

Neutrality about creating good lives: No panacea for longtermism

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1 Introduction

For Longtermism

Longtermism - General (LG). Moral assessment and decision-making should be done with a long time horizon in view: even very distant future consequences of choice options must be accounted for in the moral ranking of these options.

- Greaves & MacAskill (2021); MacAskill (2022) *What We Owe the Future*.
- When LG is coupled with standard normative and empirical commitments, we get conclusions counter to ordinary practice.
- Headline conclusions or calls to action: reduce risk, even very marginally, of ‘futuristic’ threats.

Against Longtermism

‘But if neutrality is right, the longtermist’s mathematics rest on a mistake: the extra lives don’t make the world a better place, all by themselves. Our ethical equations are not swamped by small risks of extinction. And while we may be doing much less than we should to address the risk of a lethal pandemic, value lock-in, or nuclear war, the truth is much closer to common sense than MacAskill would have us believe. We should care about making the lives of those who will exist better, or about the fate of those who will be worse off, not about the number of good lives there will be.’
(Keiran Setiya 2022 in *Boston Review*)

- cf. Narveson’s Dictum (1973): ‘morality favours making people happy, but is neutral about making happy people’.
- The longtermists go wrong in their departure from ‘neutrality’.

My Project

- There is no idiosyncratic moral premise that longtermists’ conclusions precariously rest on.
- ‘Neutrality’ (endorsed also by Rabinowicz, Frick, Nebel) has its own Longtermism implications.
- Thus I extend longtermists’ moral robustness analysis to ‘differing population size’ comparisons.

2 Longtermism and its Discontents

Longtermism Maxims

It is well known that *Totalist* moral theories entail:

Repugnant Conclusion (RC). For any population of people living good lives, there is some (much larger) population of people with lives barely worth living that is, all else being equal, morally better.

Something similar can be expressed as follows (with implicit reference to a status quo population, and assuming a scaling whereby zero welfare stands for a life that is neither good nor bad for the person):

Longtermism Additional Lives (LAL). Any losses to ‘present’ (already existing) people can be *made good* by the addition of some number of lives with positive welfare (even very low positive welfare, barely above zero).

To loosen the *Totalist* grip, Longtermists also consider ‘fixed population’ comparisons (which might be governed by the following, more or less broad church, maxim):

Longtermism Fixed Lives (LFL). Significant (or at least trivial) losses in welfare for people nearby in time can be *made good* by sufficiently high gains in welfare for people further away in time (at least if their starting welfare is very low by absolute and/or relative standards).

From Maxims to Ordinary Choices

- Longtermists say these maxims are applicable to ordinary choice problems.
- But the idea that we ordinarily face ‘LAL-choices’ and even ‘LFL-choices’ is counter to common thought and practice.
- Is that reason to question the maxims? → In the case of LFL, it would be akin to questioning Singer’s ‘pond’ maxim.
- I will argue (in what follows) that in the case of LAL too, this is not a convincing strategy, at least if one wants to avoid parochialism.
- As per Singer’s calls for individuals to act to reduce global poverty, the real focus here should be the empirical (and perhaps the decision theoretic) assumptions.

3 The Promise of Neutrality

Making Sense of Neutrality

It is not hard to see why the following is thought an effective counter to LAL and the longtermists’ choice conclusions:

The Intuition of Neutrality. ‘A world that contains an extra person is neither better nor worse than a world that does not contain her, but is the same in other respects.’
Broome (2005, 401)

More precisely, the thought is that there is some range of welfare—the *neutral range*—such that adding an extra person whose welfare falls within that range does not make the world better or worse in and of itself.

- If the lower bound of neutral range is the value for a neutral life (conventionally, zero),
- . . . and the upper bound of neutral range is infinite . . .
- We capture both ‘The Procreation Asymmetry’ and ‘The Intuition of Neutrality’ (collectively ‘Neutrality’)
- Frick (2020) and Nebel (2019) tell a compelling story about ‘conditional’ or ‘bearer-regarding’ reasons for conferring welfare on people.
- Rabinowicz (e.g., 2009) seems to defend something more ‘moderate’: a ‘neutral-range’ version of Totalism.

The Broader Axiology of Neutrality

Consider the following population outcomes, A , B , and C :

$$A = (2, 3, -)$$

$$B = (2, 3, 4)$$

$$C = (2, 3, 5)$$

All agree with Broome that Neutrality must mean ‘incommensurate in value’ (\approx). For our example, Neutrality gives us: $A \approx B$ and $A \approx C$. That is consistent with $C > B$.

Broome’s further crucial point is that Neutrality is thus ‘greedy’. It allows good and bad changes to the original population to be *offset* by the addition of ‘neutral lives’. Consider (from Rabinowicz 2009):

$$D = (3, 4, -)$$

$$E = (3, 4, 1)$$

$$F = (3, 3, 3)$$

$$G = (3, 3, -)$$

Neutrality gives us $D \approx E$ and $F \approx G$. But plausibly $F > E$, since F has greater equality, and also greater total welfare. But since E is not worse than D , F cannot be worse than D . The move from D to F shows that Neutrality about added lives can ‘swallow up’ the original people’s suffering, neutralising it, and making the change overall not bad.

Now consider G and E . Since F is not better than G , and F is itself better than E , then E cannot be better than G . The move from G to E shows that Neutrality about added lives can ‘swallow up’ the original people’s gains, neutralising it, and making the change overall not good.

4 Greedy Neutrality and Longtermism

Does Neutrality retain any advantages when we look to the long-term? Broome says emphatically ‘no’!

‘The change in population caused by global warming will probably be large, whichever direction it goes in. Therefore, if this change is neutral, I think we have to expect its neutrality to swallow up the bad effects of global warming. We shall be forced to conclude that global warming is probably not bad, but neutral.’

Broome (2005, 410)

- But Broome seems to assume a thoroughly ‘person-affecting’ version of Neutrality.

- Other approaches to same-size population comparisons can be used (cf. Frick 2020).
- For instance, Neutrality combined with totalist same-size population comparisons is *less* greedy.
- Here's a general recipe for greediness: Take a starting population outcome. Add lives at the cusp of the neutral range. Any same-sized population outcome that is better than this, perhaps with significant drops in welfare for the original population, will also be incommensurable with the starting population outcome.

The following assumes a totalist approach to fixed-size population outcome comparisons (where the losses to the present can be balanced by gains above the neutral-range minimum for those added):

Longtermism Additional Lives Any Offset (LALAO). Any losses of welfare to 'present' (already existing) people can be offset by some number of extra lives with welfare in the neutral range (even very low welfare in this range).

- Just like LAL, LALAO is not always applicable to real choice problems (e.g., climate change).

5 Greedy Neutrality and Anti-Longtermism

The Longtermism maxims trade on Neutrality 'swallowing up' welfare *losses* to the original population. But what about the 'swallowing up' of welfare *gains*?

This is pertinent to Setiya's key criticism of LAL, which he thinks crucial to Longtermism:

'Most of us agree that (1) world peace is better than (2) the death of 99 percent of the world's population, which is better in turn than (3) human extinction. But how much better? Where many would see a greater gap between (1) and (2) than between (2) and (3), the longtermist disagrees. The gap between (1) and (2) is a temporary loss of population from which we will (or at least may) bounce back; the gap between (2) and (3) is trillions upon trillions of people who would otherwise have been born.' Setiya (2022)

Under Neutrality:

- There will indeed not be a large gap between (2) and (3). These outcomes will plausibly be incommensurable.
- BUT (1) and (3) are also plausibly incommensurable: and yet the shift from (3) to (1) is a huge gain for the starting population and moreover the added persons have excellent lives.

This implication of the greediness of Neutrality can be expressed in terms of an Anti-Longtermism maxim. To keep thing simple, let's couple Neutrality with a totalist approach to fixed-size population comparisons. We get:

Anti-Longtermism Additional Lives Any Offset (ALALAO). Any gains in welfare to 'present' (already existing) people can be offset by some number of extra lives with welfare in the neutral range (even very high welfare in this range).

Arguably, it is the Anti-Longtermism that is most disturbing about Neutrality.

6 Concluding Remarks

- Neutrality does not shield us from Longtermism; but some version may yet be defended.
- The Longtermism movement is best seen as an extension of Singer's project: The novelty lies not in the moral principle (LAL), but in the claim that we regularly flout it in our ordinary choices.
- This issue — whether extreme maxims are applicable to our ordinary choice problems — should be the focus of our attention.