



Past and Future

Writer Jonathan Schell said:

The procession of generations that extends onwards from our present leads far, far beyond the line of our sight, and, compared with these stretches of human time, which exceed the whole history of the earth up to now, our brief civilized moment is almost infinitesimal. Yet we threaten, in the name of our transient aims and fallible convictions, to foreclose it all. If our species does destroy itself, it will be a death in the cradle—a case of infant mortality.

And because, in expectation, almost all of humanity's life lies in the future, almost everything of value lies in the future as well: almost all the flourishing; almost all the beauty; our greatest achievements; our most just societies; our most profound discoveries.

We can continue our progress on prosperity, health, justice, freedom and moral thought. We can create a world of wellbeing and flourishing that challenges our capacity to imagine. And if we protect that world from catastrophe (ecological and nuclear) it could last millions of centuries. This is our potential—what we could achieve if we pass the Precipice and continue striving for a better world.

It is this view of the future—the immense value of humanity's potential—that most persuades me to focus my energies on reducing existential risk. When I think of the millions of future generations yet to come, the importance of protecting humanity's future is clear to me. To risk destroying this future, for the sake of some advantage limited only to the present, seems to me profoundly parochial and dangerously short-sighted. Such neglect privileges a tiny sliver of our story over the grand sweep of the whole; it privileges a tiny minority of humans over the overwhelming majority yet to be born; it privileges this particular century over the millions, or maybe billions, yet to come.

We are not the first generation. Our cultures, institutions and norms; our knowledge, technology and prosperity; these were gradually built up by our ancestors, over the course of ten thousand generations. The humanity's remarkable success has relied on our capacity for intergenerational cooperation: inheriting from our parents, making some small improvements of our own, and passing it all down to our children. Without this cooperation we would have no houses or farms, we would have no traditions of dance or song, no writing, no nations.

This idea was beautifully expressed by the conservative political theorist Edmund Burke. In 1790 he wrote of society:

It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained except in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.

This might give us reasons to also safeguard humanity that are grounded in our past—obligations to our grandparents, as well as our grandchildren.

A human, or an entire generation, cannot complete such grand projects. But humanity can. We work together, each generation making a little progress while building up the capacities, resources and institutions to empower future generations to take the next step.

So if we drop the baton, succumbing to an existential catastrophe, we would fail our ancestors in a multitude of ways. We would fail to achieve the dreams they hoped for; we would betray the trust they placed in us, their heirs; and we would fail in any duty we had to pay forward the work they did for us. To neglect existential risk might thus be to wrong not only the people of the future, but the people of the past.

We might have duties to the future arising from the flaws of the past. For we might be able to make up for some of our past wrongs. If we failed now, we could never fulfil any duties we might have to repair the damage we have done to the Earth's environment—cleaning up our pollution and waste; restoring the climate to its pre-industrial state; returning ecosystems to their vanished glory. We should also consider that some of the greatest injustices have been inflicted not by individuals upon individuals, but by groups upon groups: systematic persecution, stolen lands, genocides.

We may have duties to properly acknowledge and memorialize these wrongs; to confront the acts of our past. And there may yet be ways for the beneficiaries of these acts to partly remedy them or atone for them. Suffering an existential catastrophe would remove any last chance to do so.

Toby Ord
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