



John Locke Global Essay Prize 2025 Prompts Breakdown
Philosophy Category - Recommended Readings



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?

Recommended Readings

Classical and Enlightenment Perspectives

1. Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics"

Focuses on virtue within immediate communities and relationships

Emphasizes obligations based on proximity and existing relationships

Suggests stronger obligations to contemporaries through virtue of justice in actual communities

2. John Locke's "Second Treatise of Government"

Introduces the "Lockean proviso" regarding property acquisition: leave "enough and as good" for others

Establishes intergenerational constraints on resource appropriation

Argues natural law requires consideration of future persons' access to resources

Suggests present use must not deprive future generations of life necessities

Property rights are legitimate only if they preserve opportunities for future persons

3. John Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"

Explores personal identity through time and consciousness

Provides framework for thinking about personhood across temporal distances

Identity considerations may affect how we conceptualize obligations to future persons

Suggests rationality as key to moral status, applicable across temporal locations



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4. John Locke's "Some Thoughts Concerning Education"

Emphasizes present obligations to children for future flourishing

Connects current actions to welfare of identifiable future persons

Suggests stronger obligations to near-future identifiable individuals

Educational responsibilities demonstrate asymmetry in temporal moral relations

5. David Hume's "A Treatise of Human Nature"

Argues moral sentiments are naturally stronger toward those proximate in time and space

Our sympathy diminishes with temporal distance

Presents psychological rather than normative justification for prioritizing present persons

6. Immanuel Kant's "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals"

Universal moral principles apply regardless of temporal location

All rational beings deserve equal moral consideration

Suggests no fundamental distinction between duties to present vs. future persons

7. John Stuart Mill's "Utilitarianism"

Happiness should be maximized regardless of when it occurs

Introduces possibility of discount rates on future utility

In principle, equal consideration to all persons regardless of temporal location

8. Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France"

Society as "partnership between those living, those dead, and those yet to be born"

Emphasizes intergenerational continuity and obligation

Suggests robust duties to future generations as part of social contract



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Contemporary Sources

Foundational Works on Intergenerational Ethics

1. Derek Parfit's "Reasons and Persons" (1984)

Introduces the non-identity problem: future people's identities depend on our present actions

Challenges person-affecting views of morality

Argues traditional moral theories fail to account for future persons adequately

Shows why harming "different future people" is morally problematic despite identity complications

2. John Rawls' "A Theory of Justice" (1971) and "Justice as Fairness" (2001)

Develops "just savings principle" for intergenerational justice

Original position with veil of ignorance extends to future generations

Proposes mutual disinterest can yield just treatment across generations

Acknowledges asymmetry between generations (we affect future but they cannot affect us)

3. Gregory Kavka's "The Paradox of Future Individuals" (1982)

Explores paradoxes in obligations to future generations

Examines whether we can wrong future people through reproductive choices

Suggests obligations differ based on identifiability and determinate harm

Introduces the "paradox of the beneficiary" in future person cases

4. Hans Jonas' "The Imperative of Responsibility" (1979)

Advocates new ethical framework based on technological power over future

Proposes precautionary principle for actions affecting future persons

Argues technological power creates asymmetrical responsibility to future

Suggests traditional ethics inadequate for long-term technological impacts



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Contemporary Theoretical Approaches

1. James Tully's "A Discourse on Property: John Locke and his Adversaries" (1980)

Re-examines Lockean proviso in context of intergenerational justice

Analyzes implications of Locke's property theory for obligations to future persons

Suggests Lockean natural law requires consideration of future generations

Connects historical property theories to contemporary resource questions

2. C.B. Macpherson's "The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism" (1962)

Critiques Lockean property rights from perspective of future generations

Questions whether unrestricted accumulation violates Lockean proviso

Analyzes implications of Lockean theory for intergenerational resource allocation

Suggests limitations on property rights based on future interests

3. Samuel Scheffler's "Death and the Afterlife" (2013)

Argues we implicitly value continuation of humanity after our deaths

The "afterlife conjecture": many current values depend on assumption of human future

Our concern for future generations reflects central aspects of current value systems

Challenges the view that we prioritize contemporaries on temporal grounds

4. Tim Mulgan's "Future People" (2006)

Proposes theory of "variable moral status" where future people have moral status but different rights

Develops consequentialism that distinguishes between needs and luxuries across generations

Argues we have stronger obligations regarding basic needs of future persons

Suggests different theoretical frameworks for different temporal distances



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5. David Heyd's "Genethics" (1992)

Defends "genethical" principle limiting obligations to actual identifiable people

Argues we cannot harm non-identifiable future persons

Suggests present interests can legitimately take precedence over future possibilities

Explores implications for reproductive ethics and population policies

6. Melinda Roberts' "Child Versus Childmaker" (1998)

Defends person-affecting approach while addressing non-identity problem

Distinguishes between determinate and indeterminate future persons

Argues we have obligations not to harm identifiable future individuals

Suggests different obligations based on identifiability and causal relationship

7. Simon Caney's "Justice Beyond Borders" (2005)

Develops human rights approach to intergenerational justice

Argues fundamental rights create obligations regardless of temporal location

Claims that basic rights violations are wrong regardless of when they occur

Minimizes distinctions between obligations to present vs. future persons

8. Henry Shue's "Climate Justice: Vulnerability and Protection" (2014)

Focuses on subsistence rights of future generations

Distinguishes between luxury emissions now and survival emissions later

Argues negative obligations (avoiding harm) extend fully to future persons

Suggests stronger obligations to avoid serious, irreversible harm to future persons

9. Janna Thompson's "Intergenerational Justice" (2009)

Develops contractarian approach to intergenerational obligations



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Argues obligations derive from ongoing intergenerational communities

Suggests stronger duties to near future generations than distant ones

Proposes temporal distance might justify some differences in obligations

Applied Intergenerational Ethics

1. Stephen Gardiner's "A Perfect Moral Storm" (2011)

Analyzes climate ethics as intergenerational collective action problem

Identifies "moral corruption" in discounting future interests

Argues institutional failures systematically disadvantage future persons

Suggests present bias reflects moral failure rather than justified priority

2. Peter Laslett and James Fishkin's "Justice Between Age Groups and Generations" (1992)

Applies Lockean principles to contemporary intergenerational questions

Examines how property rights affect obligations across generations

Suggests modifications to Lockean proviso for long-term justice

Connects historical theories to contemporary policy challenges

3. Elizabeth Cripps' "Climate Change and the Moral Agent" (2013)

Examines collective responsibilities toward future generations

Argues for robust obligations regarding climate action

Suggests present people have responsibilities regarding future access to resources

Addresses tensions between individual and collective responsibilities across time

4. Axel Gosseries and Lukas Meyer's "Intergenerational Justice" (2009)

Anthology covering various approaches to obligations across generations



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Surveys theoretical justifications for intergenerational duties

Explores practical implications for environmental policy, cultural preservation

Presents multiple perspectives on differential treatment across time

5. Joerg Chet Tremmel's "A Theory of Intergenerational Justice" (2009)

Develops comprehensive theory of justice between generations

Argues for preserving options, cultural heritage, and environmental resources

Suggests some asymmetry in obligations based on causal relationships

Connects theoretical approaches to concrete policy recommendations

6. Rahul Kumar's "Who Can Be Wronged?" (2003)

Examines whether future generations can be wronged by present actions

Argues contractualism can accommodate future persons' claims

Suggests identifiability does not fundamentally affect moral status

Challenges views that discount obligations to future persons

7. Brian Barry's "Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice" (1997)

Defends principle of equal opportunities across generations

Argues against temporal discounting of future interests

Suggests strong obligations to preserve options for future generations

Challenges view that we have stronger obligations to contemporaries

8. Gopal Sreenivasan's "A Hybrid Theory of Claim-Rights" (2005)

Draws on Lockean rights theory for intergenerational questions

Examines whether future persons can have claim-rights against present persons



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Analyzes implications of Lockean natural rights for future interests

Suggests modifications to rights theory for intergenerational contexts

9. Norman Daniels' "Am I My Parents' Keeper?" (1988)

Develops prudential lifespan account for justice between age cohorts

Focuses on overlapping generations rather than distant future

Suggests obligations based on our own interests extended over time

Provides framework for obligations to nearby generations

10. Martha Nussbaum's "Frontiers of Justice" (2006)

Applies capabilities approach across generations

Argues for threshold of capabilities for all persons regardless of when they live

Questions whether future persons can make present claims

Explores tensions between immediate needs and future capabilities

11. Amartya Sen's "The Idea of Justice" (2009)

Capability approach applicable across generations

Focuses on comparative rather than ideal justice

Emphasizes actual outcomes over abstract principles

Could justify focus on removing present injustices while considering future

Advanced Theoretical Perspectives

1. Thomas Nagel's "Equality and Partiality" (1991)

Explores tension between impartial and personal standpoints

Provides framework for justifying partiality to contemporaries



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Suggests temporal location might justify some difference in treatment

Examines how to balance impartial concern with personal projects

2. Simon Keller's "Partiality" (2013)

Defends ethical partiality based on special relationships

Suggests temporal location affects relationship possibilities

Argues relationships create special obligations to contemporaries

Explores tensions between impartial ethics and relationship-based duties

3. Matthew Adler's "Well-Being and Fair Distribution" (2012)

Develops prioritarian approach to intergenerational justice

Examines formal models for weighing present vs. future interests

Addresses problems with interpersonal and intertemporal comparisons

Proposes mathematical approaches to weighting welfare across time

4. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's "It's Not My Fault" (2005)

Questions whether traditional moral frameworks apply to intergenerational problems

Examines individual moral responsibility for collective, intergenerational harms

Suggests new ethical approaches for global, long-term challenges

Implies differences in obligations based on causal responsibility

5. Douglas MacLean's "The Ethics of Posterity" (1983)

Questions grounds for moral obligations to future generations

Examines whether uncertainty about future justifies present priority

Explores practical reasons for caring about distant future

Addresses psychological limitations in future-oriented ethics