

Week 3: From Axiological to Deontic Longtermism

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Assume Axiological Strong Longtermism: most moral value lies in the future, and there's an awful lot of it, and that we can get at it without violating side constraints or ignoring similar-sized prerogatives. Now consider the Stakes Sensitivity Argument:

- (P1) When the axiological stakes are very high, there are no serious side-constraints, and the personal prerogatives are comparatively minor, one ought to choose a near-best option.
- (P2) In the most important decision situations facing agents today, the axiological stakes are very high, there are no serious side-constraints, and the personal prerogatives are comparatively minor.
- (C) So, in the most important decision situations facing agents today, one ought to choose a near-best option.

(Greaves and MacAskill 2021, p. 27)

What should we make of this argument? We're assuming (P2), and the argument is valid. So, the Stakes Sensitivity Argument is sound if and only if (P1) is true.

Question: Is it?

We're going to look today at several ways of pushing back on (P1). Mogensen (2019) disputes it for two reasons.

Reason 1: Anti- and partially-aggregative moral views reject (P1): in deaths for headaches, the axiological stakes could be arbitrarily high, but we should still prevent deaths.

Reason 2: The Non-Identity Problem means our actions affecting the future also affect the identities of future people. On some views, we don't have requiring moral reason to make future generations better off, because we would not be making any particular person better off.

Unruh (forthcoming) disputes it for two further reasons:

Reason 3: We have prerogatives which render it permissible to focus on the present: we are protected from the normative imposition of being required to devote our lives to making the world in general (or the far future in particular) better.

Reason 4: We have duties to undo harms we have caused, which are much more stringent than our duties to prevent harms we could not be causing.

Question: Which of these approaches seem promising at first sight?

Let's look further at Reason 1. There are certainly anti- and partially-aggregative moral views which would reject (P1). So, this is a good rebuttal to the Stakes Sensitivity Argument if both of the following are true:

- (i) It's reasonable to accept a (non-axiological) anti- or partially-aggregative moral view.
- (ii) The Stakes Sensitivity Argument can't easily be re-constructed to allow for this possibility.

Question: What do you think about (i) and (ii)?

Similarly for Reason 2: it's a good rebuttal if

- (i) It's reasonable to accept a view on which we have no requiring reason to benefit future generations because this benefits no individual.

(ii) The Stakes Sensitivity Argument can't easily be re-construed to allow for this possibility.

Question: What do you think about (i) and (ii)?

Now let's look at Reason 3. It's certainly plausible that we have prerogatives to do as we please. But this is already mentioned in (P1), which requires that the personal prerogatives are "comparatively minor". Unruh argues that we should still reject this premise because:

the duty of beneficence is not the basic framework, within which constraints and prerogatives operate. Rather, it is the other way around: constraints and prerogatives, deriving from a fundamental concern with the separateness and special status of persons, provide a moral framework within which duties of beneficence are situated.

(Unruh forthcoming, p. 9)

I'm not sure I understand this fully, but here's a stab at it. Perhaps the point is that we start with the principle that we are generally permitted to do as we please (so long as we don't harm others), and there are only occasional exceptions to this general rule. If the stakes are very high all the time, as longtermists think, this just means that these high stakes won't be sufficient, by themselves, to make it obligatory to prioritise the future: otherwise, we would *always* have to prioritise the future, which would be an unacceptable normative imposition on us.

Question: Is this the right way of understanding Unruh's view? Are there alternatives?

Unruh gives some examples to flesh out the difference between this way of understanding duties of beneficence and the way Greaves and MacAskill understand them:

- Oliver can give the money he won in the lottery to his neighbourhood amateur theatre, or to an effective charity that distributes malaria bednets.
- Tommy can work as a car mechanic and not donate a significant portion of his earnings, or Tommy can work as a CEO and donate a significant portion of his earnings to charity.
- A country can fund programmes that reduce bureaucracy, improve the lighting in office buildings, build nicer ski slopes, and fund private saunas – or the country can use the money to fund public health programmes abroad.

(Unruh forthcoming, p. 10)

Unruh suggests that in all three cases, on plausible views about duties of beneficence, it is still permissible to do the non-optimific thing, and that these judgements are intuitively plausible. I wonder whether this is true though, especially when we scale up the stakes.

Question: What do you think? Are these judgements plausible?

Now let's think about Reason 4. Unruh suggests that we might be obligated to help the future in a suboptimal way, because we might have much stronger reasons to help the future by undoing harms than by preventing harms. For example, we might have stronger reasons to mitigate the effects of climate change than to prevent asteroids hitting earth within the next century.

Question: Is it plausible that we have **much** stronger reasons to undo harms than to prevent them?

Question: Do most longtermist interventions involve preventing harms that might have happened anyway, or undoing harms that the current generation might cause?

We might also add another possibility not explicitly considered by Unruh: assuming that we (citizens of affluent countries) currently collectively harm the global poor, we might have stronger reasons to mitigate those harms than to prevent harms to future people, even if mitigation is suboptimal (by far).

Question: Does this lead to a plausible case for prioritising global development over longtermist interventions?