



Philosophy Q1

What moral obligations do we owe to living persons that we do not owe to future persons? What are the implications of your answer for policy-making?

Key Issues and Questions to Address

1. Define key terms precisely:

Distinguish between types of "future persons" (near vs. distant, identifiable vs. non-identifiable)

Clarify what constitutes a "moral obligation" in your framework

Specify what "owing" obligations means in temporal context

Consider Lockean concepts of natural rights and property limitations

2. Consider different ethical frameworks:

Consequentialist perspectives may treat future/present persons equally in principle

Deontological approaches may differentiate duties to actual versus potential persons

Virtue ethics emphasizes relationships and communities existing in the present



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Contractarian theories vary in whether they include future persons in original agreement

Natural law theories (including Locke's) suggest basic constraints on resource use across time

Core Philosophical Issues

1. Address the non-identity problem:

Future people's identities depend on our present actions

Can we harm people whose existence depends on the allegedly harmful act?

Does identifiability affect strength of moral obligation?

2. Consider temporal discounting:

Should future benefits/harms count less than present ones?

Is psychological discounting of future morally justified?

How should uncertainty about future affect our obligations?

3. Examine potential grounds for differential treatment:



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Actuality vs. potentiality: Present persons actually exist; future persons are potential

Identifiability: We can identify present persons but not specific future individuals

Causal relationships: We directly affect contemporaries but indirectly affect future

Special relationships: We have existing relationships with contemporaries

Uncertainty: We know more about present than future needs

Lockean proviso: Consider implications of "enough and as good" requirement

4. Consider asymmetries in obligations:

Negative duties (non-harm) may extend more fully to future persons

Positive duties (beneficence) may be stronger toward contemporaries

Emergency duties may prioritize present suffering over future possibilities

Basic needs may have priority over luxury interests across time



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Resource preservation duties based on Lockean limitations on appropriation

Policy Implications

1. Examine concrete policy areas:

Climate change: How much should present generations sacrifice for future climate stability?

Public debt: How should we balance present spending against future burdens?

Resource conservation: What obligations exist to preserve non-renewable resources?

Infrastructure: How should we weigh immediate costs against future benefits?

Research priorities: How much should we invest in preventing future catastrophic risks?

Institutional design: How can we better represent future interests in present decisions?

Property rights: How should Lockean limitations affect contemporary resource policies?

2. Address practical constraints:

Psychological limitations in valuing distant future



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Democratic systems' focus on present voters

Market failures in accounting for long-term externalities

Institutional challenges in representing future interests

3. Develop a nuanced position that:

Acknowledges valid points from multiple perspectives

Distinguishes between different types of obligations

Considers different timeframes (near vs. distant future)

Balances theoretical ideals with practical feasibility

Incorporates Lockean natural law constraints on resource appropriation

4. Test your position against concrete cases:

Climate change mitigation vs. present poverty alleviation



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Present medical care vs. medical research for future benefit

Conservation of resources vs. present consumption needs

Nuclear waste disposal with very long-term consequences

Property accumulation versus future access to natural resources

