

What is 'longtermism' and what does it have to do with our future?

Longtermism has the potential to reshape how we prioritise resources and policies, but the movement's association with figures such as Elon Musk and FTX's Sam Bankman-Fried makes it controversial, says NUS Centre for Biomedical Ethics' G Owen Schaefer.

By G Owen Schaefer

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SINGAPORE: When promoting the Singapore Green Plan in 2021, Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Grace Fu pledged “to future generations of Singaporeans that there will always be a Singapore, come 30, 50 or even a hundred years from now.”

A hundred years sounds like a lot, but we can go farther. What about, say, thousands or even millions of years hence? That sort of concern for well-being on a massive timescale may seem to have lost the plot, but it is the focus of an emerging movement worth our attention called “longtermism”.

Longtermism has the potential to reshape how we prioritise resources and policies. However, the movement is off to a bumpy start due to its association with controversial big tech figures. Now the question is, can longtermism itself last the long-term – and, more importantly, should it?

WHAT IS LONGTERMISM?

Longtermism is a sub-strand of a broader effective altruism movement to make philanthropic efforts as effective and impactful as possible. It is premised on the intuitive idea that people's well-being matters, no matter when they live – now or thousands of years in the future



So, according to longtermism we need to do more to combat climate change and prevent emergence of devastating diseases that might plague mankind for generations. More speculatively, it also means we need to invest more in things like space exploration and colonisation, to minimise the risk of human extinction and hedge against planetary-level disasters that may strike over timelines of hundreds of years.

The longtermist movement got its biggest boost from the recent publication of *What We Owe the Future*, by Oxford don William MacAskill. The bookish philosopher lays out an appealing vision of caring for generations far in the future, and his arguments captured substantial media attention: He was featured in articles in *Time*, *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, and interviewed on *The Daily Show*.

Meanwhile, tech luminaries were lining up support, with Elon Musk calling MacAskill's book a "close match" with his philosophy. One of MacAskill's early achievements was to convince a young, aspiring student to avoid a career in philanthropy in order to "earn to give", a controversial career of maximising income then giving most of it away. The young man went on to become a billionaire and pledge his money to effective altruist pursuits, including funding the most prominent longtermist charity.



That young man's name? Sam Bankman-Fried. That's right, the very same Bankman-Fried who was arrested on Dec 12 and charged with multiple crimes including fraud amidst the recent collapse of his crypto exchange FTX.

ELITE CAPTURE?

Bankman-Fried bankrolled the FTX Future Fund, a charitable organisation designed to prioritise projects that would promote the interests of people in the very far future

Yet pledged money turned out to be ephemeral, and when Bankman-Fried's fortune evaporated, the Fund found itself struggling to make good on existing grants. Meanwhile, in one telling interview on US news site Vox, Bankman-Fried suggested his talk about ethics and the greater good were mostly for show

In response, MacAskill resigned from the FTX Future Fund's board of advisors, taking to Twitter to personally express regret over trusting Bankman-Fried and insist we shouldn't tolerate any fraud as a means to support the greater good of funding effective altruist projects. The damage to the reputation of longtermism, and the effective altruism more broadly, is however undeniable.



Longtermism's critics have previously expressed suspicion over the movement's attraction to billionaires like Musk and Bankman-Fried. They object that (among other problems) longtermism is a convenient way for tech bros to ignore actual human plight and injustice here and now (some of which they had a hand in creating), in order to fund a vision where human salvation will come from tech innovation that staves off existential risk.

Another illustration of the cosy relationship between the wider effective altruism movement and tech billionaires: According to publicly released texts, it was MacAskill who linked up Bankman-Fried with Musk in a bid to get the latter to invest a huge stake in Twitter and “making it better for the world”. Perhaps fortunately for Musk, the plan for Bankman-Fried to buy in to the Twitter deal never went through.

Other critiques of longtermism are now becoming more salient. For example, effective altruism was founded on clear-eyed, objectively evaluable philanthropy – but it is impossible to test interventions effects across generations.

Any such effects will have huge amounts of uncertainty, to the point where we only have rough guesstimates of our impact thousands of years in the future. And redirection of resources away from clear and present dangers towards speculative future generations could cause actual harm, if longtermist’s calculations end up being misguided.

TOWARDS MIXED-TERMISM

Where to go from here? It is too soon to dismiss longtermism and its potential to bring about real positive change. Perhaps its reputation can still be salvaged, with enough reforms to funding structures and philosophical outlook.

But I would suggest, the most promising route forward is a fundamental shift in the movement’s direction – away from philosophical emphasis on exclusively the far future, and towards a more grounded and pragmatic “mixed-term” approach.

Here's what I mean: Instead of longtermism’s emphasis that future generations’ well-being should be a key priority, mixed-termism would prioritise interventions that promote both the interests of individuals here and now, and in the far future.

In practice, mixed-termism overlaps with the sorts of domains MacAskill emphasises in his book and FTX Future Fund focused on prior to its collapse: Climate change, pandemic preparedness, even AI safety.

But it pre-empts concerns that this is all a Trojan Horse to start redirecting substantial funds to out-of-this-world ideas like space colonisation once enough people are converted to longtermism. Because space colonisation exclusively benefits far-future generations, it would not be a candidate for funding under mixed-termism

Mixed-termism sidesteps several other flaws with longtermism too, such as the uncertainty problem: To the extent that existing (or near-future) individuals must benefit from mixed-term interventions, we can directly measure output and impact on the near-term and ground resource allocation accordingly. And it doesn't let billionaires off the hook from helping people in need today.

To be sure, mixed-termism would suggest non-trivial changes to current funding priorities. If climate change and pandemic preparedness are to get more attention, by definition other problems that do not have substantial long-term ramifications would get less. This might mean redirection of funding from, say, poverty reduction, pensions, or chronic disease research - or, perhaps more palatably, things like military spending

Still, tough trade-offs are inevitable in policymaking. Singapore's Green Plan similarly requires funding that could be spent on other, also worthy causes. Sensible policy-making means balancing competing interests and making determinations of which projects require more resources than others.

A mixed-term approach aims to strike the right such balance, by taking seriously our obligations to future generations, while ensuring we do not at the same time forget the interests of the present ones.

G Owen Schaefer is Assistant Professor at the Centre for Biomedical Ethics at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore.

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