

# Longtermism: Ethics and the Future

Munich Center for Mathematical Philosophy, LMU—Summer 2022

---

Ludwigstr. 31, Room 021  
Thursdays 2:00–4:00 c.t. (so, actually 2:15–3:45)

Dr. William (Bill) D’Alessandro  
[d.william@lmu.de](mailto:d.william@lmu.de)

**Office Hours:** By appointment. Contact me to set up a time.

**Course Description:** Longtermism is the view that how things go in the distant future matters morally, and moreover that we have a pressing responsibility to see that they go well. Figuring out how to think about possible far-future scenarios raises not just moral questions, but scientific, mathematical and metaphysical ones—about things like population ethics, the non-identity problem, utilitarianism with infinitely many agents, various possible existential risks and how to quantify and respond to them, future discounting, the extent of our abilities to predict the far future, and so on. This course will explore such issues, while at the same time asking whether longtermism is a compelling ethical view.

**Readings:** The required readings, in the form of book chapters and journal articles, will be posted on Google Drive.

**Longtermism @ LMU Talks:** EA Funds is generously underwriting a series of in-person talks on longtermism at LMU in tandem with our course this semester. Please come to these if you can! The schedule at the end of the syllabus has details on the talks planned so far; there will probably be others added soon, and I’ll announce these in due course.

**Presentations:** Although not graded or required, I strongly encourage student presentations on assigned readings. It’s a good experience and will definitely help you understand the material more deeply, which could be helpful preparation for a term paper. To sign up for a presentation, talk to me.

## Credit Points and Requirements

In order to receive credit for the course, you have to **register for the course exam** and **write a term paper** related to our topics. Exam registration takes place between June 21 and July 2, 2022.

The choice of paper subject is up to you. If you’re unsure whether your preferred topic is acceptable or just want to discuss ideas, feel free to ask me.

### Requirements for an MA term paper

**For a grade in the range 1,0-1,3:** You clearly articulate a question and main claim, both presented in the introduction. You develop an independent and original argument supporting your main claim. (Reconstructing and commenting on other authors’ arguments isn’t enough—a good philosophy paper is more than a book report!) Your argument should take up more than 50% of the term paper. The argumentative structure of the term paper is made explicit (by an overview in the introduction, and by guidance in the body of the paper). You anticipate and discuss possible objections to your own arguments. Other authors’ ideas are presented concisely and accurately. You show familiarity with the relevant literature, by referring to at least 8 publications that aren’t required readings for the course (but “further readings” can count toward the total).

### Requirements for a BA term paper

**For a grade in the range 1,0-1,3:** You clearly articulate a question and main claim, both presented in the introduction. You develop an argument supporting your main claim, although the expectations aren’t as high as in the case of MA papers. But the more space you devote to an independent and

original argument supporting your main claim, the better. The argumentative structure of the term paper is made explicit (by an overview in the introduction, and by guidance in the body of the paper). Other authors' ideas are presented accurately. You show familiarity with the relevant literature, by referring to at least 4 publications that aren't required readings for the course (but "further readings" can count toward the total).

#### Layout instructions

- BA term papers: 10-12 pages (~3000 words), not including bibliography
- MA term papers 15-20 pages (~6000 words), not including bibliography
- 12 pt. Times New Roman, 1,5 spacing, margins 3 cm left and right

Window for exam registration (required to write a term paper and get credit for the course):

June 21–July 2, 2022

Deadline for submission: September 30, 2022

#### Tentative schedule

##### **Week 1—Introduction**

Nick Bostrom, "Astronomical waste"

Nick Beckstead, "The case for shaping the far future"

- Recommended readings:  
Andreas Mogensen, "[Moral demands and the far future](#)"  
Will MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future* (e.g. [Chapter 1, "The Case for Longtermism"](#))  
Hilary Greaves and Will MacAskill, "[The case for strong longtermism](#)"  
Holden Karnofsky, "[The 'most important century' series](#)"

##### **Week 2—Future people**

Derek Parfit, "The non-identity problem" (from *Reasons and Persons*)

Elizabeth Harman, "Can we harm and benefit in creating?"

- Recommended readings:  
Andre Santos Campos, "[Intergenerational justice today](#)"  
David Boonin, *The Non-Identity Problem and the Ethics of Future People*  
Fiona Woollard, "[Have we solved the non-identity problem?](#)"

**Longtermism @ LMU talk:** Tatjana Višak (Mannheim), May 13, 4:00 pm—"Two Types of Longtermism" (Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, Room 007)

##### **Week 3—Population axiology**

Derek Parfit, "The repugnant conclusion", "The absurd conclusion", "The mere addition paradox" (from *Reasons and Persons*)

Hilary Greaves, "Population axiology"

- Recommended reading:  
Michael Huemer, "[In defence of repugnance](#)"  
Thomas Hurka, "[Value and population size](#)"  
Melinda Roberts, "[An asymmetry in the ethics of procreation](#)"  
Lukas Gloor, "[Population ethics without axiology: a framework](#)"

## Week 4—Why care about existential risks?

Elizabeth Finneron-Burns, “What’s wrong with human extinction?”

- Recommended readings:  
Johann Frick, [“On the survival of humanity”](#)  
Franco Palazzi, [“Would human extinction be morally wrong?”](#)  
Patrick Kaczmarek and Simon Beard, [“Human extinction and our obligations to the past”](#)

**Longtermism @ LMU talk:** Teru Thomas (Oxford, Global Priorities Institute), June 7, 4:00 pm—  
“The Multiverse and the Veil: Population Ethics Under Uncertainty”

## Week 5—AI and longtermism

Nick Bostrom, “Is the default outcome doom?”, “The control problem” (from *Superintelligence*)

- Recommended readings:  
Ajeya Cotra, [“Two-year update on my personal AI timelines”](#)  
Ajeya Cotra, [“Without specific countermeasures, the easiest path to transformative AI likely leads to AI takeover”](#)  
Vincent Müller and Michael Cannon, [“Existential risk from AI and orthogonality: Can we have it both ways?”](#)  
Scott Alexander, [“Updated look at long-term AI risks”](#) (and related posts)  
Stuart Russell, [Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control](#)

**Longtermism @ LMU talk:** Richard Pettigrew (Bristol), June 23, 1:00 pm—“Should Longtermism Recommend Hastening Human Extinction?”

## Week 6— How to value the future

John Broome, “Discounting the future”

- Recommended readings:  
Tyler Cowen and Derek Parfit, [“Against the social discount rate”](#)  
Andreas Mogensen, [“The only ethical argument for positive  \$\delta\$ ? Partiality and pure time preference”](#)  
Geoffrey Brennan, [“Discounting the future, yet again”](#)  
Kian Mintz-Woo, [“A philosopher’s guide to discounting”](#)

## Week 7— The problem of cluelessness

Christian Tarsney, “The epistemic challenge to longtermism”

- Recommended readings:  
James Lenman, [“Consequentialism and cluelessness”](#)  
Hilary Greaves, [“Cluelessness”](#)  
Joanna Burch-Brown, [“Clues for consequentialists”](#)  
Andreas Mogensen, [“Maximal cluelessness”](#)

## Week 8— Future harms, future benefits and the harm/benefit asymmetry

Andreas Mogensen and Will MacAskill, “The paralysis argument”

- Recommended readings:  
Hayden Wilkinson, [“Chaos, ad infinitum”](#)  
Charlotte Unruh, [“Doing and allowing good”](#)  
David Alm, [“Deontological restrictions and the good/bad asymmetry”](#)

**Longtermism @ LMU talk:** Andreas Mogensen (Oxford, Global Priorities Institute), July 22, 4:00 pm—“Respect for Others’ Risk-Attitudes and the Long-Run Future”

## Week 9—If longtermism is true, then what?

Will MacAskill, “What to do” (from *What We Owe the Future*)

- Recommended readings:  
H. Orri Stefansson, [“Should I offset or should I do more good?”](#)  
Simon Knutsson, [“The world destruction argument”](#)  
Evan G. Williams, [“The possibility of an ongoing moral catastrophe”](#)  
David Althaus and Lukas Gloor, [“Reducing the risks of astronomical suffering: a neglected priority”](#)  
Eli Lifland, [“My take on What We Owe the Future”](#)  
80,000 Hours, [“Our current list of the most important world problems”](#)

**Longtermism @ LMU talk:** Charlotte Unruh (Technical University of Munich), July 27, 4:00 pm—“Doing Harm, Doing Good, and Future Generations”

## Week 9—Problems and responses

Scott Alexander, “‘Long-termism’ vs. ‘existential risk’”

Phil Torres, “The case against longtermism”

- Recommended readings:  
Avital Balwit, [“Response to recent criticisms of longtermism”](#) (a reply to Torres)  
ColdButtonIssues, [“The base rate of longtermism is bad”](#)  
Dylan Balfour, [“Pascal’s mugger strikes again”](#)  
Joe Horton, [“The all or nothing problem”](#)