



The Limits of ‘Longtermism’

What some champions of ‘effective altruism’ get wrong

Meghan Sullivan

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sullivan begins by pondering what she would do with a billion dollars, but says the “longtermists” would think her ideas too small and misdirected. What would *you* do with a billion dollars? Would longtermists, using Sullivan’s criteria, approve of your plan?

2. Sullivan explains that longtermism is based on two assumptions. The first is utilitarianism, the idea that “measurable impact matters the most in ethics.” In your own philanthropy, how important are quantifiable results?

3. The FTX Future Fund argues that “now is the ‘crucial time in human history’ for shaping the future.” Sullivan points out that people throughout history (e.g., Archimedes, Oppenheimer) probably thought the same thing about their own times. Do you think our time is actually different from any other time before? Why or why not?

4. Sullivan believes trying to “lock in” one’s goals for the future is foolish, and even dangerous, since coming generations will not share all of our moral concerns. What ethical issues animated your parents but do not interest you? Which of our current concerns do you think the next generation will discard?

5. “Failing at scale” was also important to the Future Fund, in order to succeed at scale. Do you think the failure of the Future Fund in November 2022 is evidence against longtermism, or is it simply one loss before a greater eventual success?

6. “The second assumption of longtermism,” according to Sullivan, “is that the time of the impact does not matter in ethics.” That is, it doesn’t matter whether lives improve “immediately, pretty soon, or even in humanity’s distant future.” It can be difficult not to be biased toward our own time, but Sullivan urges us to embrace our own “temporal mediocrity,” and to connect to other generations via institutions like schools, governments, and religions. How do institutions help us navigate questions of time and belonging? Have any served as a refuge for you?

7. Sullivan places a certain amount of faith in institutions, but points out that many others do not. How have these “squishy...moral technologies” served you well, and how have they disappointed your trust? Do you believe they have any unique ethical power?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Cathleen Kaveny, “Succor Punch,” March 2018:

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/succor-punch>

Stephen J. Pope, “I Don’t Feel Your Pain,” June 2017:

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/i-dont-feel-your-pain>

“Asking the Right Questions: An Interview with Meghan Sullivan and Paul Blaschko,” February 2022:

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/asking-right-questions>

George Scialabba, “What Were We Thinking?,” January 2023:

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/scialabba-american-inequality>

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