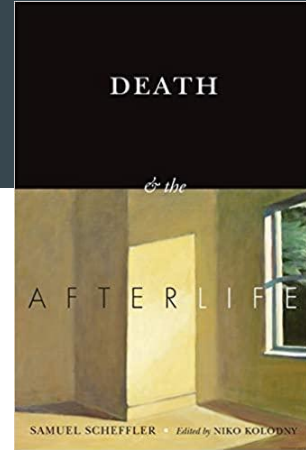
## Week 11: Meaning and Survival (Or: Death and the Afterlife)

- April 9

- Scheffler, "Lecture 1: The Afterlife (Part I)", *Death & the Afterlife* [36 pgs.]

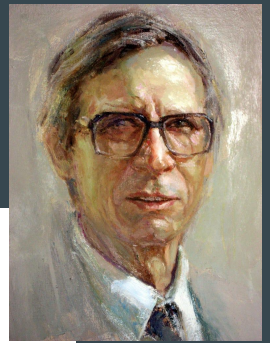
- April 11

- Scheffler, "Lecture 2: The Afterlife (Part II)", *Death & the Afterlife* [32 pgs.]
- Scheffler, [Chapter 3](#), *Why Care About Future Generations?* [18 pgs.]



Reading Response #9 Due

# Syllabus



## Week 12: Intergenerational Justice

- **April 16**

- Section 44-5; Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. [12 pgs.]
- Attas, "A Transgenerational Difference Principle" In *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer. [29 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Heyd, "A Value or an Obligation? Rawls on Justice to Future Generations." In *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer. [22 pgs.]

- **April 18**

- Gosseries, "Three Models of Intergenerational Reciprocity" In *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer [27 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Meyer and Roser, "Enough for the Future." In *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer [26 pgs.]

*Reading Response #10 Due*

# Syllabus

## Week 13: Building Institutions for the Future

- April 23

- John and MacAskill, "[Longtermist Institutional Reform](#) ↗" in *The Long View: Essays on Policy, Philanthropy, and the Long-term Future*, ed. N. Cargill & T. John [14 pgs.]
- Ord, Chapter 7 and Appendix F, *The Precipice* [35 pgs.]

- April 25

- Juliana Bidadanure, "Youth Quotas, Diversity, and Long-Termism", in *Institutions For Future Generations*, ed. Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries [14 pgs.]
- MacAskill, "[Age-Weighted Voting](#) ↗" [7 pgs.]
- Ord, Chapter 8, *The Precipice* [23 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Anja Karnein, "Can We Represent Future Generations?" In *Institutions For Future Generations*, ed. Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries [12 pgs.]



Reading Response #11 Due

**Final Paper Due [May 8]**

# Syllabus

## Grading Breakdown

Reading Responses	...	10%
Problem Sets	...	10%
Midterm Project	...	30%
Final Paper	...	40%
Participation	...	10%



**The Hinge of History?**

# The Hinge of History

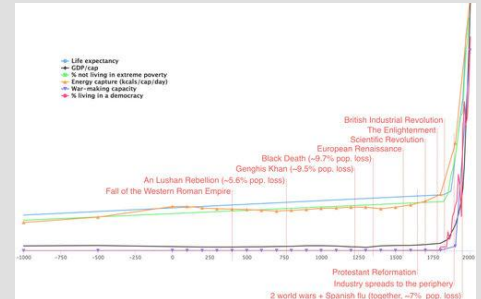
“We live during **the hinge of history**. Given the scientific and technological discoveries of the last two centuries, the world has never changed as fast. We shall soon have even greater powers to transform, not only our surroundings, but ourselves and our successors. If we act wisely in the next few centuries, humanity will survive its most dangerous and decisive period. Our descendants could, if necessary, go elsewhere, spreading through this galaxy.”



Derek Parfit, *On What Matters, Vol. II* (2011)

# Discussion Question:

## Is Parfit right that “we live during the hinge of history”?



# Next Time: The Case for Longtermism



## Week 1: The Case for Longtermism and Avoiding Existential Risk

- January 30
  - Greaves & MacAskill, "[The Case for Strong Longtermism](#) ↗" [29 pgs.]

### OPTIONAL:

- Wildeford, "[Why I'm Skeptical About Unproven Causes \(And You Should Be Too\)](#) ↗" LessWrong blog post. [11 pgs.]