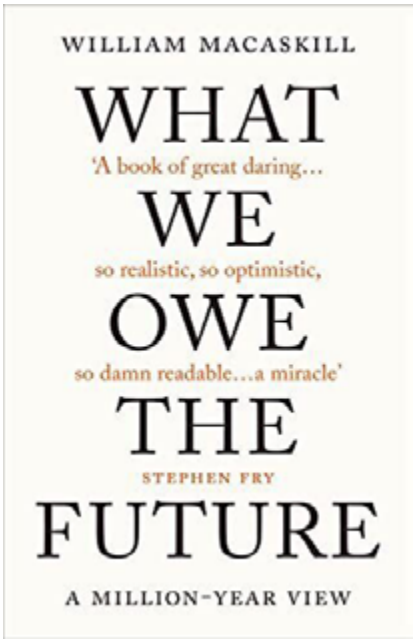
The Value of the Future: An Open Conversation

Gabriel Martino



What We Owe the Future: A Million-Year View by William MacAskill, a Visiting Fulbright Scholar to Princeton in 2014.

What We Owe the Future is a compelling and informed advocacy of "longtermism." Developing the simple premise that future generations matter, the book explores arguments to show the importance of the present moment in relation to the future or, as the author writes in the Preface, "the view that positively impacting the long term is a key moral priority of our time."

William MacAskill is the founder of the "Effective Altruism" movement, which searches for the most efficient ways to help others, and currently a Senior Research Associate at the Global Priorities Institute of the University of Oxford. In *What We Owe the Future*, his latest book, he states early on one of his main concerns: "technological development is creating new threats and opportunities for humanity, putting the lives of future generations on the line" (5). And he considers that "we can increase the chance of a wonderful future by improving the values that guide society and by carefully navigating the development of AI" (6). In this first section the author also introduces three metaphors used frequently in the book: humanity as an imprudent teenager, history as a molten glass, and the path towards long-term impact as a risky expedition into uncharted terrain. The metaphor of molten glass is used to explain that the present moment is extremely unusual compared both to the past and to the future, since the values that guide civilization are still malleable and can be changed. In order to assess the new states of affairs that

could be brought about, MacAskill proposes a framework composed by three factors: significance, persistence and contingency. This framework is valuable, says the author, because the product of these factors can help us to evaluate comparatively alternative longterm effects.

The second part of the volume examines ways in which civilization's average value can be affected by a change in its trajectory that improves the quality of life of future people. Another key theme examined in this section is moral values, but the problem that preoccupies the author is the possibility that at a certain point in time global dominant values could get "locked in" by Artificial Intelligence and persist for an extremely long time. MacAskill considers that we are still in a period of plasticity during which moral norms should be improved since, in a few centuries —as cooled down molten glass— AI could take over after incorporating the value system dominant at that time, preventing it from changing. But an interesting lock-in paradox is also suggested by the author, which involves "locking in" institutions and ideas that can prevent a more thoroughgoing lock-in of values.

Part three discusses several, critical doomsday scenarios, such as extinction caused by an asteroid impact, engineered pathogens, a great-power war, or the collapse of civilization. The author also examines the possibility of avoiding technological stagnation as a means of diminishing the risks entailed by these scenarios. The fourth part re-addresses the issues of significance and persistence, concluding that increasing the quality of life by trajectory changes and ensuring survival have to be considered with equal priority.

The last part of the book suggests a series of practical steps to be followed. MacAskill's first step involves the application of the significance, persistence, and contingency framework in order to decide which problem one should work on. The second step entails direct action; MacAskill argues that donating money to nonprofit organizations is one of the best ways to work on vital problematics. But MacAskill believes that the most important decision a person can make in terms of a lifetime impact is the choice of her or his career. The author, in fact, is the co-founder of 80,000 Hours, a nonprofit that provides free research and support to help people use their career to tackle the world's most pressing problems. Doing good collectively is also contemplated in MacAskill's plan, of which its last ingredient is building a movement and spreading the word of longtermism —or "going meta"—as another significant way of caring about future generations. MacAskill writes that his "aim with this book is to stimulate further work in this area and not to be definitive in any conclusions about what we should do. But the future is so important that we've got to at least try to figure out how to steer it in a positive direction" (21-22).

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MacAskill's book is, indeed, a richly creative, heavily informed and enthusiastically persuasive defense of longtermism. It is also a call to action that includes a step-by-step program. I believe that if more readers of the book, and culturally diverse ones, engage in the conversation about what we owe the future, the openness of values could be better guaranteed for the generations to come.

William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future: A Million-Year View.* New York: Basic Books, 343 pp. $15.99 pb.

Biography

Gabriel Martino holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Buenos Aires and was a Visiting Fulbright Scholar to Rutgers University in 2021 where he researched ancient Indian philosophy. He teaches Sanskrit, Greek, and ancient philosophy at Argentinean universities and is an associate researcher of the CONICET (the government agency that fosters the development of science and technology in Argentina) and of the Institute of Philosophy and Technology of Athens, Greece. He has authored numerous papers and two books on Indian and Greek philosophy. He can be reached at gabriel.filosofia@hotmail.com