

The Far Future Argument for Confronting Catastrophic Threats to Humanity: Practical Significance and Alternatives

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Background: The Far Future Argument

Certain major global catastrophes could cause permanent harm to humanity. A large body of scholarship makes a moral argument for confronting the threat of these catastrophes based on a concern for far future generations. The far future can be defined as anything beyond the next several millennia, including millions or billions of years from now, or even longer. Given the moral principle of caring about everyone equally, including people in the far future, confronting threats of permanent harm should be a major priority. The paper calls this *the far future argument*.

Practical Significance

The far future argument says we should try to confront catastrophic threats in order to benefit far future generations. Unfortunately, many people do not care much about far future generations and thus do not follow the far future argument. Fortunately, the practical task of confronting the threats does not always require caring about the far future. *This paper assesses the practical significance of the far future argument by examining the extent to which confronting catastrophic threats to humanity requires caring about the far future.* The paper surveys a range of threats according to several criteria.

Catastrophe Timing

If a catastrophe could occur in the near future, then confronting it will have near future benefits. The sooner the catastrophe could occur, the easier it may be to convince people to confront it. Most types of major global catastrophes could occur in either the near or far future, and some could only occur in the near future. This makes for almost all of the total risk.

Co-Benefits And Mainstreaming

Co-benefits are other benefits of some action besides the target goal. Actions with the goal of confronting catastrophic threats can have other significant benefits. These other benefits can get people to confront the threats even if they don't care about the threats, let alone about the far future. *Mainstreaming* means fitting actions into established goals and procedures. Actions to confront the threats can be mainstreamed into a range of established goals and procedures. This makes it easier for people to take the actions. *Actions with large co-benefits that are well mainstreamed will often be the easiest actions to take; these make for a good starting point for confronting the threats.* However, some actions require large sacrifice, such that the only people who will take the actions are those who support the far future argument.

Far Future As Inspiration

Some people do support the far future argument, and more people can be inspired to do so. The far future can provide analytical inspiration, based on the quantitative significance of far future generations, as well as emotional inspiration, based on the beautiful future that could occur as long as no major catastrophe ruins it forever.