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Longtermist Political Philosophy

An Agenda for Future Research

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1 Introduction

What we do now can affect future generations. And most people agree that, morally, we ought to consider their interests. But how far into the future do our obligations reach? Political debates typically focus on the near- to medium-term. For example, even discussions of climate change often focus only on the next century. But while most CO_2 emitted today will leave our atmosphere within 200 years, the remaining 20–35% could remain for thousands of years longer (Emanuel 2016: 15). Shouldn't we care about such longer-term effects, too?

Longtermists answer that we should. They argue that we should give significant moral weight to positively affecting the distant future, and that this has important and fascinating implications for what we should do now.[1] The standard case for longtermism goes roughly as follows.

First, longtermists argue that distant future people matter morally. Economists and policymakers commonly discount future income or consumption. However, most philosophers argue against discounting non-instrumentally valuable things, such as well-being, simply because they lie in the future.[2] Future well-being should not be subject to a positive rate of pure time preference, or the rate should at least be small.[3] This still allows that we might discount future people's well-being for other reasons.[4] For example, Tyler Cowen suggests that our annual risk of extinction is high enough that we should mainly consider people in the next few thousand years, and heavily discount the well-being of those living in the more distant future since they are unlikely to exist.[5] Call a view focused on such time scales 'medium longtermism'. Other longtermists have longer time horizons and believe we should focus on people millions or billions of years in the future. Such 'full longtermism' may follow from more optimistic estimates of our chance of surviving that long, or from the

[1] See, e.g., Cowen (2018), Ord (2020), MacAskill (2022), Greaves and MacAskill (this volume).

[2] See, e.g., Cowen and Parfit (1992), Broome (1994), and the citations at fn. 21 in Greaves and MacAskill (this volume). See also Heath (2017) and Russell (2022) for opposing arguments.

[3] Arguments for adopting a small discount rate (which is too low to challenge longtermism) appeal to factors such as agent-relative reasons (Mogensen 2022) and uncertainty about the right discount rate (Weitzman 1998).

[4] As we will see, some also downgrade the moral significance of distant future people's well-being by drawing a sharp moral distinction between existing and future people generally, for example, by adopting 'person-affecting' views in population ethics.

[5] Cowen (2023) lays out this view during a talk on effective altruism, but it is also common to discount future people's interests for this reason, for example, in climate economic models (Stern 2006).

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idea that even a small probability of this occurring is enough for very distant future people's well-being to weigh heavily *in aggregate*, given the sheer number who might exist.

This brings us to a second major longtermist claim: there might be *vast* numbers of far-future people. For example, Greaves and MacAskill argue that a plausible estimate of the expected number of future people, conditional on humanity remaining Earthbound, is 10^{14}—that is 10,000 persons for every person alive today. They see this as a lower bound estimate, noting that if we assign even small probabilities to humanity settling the stars, or to future sentient life being digital, the number of expected future people magnifies greatly: here their estimates range from 10^{18} to 10^{45} future people (Greaves and MacAskill this volume).[6] Exact numbers are neither possible nor necessary, and we should treat such estimates with a heavy grain of salt. But in any case, the expected number of future people is likely orders of magnitude greater than people alive today, such that the value at stake in the long-term future may be massive.[7]

Third, longtermists argue that we can sometimes predictably affect the value of the long-term future. Most obviously, we can try to mitigate extinction risks that threaten to massively curtail far-future value by causing our extinction. These might be, for example, risks due to nuclear war, pandemics, climate change, or artificial intelligence (Ord 2020). Alternatively, we might also be able to affect the value of the long-term future, conditional on humanity's survival, by launching ourselves on higher-value trajectories (MacAskill 2022): for example, those less ravished by climate change, repressive governments, or catastrophic events so terrible that humanity can't bounce back.[8] Note also that *if* such ways of improving the distant future exist, it would be surprising if we had already identified and were already pursuing all of them. After all, longtermist thinking is not mainstream and, unlike most other groups, future people cannot advocate for their own interests, for example, through participating in politics or markets.

These three ideas suggest that our actions can, in expectation, sometimes bring about a huge amount of value in the long run. If we also believe that we morally *ought* to promote this value—something we discuss in Section 2—then we arrive at longtermism. Informally stated for now, this is the thesis that positively affecting the value of the long-term future is *among* the key moral priorities (call this 'weak longtermism') or perhaps *the* key moral priority (call this 'strong longtermism') of our time (MacAskill 2022: 4).

Many discussions of longtermism focus on individuals—for example, on where philanthropists should donate. However, institutions also affect the long-term future. Longtermism may thus be an important topic for *political philosophy*: positively affecting the value of the long-term future may be a (or the) key *institutional* priority of our time.

[6] A common misconception is that longtermists endorse the *goal* of bringing sentient digital beings into existence. More standardly, longtermists appeal to sentient digital beings to emphasize the stakes of making the future go well because of how large the future population of sentient beings might be.

[7] Later, we flag views that drive a wedge between huge numbers of future people and huge moral stakes. Some might also deny the relevance of the *expected* future population size, given its dependency on tiny probabilities of massive populations, and focus only on more likely scenarios.

[8] Some longtermists use the broader category of an 'existential risk' to refer to any 'risk that threatens the destruction of humanity's long-term potential' (Ord 2020: 37). This is meant to include risks not only of extinction but also of other similarly significant and irreversible events, such as an irrecoverable civilization collapse or an advanced artificial intelligence (AI) permanently disempowering humanity. However, as the distinction between (non-extinction) existential risks and trajectory changes is fuzzy and often causes confusion, we avoid talk of 'existential risks' here.

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Now, political philosophers have produced valuable work on future generations, involving climate change, environmental ethics, and intergenerational justice.[9] But these discussions often focus on the near term. Moreover, while longtermists often invoke consequentialist or beneficence-based reasoning, political philosophers focus more on non-consequentialist considerations and on political values like justice and legitimacy. So, to date, there is almost no political philosophy explicitly engaging with longtermist thought. This is a striking lacuna, as longtermism might radically challenge mainstream political philosophy, and, conversely, political philosophy might offer challenges or insights for longtermists.

In this chapter, we outline some central questions in *longtermist political philosophy*. Our aim is to set out longtermist political philosophy as a research field and to motivate readers to pursue questions and arguments we here only broach. We believe more work in this area is both theoretically and practically important. Longtermism has spawned a thriving research field but also a flurry of philanthropic activity moving millions of dollars each year. It is important to understand what institutional implications longtermism might have, as well as how political values might constrain, challenge, or support longtermism (or particular longtermist proposals).

In section 2, we outline 'institutional longtermism', suggesting that the standard case for longtermism may be more robust for institutions than for individuals. In section 3, we turn to points of tension and convergence between longtermism and some values that loom large in mainstream political philosophy. Section 4 provides a grab bag of other questions we lack space to explore.

2 The case for institutional longtermism

We begin by distinguishing individual from institutional longtermism:

> *Individual longtermism*: when evaluating the moral choiceworthiness of individual actions or projects, we should often give significant weight to their expected long-term effects.

> *Institutional longtermism*: when evaluating the moral choiceworthiness of institutions, we should often give significant weight to their expected long-term effects.

The above definitions invoke 'significant weight' and thus remain neutral between the long-term future being *the* most important priority or it being *one* important priority. Implicitly, we are mostly concerned with the latter thesis of weak longtermism, though we assume all versions of longtermism are revisionary in recommending that we give much *more* weight to the long-term future than existing individuals and institutions tend to. The term 'often' is also intentionally vague and signals that longtermism may have revisionary implications in many, but not all, contexts. Finally, by 'institutions', we mean social practices with rule-governed behavioural interdependencies. These include both formal institutions, such as laws and public policies, and informal institutions, such as norms and conventions.

[9] See, e.g., Rawls (1971: sec. 44), English (1977), Barry (1997), Gosseries and Meyer (2009), Gardiner et al. (2010), Moellendorf (2015), González-Ricoy and Gosseries (2017).

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Functioning formal and informal institutions often depend on and overlap with one another; for example, laws may command compliance only in the presence of supportive social norms (Barrett and Gaus 2020). However, for reasons of space, we primarily focus on formal institutions here.[10]

The standard argument for longtermism is beneficence-based. The basic idea is that our expected effects on far-future value are sometimes massive and sometimes much larger than our short-term effects, given that—as discussed above—our actions might affect a vast number of future people. To reach the deontic conclusion that we morally *ought* to promote long-run value, we could appeal to an all-things-considered *consequentialist* duty to do the most good. However, the standard argument requires only that we have a weighty *pro tanto* duty of beneficence to promote the good. This beneficence-based case can be made for both individual and institutional longtermism. For the latter, we can endorse *social beneficence* (or 'instrumentalism'): how much good institutions do is one central consideration when evaluating their choiceworthiness (Barrett 2022; Schmidt 2023a).

We discuss duties and values other than beneficence later. But, first, we consider four empirical reasons, and then four more 'philosophical' ones, why the beneficence-based case for longtermism might be more robust for institutional than for individual longtermism.[11] As this chapter outlines a research agenda, our discussion should not be read as providing fully worked-out arguments so much as ideas meriting further consideration.

2.1 Institutions may affect the long run

We first consider reasons why institutions can be impactful in ways that significantly, and in expectation, affect the value of the long-term future. These reasons suggest that, if you are already sympathetic to longtermism, you should care about institutions.

The first reason is the sheer *scale* of the power and influence of institutions. Consider states. The 2022 United States federal budget had roughly US$6 trillion in outlays, with yearly defence spending alone of $754 billion (Office of Management and Budget 2021). The Chinese Communist Party is arguably the most powerful organization in the world, ruling over roughly 1.4 billion people and influencing many more. Furthermore, government budgets underestimate the power of states, which also exert influence through legislation. And the *de jure* monopoly on violence (and its *de facto* implications) makes the government an actor like no other.

Second, institutions' impacts are *broad*. Good institutions are arguably *all-purpose goods* that are valuable when dealing with most large-scale societal challenges—such as pandemics, international crises, or climate change. What makes institutions 'good' depends on various factors, including collective epistemic qualities and decision-making procedures,

[10] Note two other features of our definitions. First, they are concerned with moral choiceworthiness, or what it would be morally better or worse to choose, factoring in all relevant moral considerations (both axiological and deontological). Second, they are concerned with *expected* rather than *actual* long-term effects. However, the term 'expected' is employed loosely, and is meant to allow, besides expected value theory, other approaches to decision-making that are risk- or ambiguity-averse, that discount tiny probabilities, and so on.

[11] To clarify, the arguments below are not meant to suggest that individual longtermists should focus their efforts on institutional change rather than on some other priority. We are concerned with whether institutional longtermism is more robust than individual longtermism, not with whether the implications of individual longtermism are distinctively institutional.

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suitable conditions for collective action and public good provision, low corruption, and so on. Conversely, bad institutions can be 'all-purpose bads' (or at least can be 'all-purpose worse' than good institutions). For example, a kleptocratic system that extracts resources to benefit a small corrupt elite may not only be bad for its contemporaries, but may, in expectation, deal less well with major risks that come its way.

Third, institutions can sometimes have *long-term* impacts that, in expectation, affect the value of the long-term future. Some institutions are deliberately designed to have long-lasting effects (think of those targeting climate emissions) or to themselves be long-lasting (think of constitutions). But more generally, functional institutions tend to be sticky—or to 'reproduce themselves'—simply because they are functional. Social scientists talk of *path dependence*: past events, decisions, technologies, and institutions constrain later ones (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000). This can take drastic and far-reaching forms. The US Constitution still greatly influences and constrains decisions in the US today. Many former colonized countries still struggle to shake off the dysfunctional institutions colonizers installed. At the far end of the spectrum, work in 'persistence studies' uses explanatory variables hundreds or thousands of years old to explain social and economic outcomes today.[12]

Path-dependence means that institutions affect not only later outcomes and decisions, but also what institutions we come to have. And while we cannot precisely predict this, social science and history might uncover helpful heuristics. For example, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson argue that countries sometimes display virtuous and vicious cycles in their long-term development (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Countries with inclusive economic systems often generate more inclusive political systems which in turn beget more inclusive economic systems (a virtuous cycle). Countries with 'extractive' economic systems might see organized extractive interests capture political influence, which in turn begets more extractive economic institutions (a vicious cycle).

A fourth consideration strengthens the others: under some scenarios, the scale, breadth, and stickiness of institutions may *intensify* in the future, as new technical capabilities and organizational forms increase the extent and persistence of institutional impact. Longtermists sometimes worry about *totalitarian risk*: a totalitarian government locking in its power over the long term. Bryan Caplan, for example, argues that future technological developments (such as AI-driven surveillance and life extension) might allow dictators to cement their power for a very long time (Caplan 2011). Alternatively, an artificial general intelligence (AGI) might become all (or very) powerful, such that the goals or values it receives at inception might get locked in long-term (MacAskill 2022: ch. 4). If that happens, it is crucial we have good institutions and values when this lock-in occurs.

Various empirical considerations thus seem to support institutional longtermism: institutions have large, broad, long-term, and perhaps intensifying impacts. But how long-term are we talking here? Does institutional longtermist lend itself more to medium or to full longtermism? In general, the most plausible way to have a *very* long-term impact is through effects on the near term that, with sufficient probability, persist for a very long time. This is why longtermists focus so much on extinction: if humanity goes extinct, this will almost certainly last forever. To the extent that institutions can reduce extinction risks, this may support full institutional longtermism. Furthermore, it might suggest an 'urgent' approach

[12] See, e.g., Giuliano and Nunn (2020), Abad and Maurer (2021), and especially Sevilla (2022) for critical reviews of such work.

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to institutional longtermism focused on establishing institutions, as soon as possible, that can combat pressing risks arising from engineered pandemics, climate change, nuclear war, AI, and the like.

But how robust is this case for full longtermism? Consider two worries. First, the idea that preventing extinction has great long-term value goes through most easily on the assumption that it is better for the future to contain more (happy) lives. But some views in population ethics deny this, holding that the effects of human extinction, beyond its effects on those living today, would be morally neutral or even positive (Benatar 2008: ch. 6; see Thomas 2023 for discussion). Second, if the annual extinction risk is high, fending off such risks now might have little impact over the very long term: over the next few millennia, extinction might be close to guaranteed even if we prevent it the next century. Indeed, to have a seriously long-term impact through this route, full longtermists arguably must endorse the controversial *time of perils hypothesis*: if we make it through the next century or so—the 'time of perils'—the annual extinction risk will then reduce to a very low rate (Friederich and Aebischer 2021; Thorstad 2023).

Arguably, the case for medium longtermism requires fewer contested normative and empirical assumptions. For, even beyond their effects on extinction risk, some institutions have a reasonable prospect of improving the well-being of future people, conditional on our survival, over medium timelines. Think, for example, of institutions explicitly designed to represent future generations (González-Ricoy and Gosseries 2017; John and MacAskill 2021). Within such medium timelines, we might also promote value by engaging in 'patient' approaches to longtermist institutional reform, focused on trying to achieve good institutions *in* the long run, even if it takes a long time to get there. This doesn't necessarily mean that we should come up with a blueprint for institutions that we wish to achieve in the distant future, which we should aim at by trying to take steps from here to there—as 'ideal theorists' sometimes suggest (Rawls 2001; Simmons 2010). Instead, given our limited predictive capacities, we might better promote long-run institutional reform by trying to make institutions more *progressive*—that is, better at getting better—for example, by facilitating institutional experimentation and learning (Barrett 2020c; MacAskill 2022: 99–102).

So, the claim that institutions can significantly and positively affect the long-term future over medium longtermist time horizons seems plausible, but extending this to full longtermism requires a defence of more contested normative and empirical assumptions. However, since the same assumptions are needed to get full *individual* longtermism, institutional longtermism seems, so far, on at least as strong footing as individual longtermism.

2.2 Institutional longtermism may be morally robust

We have discussed how institutions might promote long-run value; we now consider how this impacts their choiceworthiness. As we have noted, the case for longtermism typically assumes a *pro tanto* duty of (social) beneficence. While many worries have been raised about this duty at the individual level (e.g., in response to Singer 1972), we now suggest that institutional longtermism might mitigate them. So, if you are sceptical of individual longtermism because of the worries discussed below, here are some reasons why they might not apply to institutional longtermism.

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First, some argue that a duty to do good sometimes falls short in collective action cases, where we can have a large impact as a collective but no (or little) impact as individuals. For example, consequentialists often argue we should go vegetarian because factory farming causes so much suffering. However, critics suggest that individual consumption decisions make no causal difference (Budolfson 2019; Schmidt 2024a; also see Barrett and Raskoff 2023). It is not implausible to think that such collective action problems can arise for individual longtermism, given the need for collective action to achieve many longtermist goals. But this challenge is less severe for institutional longtermism, since one function of institutions is to overcome such problems.[13]

Second, one consequentialist response to collective action worries is that even when individual actions seem to make no difference, they may have a tiny chance of making a huge difference. Refraining from buying chicken usually saves no one, but it may occasionally trigger a threshold in the supply chain that saves a huge number of chickens. If so, beneficence may demand vegetarianism because it does a lot of good *in expectation* (Singer 1980; Matheny 2002; Norcross 2004; Kagan 2011). However, for individual longtermism, this response to collective action problems seems to require a decision-theoretic commitment that is controversial in other contexts: *fanaticism* (see Greaves and MacAskill this volume: sec. 8 and references therein). Suppose you must choose between saving a hundred lives for sure and saving a quadrillion lives with a one-in-a-trillion probability (and assume saving lives has constant marginal value). According to expected value theory, you should choose the latter, since a one-in-a-trillion chance of saving a quadrillion lives is just as good as certainly saving a *thousand* lives. But this verdict is often seen as counterintuitively 'fanatical' in its pursuit of tiny probabilities of enormous value.

Now, predicting and controlling the long-run future is difficult, and many attempts to do so may have slim chances of success. For example, donating to an AI safety organization may only have a tiny chance of making a (huge) difference. Individual longtermism might therefore require fanaticism (see Tarsney 2023 for discussion). Of course, responses are available: one could defend fanaticism (Beckstead and Thomas 2023; Wilkinson 2022; see Russell 2024; Barrett 2024a for responses) or argue that, empirically, longtermist actions have a non-fanatical probability of doing long-run good. Regardless, institutional longtermism can often avoid such difficulties, as institutions typically have a much larger chance of making a difference than individuals (compare Kosonen 2023).

Third, consequentialism is often criticized for being too demanding: it does not leave room for personal pursuits, relationships, and projects (see Sobel 2020 for discussion). And even a somewhat stringent *pro tanto* duty of beneficence can raise similar worries. Now, if individual longtermism is implied by beneficence, this worry may intensify: the huge stakes associated with the long-term future may render beneficence even more demanding, and certain familiar strategies for avoiding demandingness problems may no longer be available (Mogensen 2021). However, institutional longtermism softens such demandingness problems, as there is less reason to worry about too much being demanded of *institutions*. Moreover, institutions might lighten the total burden individuals face by promoting

[13] Of course, collective action problems might still arise *between* institutions, for example, in getting various nations to do their part to combat climate change. Our claim is not that institutions resolve all collective action problems; it is only that they help.

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longtermist aims more effectively, for example, due to economies of scale or a division of labour (Buchanan 1996; Goodin 2017).[14]

Fourth, many of our most meaningful projects and priorities involve relationships with others, such as our friends and family. Consequentialism or a weighty duty of impartial beneficence might unduly shrink the space for partiality. Of course, consequentialists respond to such worries (e.g., Railton 1984; Jackson 1991). But institutional longtermism can again sidestep them. Rather than to individuals, it applies impartial beneficence to institutions. And, as Robert Goodin argues, while being partial towards one's family and friends carries intuitive ethical weight for individuals, such partiality is objectionable at the institutional level. We expect private citizens to be partial but legislators to set aside personal relations and allegiances when designing or enacting law and policy (Goodin 1995; also see Pettit 2012).[15]

The above are sketches of arguments, not fully worked-out versions thereof. Still, further explorations of them seem worthwhile, since they suggest that the beneficence-based argument might be more robust for institutional than for individual longtermism.

3 Institutional longtermism meets mainstream political philosophy

So far, we have focused on the beneficence-based case for institutional longtermism. However, most political philosophers are more concerned with other considerations, like justice, legitimacy, or democracy. Might these defeat institutional longtermism?

3.1 The Stakes-Sensitivity Argument

Here, a standard longtermist argument (adapted from Greaves and MacAskill this volume) is the Stakes-Sensitivity Argument:

A. When the axiological stakes are very high, non-consequentialist considerations are (largely) outweighed, such that consequentialist reasons (largely) determine institutions' choiceworthiness.
B. When choosing among institutional options that significantly affect, in expectation, the long-term future, the axiological stakes are very high.
C. So, when choosing among institutional options that significantly affect, in expectation, the long-term future, consequentialist reasons (largely) determine institutions' choiceworthiness.

[14] One might still worry that longtermist institutions will demand more of individuals than non-longtermist ones. Whether this is so depends on complex issues that we cannot discuss here; for example, on some views, both sorts of institutions might instead be similarly demanding but simply demand different things. Regardless, our point is only the comparative one that demandingness worries are worse for individual than for institutional longtermism.

[15] Legislators must set aside *personal* relations, like friendships, but not necessarily other types of partiality, like being partial towards citizens of their own countries. Whether national partiality is justified and what it implies is an open question in general (Goodin 1988) and even more so under institutional longtermism.

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Premise A allows for weighty non-consequentialist reasons of (say) justice and legitimacy but claims that they are overridden when the axiological stakes are high. This is intuitive. In emergency situations, when many lives are at stake—because of a war or a natural catastrophe, for example—it often seems justified to override 'non-consequentialist' concerns. Premise B adds that when institutions significantly affect the long-run future the stakes are indeed very high, since trillions or quadrillions of lives might be at stake in the long-run future.

While simple and powerful, many find the Stakes-Sensitivity Argument hard to accept. For example, Premise B is open to challenge from moral views on which large *numbers* of future people don't necessarily produce large *stakes*. Consider non-aggregative views on which 'the numbers don't count': we should be more concerned with a larger harm to one person than any number of smaller harms to others (Scanlon 1998). Or consider 'person-affecting' views in population ethics on which non-existing people don't count the same as existing people: it is neither good nor bad to bring new happy people into existence (Narveson 1973). Such views, and more sophisticated variants of them, are often thought to challenge longtermism.[16]

These debates are well-explored elsewhere. So, here we proceed on the assumption that the above objections are not decisive, and instead investigate how distinctively *political* values interact with longtermism. The Stakes-Sensitivity Argument suggests that even non-consequentialists cannot brush aside long-term consequentialist considerations so easily. But many political philosophers think that non-consequentialist considerations weigh very heavily. John Rawls, for example, famously identifies *justice* as the first virtue of institutions (Rawls 1971). If such considerations indeed weigh heavily, they might defeat longtermism (or at least its strong version on which promoting long-term value is *the* key priority). Alternatively, political philosophy may furnish new arguments in favour of longtermism, since many political values also call for the consideration of future people. For example, we might care about intergenerational justice or about the freedom and equality of future people. And how compelling is an ideal of democracy that disenfranchises most people, namely all those still to come?

In the remainder of this chapter, we therefore focus on how longtermism interacts with five mainstream values in political philosophy: justice, equality, freedom, legitimacy, and democracy. In each case, we first consider possible tensions with longtermism and then arguments pointing toward greater convergence.

3.2 Justice

T. M. Scanlon distinguishes between morality in general and *interpersonal morality* which is concerned with directed duties or *what we owe to each other* (Scanlon 1998: 6–7). Justice, according to Scanlon, falls within interpersonal morality, whereas at least some forms of impartial beneficence do not. Beneficence can involve undirected duties or reasons to

[16] See, e.g., Heikkinen (2022) and Curran (this volume) on non-aggregative views and Thomas (2023) on population ethics. Of course, it is also possible to challenge the relevance of the Stakes-Sensitivity Argument by appealing to empirical views on which institutions cannot significantly affect the long-run future.

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promote value—duties not owed *by* anyone in particular, or *to* anyone in particular. But justice is distinctively concerned with what people are *due* (Gilabert 2016; Miller 2021; Barrett 2022).[17]

Already, this generates a tension between longtermism and justice. The beneficence-based case for institutional longtermism at least *prima facie* appeals to undirected reasons that are not owed to anyone in particular, as they pertain to possible people in the far future (though more on this shortly). Justice, in contrast, is owed to someone.

Besides this *structural mismatch* there might also be an *intuitive conflict* between justice and longtermism. Why should we worry so much about possible people in the far future when there are so many pressing injustices here and now? Shouldn't we address ongoing and historical injustice first?

However, several considerations might lessen these tensions.

First, longtermists might argue that longtermist priorities perform well in terms of near-term justice. Consider pandemic preparedness. As the COVID-19 pandemic shows, pandemics are supremely bad in the near term and lead to massive injustices, involving unnecessary death, illness, and poverty. And their burdens tend to fall disproportionately on disadvantaged individuals and groups. Similarly, AI safety work might also prevent near-term injustice (say, due to algorithmic discrimination). More generally, Carl Shulman and Elliott Thornley argue that most longtermist interventions that reduce extinction risks (or other similarly catastrophic risks) are competitive given the cost-benefit standards of rich countries, even if one only considers present people (Shulman and Thornley this volume).

Second, there might be institutional convergence: just institutions may better promote long-term value. For example, states that protect human rights, secure some decent economic minimum, and observe principles of legal justice might perform better by longtermists' lights. Furthermore, from a patient perspective, unjust institutions may be sticky and involve feedback loops that block institutional improvements (Barrett and Buchanan 2024). For example, those who benefit from unjust power inequalities tend to shape institutions in ways that further their short-term interests. And societies subject to epistemic injustice may be worse at institutional learning.

Besides these (speculative) empirical considerations, there are also more philosophical considerations pointing toward convergence.

First, justice gives us directed duties we owe to others. But, like beneficence, it may also give us undirected duties to *promote* justice. For example, imagine a button that would immediately remove injustices in some far-away country (or that would prevent them from occurring in the far future). Regardless of whether you have directed duties to people there, it seems you ought to press it. Rawls, too, thought that we have a 'natural duty' of justice to promote or sustain just institutions (Rawls 1971: 98–99).

If there is an undirected duty to promote justice, then presumably we have stronger reasons to promote more justice. Roger Crisp and Theron Pummer thus suggest that we should focus on reducing injustice in low-income countries, since, at the margin, we can

[17] Directed duties, as we use the term, differ from undirected duties in two ways. First, they concern what we owe *to* particular individuals, such that when we violate these duties we not only *do wrong* in an impersonal sense, but *wrong* someone in particular. On many views, duties of beneficence need not be directed in this way. Second, directed duties may also involve agent-relativity. For example, justice may require that *I* compensate you for my past wrongdoing, and not just that you are compensated by *someone*. Duties of beneficence, in contrast, are typically thought to be agent-neutral.

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typically reduce injustice more effectively there than in high-income countries (Crisp and Pummer 2020: 401–402). However, if longtermists are right, our expected impact might be largest on future people, given their great number. An undirected duty to promote justice might push us to be 'justice longtermists'.

What exactly justice longtermism implies, however, is complicated. For example, some suggest that injustice is primary, with justice being merely the absence of injustice (e.g., Shklar 1990; Schmidtz 2011). If so, we can have a duty to prevent injustice, but no duty to promote justice. Does justice longtermism then imply a duty to hasten human extinction, since without people, there can be no injustice? This may strike many as a *reductio*.[18] Alternatively, we might have a duty to promote justice rather than to prevent its opposite. But does that imply we ought to bring more people into existence, to increase aggregate justice among them? We are not used to thinking of larger countries as more just simply in virtue of their greater population. Clearly, some work is needed on the 'population ethics of justice'.

A second type of convergence argument zooms in on directed duties of *intergenerational justice*: duties we owe to future people. There is some debate about whether we can owe future people anything in light of the non-identity problem: what we do now affects not only how well off future people are, but also *which* future people exist (see Meyer 2021: sec. 3 for an overview). But many political philosophers believe that we at least owe it to future people not to bring them into existence beneath some threshold of sufficiency or in circumstances where their rights will be violated (see Caney 2018 for discussion). Moreover, conditional on there being future people, we might have directed duties towards them, if we think of these duties as owed to 'types of person' or persons *de dicto* (Hare 2007; Kumar 2015; 2018). However, it is harder to see how we can have directed duties of justice *to* future people to bring them into existence in the first place. To *whom* have we acted unjustly if none come to exist? The tension between intergenerational justice and the longtermist priority of avoiding human extinction may therefore persist (Barrett 2022).[19]

Another issue is that many global justice theorists argue that (certain) duties of distributive justice are owed only to those we bear special relations to. For example, Michael Blake and Laura Valentini argue that we only have duties of (egalitarian) justice towards others if we share *coercive* institutions with them (Blake 2001; 2013; Valentini 2011a; 2011b). Andrea Sangiovanni argues that the relevant relation is *reciprocity* (Sangiovanni 2007). Can such relations exist across generations? Intuitively, relations of direct reciprocity cannot (Heyd 2009), but recent work suggests that relations of indirect reciprocity might (Gosseries 2009; Heath 2013; Brandstedt 2015; Scheffler 2018). Yet even if such relations extend across generations, they are unlikely to get us all the way to (full) longtermism. Intergenerational coercion, reciprocity, and so on are likely weaker across than within generations, and may weaken and even disappear as we peer further into the future (compare Mogensen 2022).

Finally, even if duties of intergenerational justice extend into the far future, they might require something different than our undirected duties to promote valuable or just outcomes.

[18] Even if justice longtermism implies a duty to hasten human extinction, this duty would only be *pro tanto*, so it wouldn't imply that we all-things-considered ought to do this. Still, we suspect that many will find even this qualified implication hard to stomach.

[19] While failing to prevent human extinction might also be unjust to *present* humans, this convergence may not support (for example) the longtermist thought that even reducing the probability of human extinction by a small probability is hugely important, or that preventing outright extinction may be much more important than preventing near-extinction events from which we could recover.

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Many theories of intergenerational justice are sufficientarian, only requiring us to ensure that future people meet some minimal standard (Meyer and Roser 2009). Undirected duties to promote justice and the good within future generations might not be limited this way. Ultimately, this depends on our particular theory of justice. Although we cannot provide a survey of such theories here, we now explore the two most common values used to fill out theories of justice, but which may also matter for other reasons: equality and freedom.

3.3 Equality

Equality is a central value in political philosophy, perhaps because there are so many reasons to care about it (Miller 1997; O'Neill 2008; Scanlon 2018). We here focus on three egalitarian views, which are distinct though not mutually exclusive.

First, a more equal distribution of income and wealth might be instrumentally valuable by contributing to more well-being, trust, education, better political institutions, social mobility, and the like (Woodard 2019: ch. 7; Schmidt and Juijn 2024). Call this *instrumental egalitarianism*.

Second, *relational egalitarianism* holds that what matters is establishing equal relations and preventing problematic relational inequalities.[20] Relations like domination and subjugation are the central enemies, while securing conditions for people to live as equals is the positive ideal. For relational egalitarians, distributive inequalities are not bad in themselves, but they are objectionable if they constitute or contribute to relational inequalities.

Third, distributive egalitarians hold that distributive inequalities are non-instrumentally bad.[21] Luck egalitarians add that inequalities between individuals are only bad if they arise from brute luck but not if they arise from responsible choice.[22]

How do these versions of egalitarianism bear on longtermism? To answer this, we must consider, (i) whether each view applies only within or also across generations; and (ii) what kind of reasons each view gives us: undirected reasons to promote good outcomes or directed reasons owed to others?

First, answering (i), some *instrumental* egalitarian arguments apply to both intragenerational and intergenerational distributions. For example, more equal distributions of economic resources between generations might lead to more well-being because of such resources' decreasing marginal utility. So, if we expect future people to be richer than us, this might push us to spend somewhat more on present people's welfare. Other arguments apply more to intragenerational distributions, such as arguments around relative standing and status anxiety. On (ii), instrumental egalitarianism is about good outcomes and not about directed duties of justice. So there is no obvious structural tension between instrumental egalitarianism and longtermism.

However, Tyler Cowen argues that for longtermists, economic (in)equality is mostly irrelevant (Cowen 2018): sustainable growth is far more important, as it compounds

[20] See, e.g., Young (1990), Anderson (1999), Fourie, Schuppert, and Wallimann-Helmer (2015), Lippert-Rasmussen (2018), Schemmel (2021), Schmidt (2022c).

[21] Alternatively, distributive egalitarians might hold that distributive equalities are non-instrumentally good. This raises issues similar to those discussed under 'justice longtermism': if inequality is bad, we might have reason to hasten human extinction. See Arrhenius and Mosquera (2022) and Mogensen (this volume).

[22] See, e.g., Arneson (1989), Cohen (1989), Stemplowska (2013), Lippert-Rasmussen (2015).

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over the years. Andreas T. Schmidt and Daan Juijn disagree, arguing that reducing (intragenerational) economic inequality is probably valuable (even assuming a utilitarian axiology) whether one takes a short, medium, or longtermist time frame (Schmidt and Juijn 2024). Central arguments here are that more equal societies likely have lower greenhouse gas emissions, lower risk of elite capture of political institutions, and better all-purpose conditions for public good provision and for dealing with long-term risks.

Consider *relational* egalitarianism next. Regarding (i), most relational egalitarians focus on intragenerational inequalities, but some relational inequalities might obtain across generations too (e.g., Bengtson 2019). Regarding (ii), relational egalitarianism is sometimes considered a theory of interpersonal justice and sometimes an axiological theory. Insofar as relational egalitarianism is interpersonal and about directed duties, it might conflict with longtermism: the strongest relationships will likely be intragenerational, and stronger intergenerational relationships will be near-term rather than long-term. However, if relational egalitarianism issues undirected duties to promote justice, it might not clash with longtermism but merely affect its shape: preventing relational inequalities among future people would become a longtermist priority.

Finally, consider *distributive* egalitarianism. Regarding (i), the theory can be both intra- and intergenerational, though a concern with intergenerational equality sometimes leads to counterintuitive verdicts (Temkin 1995: 99; Schmidt 2024b). Derek Parfit, for example, asks whether it really matters that 13th-century Inca peasants were worse off than people alive today (Parfit 1991: 7; though see Segall 2016). Regarding (ii), distributive egalitarianism is typically understood to be about the value of outcomes. So there is no structural conflict with longtermism, and distributive egalitarianism might only affect longtermism's shape.[23]

3.4 Freedom

Freedom is another central value in contemporary political philosophy. On first glance, it seems to conflict with longtermism: freedom is often thought to place limits on using state power to bring about certain outcomes. Longtermism, however, might require that we infringe the freedom of existing people.

Nick Bostrom provides an extreme example of a potential clash (Bostrom 2019). He asks whether we may have been lucky so far to have only discovered ways of causing global disasters that are costly and difficult to implement. But what if the nuclear weapons or pandemic-causing pathogens of the future could be built in your garage? To reduce the risk that such technological developments occur, Bostrom wonders whether we might have to violate people's freedom and privacy on a massive scale, for example, through a global surveillance state. Beyond such horrifying scenarios, there are more mundane cases where longtermism might conflict with freedom. For example, might preventing long-term damage from climate change require restricting people's freedom now?

[23] If distributive egalitarians give *overriding* weight to equality, or perhaps to benefiting the worst off, this might challenge longtermism rather than just change its shape, at least assuming future people will be better off than us. Arguably, however, all plausible versions of distributive egalitarianism allow that large increases in aggregate welfare (as are at stake in the very long run) sometimes outweigh inequality or the interests of the worst off (Barrett 2020a; 2020b).

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To explore these issues, we need a better handle on what freedom is and why we should care about it. Contemporary political philosophy often distinguishes between liberal, republican, and libertarian freedom (Schmidt 2022d). Liberal theorists hold that freedom is primarily about having *options*. Some liberals hold that the absence of interpersonal interference with your options is sufficient for freedom (Miller 1983; Steiner 1994; Kristjánsson 1996). Others hold that freedom requires not only the absence of interference, but also the genuine ability to pursue an option (Parijs 1997; Sen 1999; Kramer 2003; Schmidt 2016). Recent republican theories argue that even this is insufficient: freedom also depends on not being subject to domination, where someone dominates you if they have the uncontrolled power to interfere with you—regardless of whether they actually intervene (Lovett 2010; Skinner 2012; Pettit 2014; Schmidt 2018a).

Practically, liberal and republican theories of freedom mainly converge, first, because (most) republicans think option-freedom is necessary (but insufficient) and, second, because most liberals think republican institutions and relations of non-domination tend to increase liberal option-freedom (Carter 1999: ch. 7.5; Kramer 2003: ch. 3). Interestingly, recent theorizing in this tradition often treats freedom as a scalar good rather than something imposing a deontic constraint (Schmidt 2022d).[24] If we go with liberal or republican theories, then, longtermism and the pursuit of freedom might seem to converge: reasons to care about the freedom of existing people are also reasons to care about future people's freedom, whether this is understood as option-freedom or non-domination (Vercelli 1998; Schmidt 2025). Some republicans add that there can also be domination *across* generations (Smith 2013; Beckman 2016; Katz 2017; Schmidt and Bengtson 2021). Previous generations dominate future people, as they have the uncontrolled power to influence their lives. All this suggests that freedom might not speak against longtermism but only affect its shape.

But perhaps we are assuming an overly consequentialist view on freedom. Rather than promoting other people's freedom, aren't we required to respect it?

There are different deontological theories on offer but the most influential are libertarian. Libertarians see freedom as intrinsically linked to *property rights*: we are unfree to the extent that our property rights are violated, including our right of self-ownership (Nozick 1974; Vallentyne and Steiner 2000; Otsuka 2003; Fried 2004). If such views issue deontological constraints, they might limit the scope within which institutions can permissibly pursue longtermist causes. But even this is not clear.

First, libertarians often allow interfering with person *A*'s actions if this interference is necessary to prevent interference with person *B*'s freedom. For example, if *A* threatens *B*'s physical safety, libertarians might endorse restricting *A*'s options to safeguard *B*'s freedom. So perhaps some restrictions now might be necessary to reduce the risk of restrictions on future people's freedom. Second, even if we see freedom as issuing deontological directed duties, it might also give us undirected duties to promote it. Shouldn't libertarians try to bring about libertarian institutions for future people? Furthermore, most libertarians are not entirely insensitive to axiological stakes. Even Robert Nozick held that preventing 'catastrophic moral horrors' might override freedom and property rights (Nozick 1974: 29).

[24] As we did for justice and equality, we might ask: is freedom good, or unfreedom bad? Each answer—if it invokes non-instrumental value or disvalue—will encounter the by now familiar complications in variable population cases.

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Longtermists could argue that they are concerned with preventing such horrors from occurring, or with promoting outcomes that it would be equally disastrous not to achieve.

Leaving philosophical considerations aside, there may also be strong empirical reasons why longtermists should safeguard freedom (of both current and future people) (see Schmidt 2025, pp. 205–6). First, empirical evidence suggests societies with more freedom are, on the whole, happier (Veenhoven 2000; Inglehart et al. 2008; Bavetta et al. 2014). Moreover, most rich countries (other than tax havens and petrol states) are broadly speaking liberal democracies. This suggests freedom has benefits at least in the medium term and perhaps in the very long run. Second, the risk of 'value lock-in' might give longtermists reason to prefer freedom as a default. If we are uncertain about what the correct values are, we should be cautious not to lock in values for a long time that later might turn out misguided. Free societies are less likely to lock in contested values and may offer better epistemic conditions for experimentation and moral progress. Finally, and relatedly, longtermists worry about totalitarian risk. A strong societal and institutional commitment to freedom might reduce such risk.

3.5 Legitimacy

So far, we have seen that while justice, equality, and freedom pose *prima facie* challenges to longtermism, various arguments also suggest convergence. However, for legitimacy, the tension with longtermism seems stark. On common theories of legitimacy, a state is legitimate only if it rules by the consent of the governed (e.g., Locke 1690/1990; Simmons 2001), or if its actions are the output of a fair democratic procedure (e.g., Christiano 2008), or if its constitution or laws are 'publicly justified'—that is, justified *to* all reasonable people it rules over, in light of their diverse values and beliefs (e.g., Rawls 2005). Many actions favoured by longtermists might therefore prove illegitimate in modern societies, where citizens do not generally consent to, vote for, or agree with longtermist priorities.

Moreover, the *structural* tension with longtermism also seems greater for legitimacy: unlike the values discussed above, legitimacy is uncontroversially deontological. A government or other entity is legitimate when it has the 'right to rule'. Minimally, this is a 'permission-right' implying it permissibly wields its political power. More controversially, legitimacy may involve *authority* or a 'claim-right' that implies individuals have an obligation to obey. Although we might also have some reason to promote legitimacy, legitimacy's force is widely assumed to be deontological, so repeating the above move of making it an object to promote seems less promising.

Nevertheless, we might try to resolve this tension.

First, we might argue that, empirically, pursuing certain longtermist priorities is indeed legitimate, at least on some theories. For example, perhaps efforts to combat extinction risks are publicly justified, since they also severely threaten present people. Less speculatively, Eric Martinez and Christoph Winter present survey evidence that most legal professionals and laypeople believe the law both can and should protect future people much more than it currently does (Martinez and Winter this volume). This tentatively suggests a case for the legitimacy of relevant legal reforms.

Second, and more philosophically, we might offer a modified version of the Stakes-Sensitivity Argument, where stakes-sensitivity is built into the very concept of legitimacy

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(rather than, as on the standard argument, stakes potentially outweighing legitimacy). Ross Mittiga argues that, when the stakes are high enough, ordinary notions of legitimacy allow the state to employ emergency powers that would be illegitimate in normal times (as occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example) (Mittiga 2022). On his view, climate change may represent an ongoing state of emergency such that, in tackling it, governments can legitimately act in ways normally seen as illegitimate or even authoritarian. Longtermists might generalize this argument, claiming that the same applies to efforts to promote massive long-run value. However, most theorists would likely deny that legitimacy really is stakes-sensitive in this way: while many agree that states can render themselves *illegitimate* by acting very badly or unjustly (e.g., Rawls 2005: 428), few agree that they can legitimate themselves by doing enough good. Furthermore, as seen above, societies that value freedom are likely to promote long-term value better than those that do not. And as we will see, the same may be true of democratic rather than authoritarian states. Indeed, a government that effectively declared a perpetual state of emergency should raise red flags to longtermists due to the risk of bad value lock-in, long-term totalitarian capture, and other troubling path-dependencies.

Finally, and most radically, we might challenge existing approaches to legitimacy as being too focused on present people. Allen Buchanan, for example, ties legitimacy to justice, defending the 'functionalist' thesis that a state is legitimate when it meets minimal standards of justice. One of his central arguments is that the state is such a dangerous and powerful entity that only justice is weighty enough to legitimate its establishment (Buchanan 2003: 247). Longtermists may retort that the value at stake in the long-run future is also of great weight, such that similar arguments should lead one to view a state as legitimate only if it appropriately pursues long-run value.

Tyler John suggests another argument pointing in the same direction. He notes that the demand for legitimacy arises given some relation between the ruler and the ruled, and argues that whatever the relevant relation is in the intragenerational case—be it coercion, domination, or subordination, say—the same relation holds intergenerationally (John 2022: ch. 1). Others demur. Ludvig Beckman, for example, argues that present governments cannot 'rule' future people at all, because future people can repeal or modify laws we pass now (Beckman 2009: ch. 7). Furthermore, it is not obvious how states *can* legitimate themselves to future people, at least on certain theories. For example, future people cannot consent to what present states do (although perhaps we can appeal to notions like hypothetical consent). Still, if states must indeed legitimate themselves to future people, then legitimacy arguably provides an argument *for* longtermism. Consider democratic conceptions on which states derive legitimacy from the participation or representation of its subjects in appropriate decision-making procedures. If future people need to be represented too, then this might radically change which actions are legitimate, perhaps suggesting that longtermist institutions and policies are not only consistent with, but mandated by, legitimacy. This leads into our next topic.

3.6 Democracy

Intuitively, respecting the voice and preferences of existing people might constrain how longtermist institutions can be. Stephen A. Marglin, for example, appealed to democracy when defending a positive social discount rate, on the grounds that existing people discount

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the future (Marglin 1963). Yet, again, it might also seem undemocratic that the vast number of future people are disenfranchised. So, does democracy push us towards or away from longtermism?

The answer partly depends on *why* one supports democracy. Democracy is defended on two main sorts of grounds: intrinsic and instrumentalist (though see Ziliotti (2020) for more fine-grained distinctions). Intrinsic defences point to features of democratic decision-making procedures that are valuable independently of the outcomes they produce. For example, such procedures may realize values of freedom, equality, collective self-rule, or fairness. Instrumental defences appeal to the beneficial consequences of democracy. For example, democracies may have good empirical track records or have epistemic properties that yield better decisions than other systems.

In practice, 'pure proceduralists' are rare. Most endorse both intrinsic and instrumental arguments. John Halstead thus argues that nearly all major theories of democracy are committed to 'high-stakes instrumentalism': when the moral stakes are very high, the intrinsic value of democracy is outweighed, and we ought to employ whatever political procedures yield better outcomes (Halstead 2017). Given that longtermist decisions involve high stakes, the Stakes-Sensitivity Argument therefore threatens to collapse all democratic theories to instrumentalism.

Suppose, however, that this collapse can be avoided. Do intrinsic theories of democracy then conflict with longtermism? On the one hand, the conflict between democracy and longtermism seems obvious: democratic bodies may predictably decide against longtermist priorities. On the other, actual democracies might fall short of the intrinsic ideals of democracy. Assume democracy implies, roughly, that all constituents enjoy equal say or representation in decision-making. The question now arises *who* should be included in this constituency. The two most prominent approaches to answering this 'boundary problem' involve the 'all-affected' and the 'all-subjected' principles. According to the former, all individuals whose interests are (actually or possibly) affected by a decision should have influence over or representation in the decision (Arrhenius 2005; Goodin 2007). According the latter, all who are bound by, subject to, or coerced by a decision should be included (Beckman 2014: 257; Goodin 2016: 370–373).

Do these principles imply we must include future people? Initially, it seems so: future people seem both affected by and subject to current decisions. However, the non-identity problem may suggest otherwise for the all-affected principle (Tännsjö 2007). And Beckman's above argument that we cannot rule over future people threatens the application of the all-subjected principle (Beckman 2009: ch. 7). Further, these two principles are both highly revisionary and somewhat 'free-floating', and several theorists now argue that we should look beyond them and adopt more theory-driven approaches to the boundary problem that connect to a theory of what democracy is and why it is valuable (Saunders 2012; Song 2012; Miller 2020; Bengtson and Lippert-Rasmussen 2021). For example, some recent work explores whether and how relational egalitarian and republican theories of democracy should include future people (Schmidt and Bengtson 2021; Bengtson forthcoming).

Turn now to *instrumental* defences of democracy. In general, longtermists should care about at least some ways democracy is instrumentally valuable. For example, democracies arguably facilitate economic growth (Acemoglu et al. 2018), have better human rights records (Herre and Roser 2013), and correlate with better education, health (Herre and Roser

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2013; Ortiz-Ospina 2019), happiness, and life satisfaction (Owen, Videras, and Willemsen 2008; Orviska, Caplanova, and Hudson 2014). Insofar as those benefits are real and democracies are sticky, democracies may provide steady streams of such benefits over time. Also pertinent to longtermism, 'democratic peace theory' holds that democracies go to war less often, especially with each other (Chan 1997). They might also better deal with certain disasters (see Sen (1982) on democracies and famines and Rubin (2009) for a response). Some also argue that democracies improve and adapt faster since they are better at experimenting and gathering feedback (Dewey 1927; Anderson 2006; Knight and Johnson 2011); others argue that they are better at resisting elite capture (Bagg 2018; 2024).

But are democracies really equipped to handle longtermist problems, including low-probability/high-impact risks that require long-term strategy? Electoral incentives notoriously focus politicians on the next election cycle, and mechanisms of democratic accountability generally hold politicians to account to present citizens rather than to future people (Caney 2017; John and MacAskill 2021). Some thus argue for more centralized or even authoritarian forms of governance to respond to the climate crisis (Mittiga 2022; see Shahar 2015 for an overview and critique of such 'eco-authoritarianism'). However, as defenders of this view themselves often acknowledge, authoritarian governments have poor track records on environmental issues (Shahar 2015: 354–356; Mittiga 2022: fns. 1, 2). Furthermore, the only systematic attempt we are aware of to quantify how well governments pursue long-run goals finds a strong *positive* correlation between democracy and 'Intergenerational Solidarity' (Krznaric 2021: ch. 9). If we also consider the above instrumental arguments plus worries around 'totalitarian risk' and value lock-in, longtermism seems more likely to reinforce rather than challenge the instrumental case for democracy.

Finally, longtermism raises questions for so-called 'epistemic' defences of democracy, including those that invoke formal results rather than empirical evidence (Cohen, 1986; Anderson 2006; Estlund 2009). The most famous defence rests on the Condorcet Jury Theorem, which says that under certain conditions the majority is more likely to be right than any individual (List and Goodin 2001; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). Others have invoked the Diversity Trumps Ability theorem (Landemore 2012), which says that under certain conditions more diverse groups outperform groups composed of experts (Hong and Page 2004; Page 2008). Both theorems have their limitations, but the basic idea—that democracy can harness diversity and the wisdom of crowds—has staying power. Might longtermism challenge this? Speaking roughly, the key insight behind both theorems is that decision-making bodies face a trade-off between the greater competence (or expertise) of their members, and their greater diversity.[25] Crucially, however, the benefits of diversity only kick in if all members are 'competent enough'. Now, figuring out how to promote long-run value is very hard. This might seem to undermine the 'competent enough' condition and thus suggest an argument for epistocracy ('rule by the knowers'): if lay people are incompetent, we must leave longtermist governance to experts rather than the people. Conversely, however, longtermist problems might be tractable enough that most individuals do count as competent. Instead, the real challenge might be that no one is *very* competent to pursue

[25] However, the theorems do interpret diversity differently. The Condorcet Jury Theorem suggests that diversity helps insofar as it facilitates probabilistically independent judgements, whose errors can 'cancel out'. The Diversity Trumps Ability theorem operates instead through a 'baton-passing' mechanism that relies on a diversity in perspectives and heuristics: more diverse groups are less likely to get stuck at suboptimal solutions, since there is more likely to be at least one person who can find an improvement.

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them: even 'experts' aren't much better than laypeople. If so, this might reinforce epistemic arguments for democracy, since it suggests we must rely on diverse crowds rather than (only on) expertise (see Ahissar 2022).

4 What next?

We have explored not only the beneficence-based argument for institutional longtermism, but also various points of tension and convergence between institutional longtermism and central values in political philosophy. In each case, we have found that while certain tensions initially seem manifest, on closer inspection things quickly get complicated, leaving it far from obvious whether political values conflict with, or even support, institutional longtermism.

Of necessity, our survey of these topics has been superficial as well as incomplete. Further research is needed, including more careful investigations both of the arguments we have floated and of what longtermism might imply for particular theories of justice, legitimacy, and the like.[26] Such work might also more carefully distinguish strong from weak (and full from medium) versions of longtermism, which we have often run together here. But rather than diving deeper into these topics, we end with a grab bag of other important questions in longtermist political philosophy, starting with more theoretical and broader questions:

Global justice and global governance: as noted, global justice and longtermism intersect in interesting ways. But longtermism also raises fascinating questions about global *governance*. Effective longtermist action—on issues like climate change, pandemic prevention, AI safety, and more—likely requires international action (Ord 2020). However, some worry that centralizing political authority raises totalitarian risk (Caplan 2011). So, should longtermists favour more or less international coordination or centralization, and of what sort?[27]

Political morality: we have focused on institutions rather than on how individuals should act. But how does longtermism affect political morality? For example, if longtermism holds up yet states fail to meet their longtermist duties, what does that imply for citizens and their political obligations and potential civic duties to effect change?

Diversifying: we have focused on contemporary analytic philosophy. But we might also gain insights from other periods and traditions. Consider first examples from the history of Western philosophy. John Stuart Mill (Mill 1866: cols 1525–1528) argued that we should leave coal in the ground for future generations—an argument recently explored by MacAskill (MacAskill 2022: 138–141). Edmund Burke (1790) provided a conservative political argument for concern for the future, which has been taken up by Ord (2020: 49–52). Hans Jonas developed a Kantian variant of longtermism several decades ago (Jonas 1979; 1985).

[26] For example, Porter and Gibbons (2024) consider how an appreciation of the longtermist priority of mitigating extinction (or other catastrophic) risks might lead parties behind a Rawlsian veil of ignorance to endorse different principles of justice than Rawls himself derived.

[27] Such questions are pressing: marking its 75th anniversary, the United Nations released a report that explicitly includes longtermist goals as central to the UN's mission (United Nations 2021). With more meetings and public deliberations planned, the UN will also consider concrete proposals to represent future generations, including a Trusteeship Council, a Futures Lab, a Declaration on Future Generations, and a Special Envoy.

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Beyond the 'Western' tradition, the oral constitution of the Iriquous confederacy (*Gayanashagowa*) dates back centuries and includes concern for future generations, often interpreted as the 'seventh generation principle'. There is also much to learn by investigating points of contact between longtermism and other traditions, such as Buddhist ethics (Baker 2022: sec. 3.2.2), Confucianism (Hourdequin and Wong 2021), Latin American thought (Vidiella and García Valverde 2021), African thought (Mbonda and Ngosso 2021), and Thomist Christian thought (Riedener 2022).

Non-human animals: non-human animals remain neglected by political philosophers (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Garner 2013; Schmidt 2018b; Barrett 2022) and longtermists (Browning and Veit this volume). This is unfortunate, since serious efforts to promote longtermist institutional reform must take animals into account. It also raises challenging questions (MacAskill 2022: 208–213): given humanity's impact on non-human animals and ecosystems, is the value of our survival really positive on balance? Furthermore, bringing non-human animals and longtermism together might uncover sources of insight, since the political issues confronting non-human animals and future people have much in common: despite their massive numbers, both groups are utterly disenfranchised.

Distinctively longtermist values: we have discussed how longtermism interacts with existing values in mainstream political philosophy. But might longtermism also require new, specifically longtermist values to shape our institutions? If so, what might those be? For example, should we focus more on adaptability?

Longtermist institutional reform: what longtermist political reforms, if any, should we pursue (González-Ricoy and Gosseries 2017; John and MacAskill 2021)? For example, should we focus on *constitutions* (Beckman 2016; Araújo and Koessler 2021) or more on the legislative or executive? Or should we focus less on formal changes, and more on informal norms, or on having civil society and voters pressure decision-makers into longtermist action?

There are also important questions about concrete longtermist priorities:

Pandemics and public health ethics: public health ethicists have already written much about the ethics and politics of infectious diseases and pandemics (Boylan 2022; Hirose 2022). Integration and further work might be important for targeted interventions to reduce pandemic risks that threaten long-run value.

Nuclear weapons: in the heyday of the Cold War, several philosophers wrote about nuclear weapons (Goodin 1980; Cohen and Lee 1986; Lewis 1986; Kavka 1987). Renewed interest—with a view towards longtermism and extinction risks—might be valuable, particularly in evaluating specific interventions (e.g., Rendall 2021).

Population ethics and demography: population ethics throws up challenging questions that receive much attention in the literature on longtermism. But applied political questions around demography also demand our attention. Near-term worries tend to cluster around overpopulation. For example, given the climate crisis, political philosophers discuss how many children one can permissibly have and what, if anything, states should do about

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overpopulation (e.g., Conly 2016). However, if current trends continue, demographers predict that *depopulation* will replace overpopulation in the next century (Bricker and Ibbitson 2019; Jones 2022). So, what would a longtermist perspective imply here?

AI governance: for longtermists, AI presents both vast opportunities and risks. AI governance should thus be an important area for targeted interventions, and political philosophy could make valuable contributions to this growing field (e.g., Bullock et al. 2024).

Space governance: some longtermists view space settlement as a crucial step in humanity's future, since it may allow humanity to massively expand its population and fortify itself against certain catastrophic risks. The field of space governance, however, is in its infancy. Political philosophers could help.

Finally, consider some questions about *how* longtermism is pursued and promulgated, or about what we might call the politics (rather than political philosophy) of longtermism:

Longtermism as ideology: some worry that longtermism could come to serve as an ideology that, in the name of a long and glorious future, justifies maintaining or even worsening problematic features of the status quo. Notably, this criticism does not assume that longtermism is false, only that it might be abused (either intentionally or due to bias or motivated reasoning). How should we best understand, and guard against, this concern?

Democracy and longtermist philanthropy: currently, much investment into longtermism comes from private donors, including billionaires associated with effective altruism. Some worry that such funding structures are undemocratic and elitist (Reich, 2018; Lechterman 2021; Saunders-Hastings 2022; though see Barrett 2024b). Such worries are especially pressing in light of the recent collapse of and (alleged) fraud surrounding the FTX cryptocurrency exchange, given its longtermist philanthropic arm.[28]

This list remains only a sampling of the many questions and research avenues in longtermist political philosophy. Our goal has been to show that there is important work to be done here—work that we hope both longtermists and their critics will feel compelled to pursue. After all, the stakes may be very high.[29]

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[28] However, if democratic worries primarily concern individual philanthropists circumventing the democratic process to pursue longtermist goals, then such worries may arise more for individual than for institutional longtermism.

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