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Sourcebook Case 2

When in conflict, our obligations to future generations ought to be valued above our obligations to our own generation.

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Negative Case: Human Dignity

When we make decisions, we often have to choose between what will help us now and what might benefit us later. Sometimes, those choices are pretty simple. Other times, they require sacrifices, and choosing one option means giving something else up.

I think we have a responsibility to think about the future and how our decisions will affect the people who come after us. However, I don't think that means we should automatically value their needs above our own. The people living today have needs, responsibilities, and rights that matter right now.

Just because a decision might benefit future generations doesn't necessarily mean it's the right decision, especially if it comes at the expense of people's basic needs today. For these reasons, I negate today's resolution:

When in conflict, our obligations to future generations ought to be valued above our obligations to our own generation.

Definitions

First, I would like to provide some definitions to clarify the terms in this debate.

Definition 1: Obligation: "Something one is bound to do."[1] (Mirriam-Webster)

Definition 2: Future generations: "The people who will be born in future within a society."[2] (Cambridge)

Our own generation refers to the people living today.

Value: Human Dignity

My value for today is human dignity. Human dignity is the idea that every person has inherent worth and deserves to be treated with respect. A person's value doesn't depend on when they were born or what they can contribute to society.

[1] 1. Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "obligation," accessed October 15, 2026, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/obligation.
[2] Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "future generation," accessed October 15, 2026, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/future-generation

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Criterion: Protection of Fundamental Rights

My criterion is the protection of fundamental rights. The best way to uphold human dignity is to protect people's fundamental rights, including their rights to life, liberty, and security. Even when we are working toward long-term goals, we still have a responsibility to make sure our decisions don't disregard the basic rights of the people affected by them.

Contention 1: Present Needs Still Matter

We have responsibilities to people who are struggling right now, and those responsibilities shouldn't automatically become less important because future generations might benefit from a different decision.

For example, a government might have to choose between funding essential healthcare services today and investing in a long-term project that could improve healthcare in the future. While that investment could be valuable, cutting off people who need treatment now could have serious consequences.

Article 3 of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* recognizes everyone's right to "life, liberty, and security of person."[3]

This matters because the people affected by these decisions aren't just numbers in a plan. They are real people whose lives will be changed by the choices we make. We shouldn't assume that a possible future benefit is more important than a need that exists right now.

Contention 2: We Cannot Know Everything About the Future

We can make educated predictions about what future generations will need, but we can't know exactly what their lives will look like. Technology, society, and the problems people face will continue to change.

Imagine a government spending a large amount of money developing a solution to a problem it expects future generations to face. But when circumstances change or a better solution becomes available, that investment is not as useful as expected.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains that "our knowledge of the future is limited."[4] Decisions made today often depend on predictions about what future generations will need.

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[3] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." *United Nations.* December 10, 1948. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/

[4] "Intergenerational Justice." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* July 17, 2026. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-intergenerational/

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Since we cannot know exactly what those needs will be, we should consider future consequences without automatically putting them above the needs we can see today

Conclusion

I believe we should care about future generations and make decisions that give them opportunities to succeed. However, that responsibility doesn't mean we should place their needs above the needs of people living today.

Human dignity means recognizing the worth of every person, and protecting fundamental rights means taking that worth seriously when we make difficult decisions. We should consider the future, but we shouldn't assume that a future benefit always outweighs a present need. For these reasons, I negate today’s resolution.

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