at the center

Thinking about Moral Progress. This summer, as I considered what my first research project should be at The Hastings Center, I heard an instructive story—though I'm not sure what it instructs. I'm told that Dan Callahan, cofounder of the Center, said that people would often ask him why he founded a center on bioethics instead of something much more concerning, like nuclear war. After decades as an amusing anecdote, it seems like a real question again: should we drop everything to avert nuclear war?

The "longtermists" think so. In a recent flurry of books, articles, and podcasts, William MacAskill, Toby Ord, and Nick Bostrom have argued that our primary concern should be avoiding human extinction. Their argument is simple. As long we don't wipe out humanity, there will be vastly more people in the future than there are now. If each of those people has equal value to each of us, then their collective value dwarfs ours.

There are, however, multiple concerns about this approach to ethics. First, when ethicists choose our priorities based on speculative futures, rather than current evidence of harm, we increase the chance that our choices are influenced by our cultural imagination. What is the greatest threat to humanity—AI robots taking over or AI chatbots using all of Earth's energy? Either is a possible future calamity, but only the former gets attention in peer-reviewed journals. As John Michael Greer argues, people seem to prefer narratives of human strength (we outsmarted ourselves) to those of human weakness (we ran out of gas).

And, second, as Peter Singer and others have pointed out, if you put the future of humanity on one side of the scale, nothing else measures up. We should always sacrifice the present—*any* present—to avoid human extinction. This is an odd way to think about human progress—saving future humans so they too can prioritize saving future humans? When do we get to cash out and live better lives?

This worry is supposed to be alleviated by technological progress. As Ord argues, such progress generally improves everyone's well-being—average lifespans and incomes have risen over time, even among the poor. And the costs, he contends, are temporary. True, industrialization continues to destroy the environment and subjugate animals in factory farms. But, as humans make moral progress and ethical action becomes cheaper, there comes a point at which ever-richer people are willing to pay for carbon offsets and cage-free eggs. In the long-term, technology will dig itself out of any hole.

But this bust-and-boom cycle of morality is neither sustainable nor inevitable. It isn't sustainable because, as our technological power increases, so do the costs of our moral mistakes. Unless we find a way to speed up moral progress, we will fall ever farther behind our destructive potential.

And it isn't inevitable because we *can* get better at making decisions about what constitutes progress. And that's what I'm interested in working on as I start my position as a Hastings research scholar: how can we improve the *process* of developing new technologies? How can we match the pace of technological progress to the pace at which we can evaluate its contribution to human welfare? How do we create democratic and expert bodies that can keep up with new technology? And, most importantly, how can these bodies think intentionally about what constitutes human progress, beyond our species' continued survival? It is not enough to ensure our continued dominion over Earth; we have to figure out how to deserve it.

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