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Lincoln-Douglas Debate
Sourcebook Case 3

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

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Affirmative Case: Justice

Jonas Salk, the inventor of the polio vaccine, famously said, "Our greatest responsibility is to be good ancestors."

It is because I agree with Dr. Salk that I stand resolved:

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

Definitions

I'd like to clarify three key terms in the resolution:

"Obligations" refer to moral duties we hold toward others because our actions affect their wellbeing, regardless of whether they can currently demand that duty from us.

"Future generations" refers to people who will exist after the present generation, and who cannot yet advocate for their own interests.

"In conflict" refers to situations where fulfilling an obligation to our generation would meaningfully harm the interests of future generations, such that both obligations cannot be honored at once.

These definitions matter because the resolution isn't asking us to ignore our own generation entirely, it's asking what we should do in cases where interests collide.

Value: Justice

The highest value in today's debate is Justice. American Heritage Dictionary defines Justice as "the principle of moral rightness"(The American Heritage Dictionary).[1] Justice means giving every person their fair moral consideration, including people who don't exist yet. Future generations can be helped or harmed by our choices today, even though they can't represent themselves in that decision. Since the resolution is about what happens when generations' interests conflict, justice, figuring out whose claim should win, is the right standard to judge the round.

[1] *The American Heritage Dictionary Entry: Justice*. American Heritage Dictionary Entry: justice. https://ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=justice

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Criterion: Minimizing Irreversible Harm

My criterion is Minimizing Irreversible Harm. To achieve justice, we should prioritize avoiding harms that can't be undone. This is the best criterion, better than alternatives like maximizing overall welfare, for three reasons:

First, reversibility, not just magnitude, determines what justice requires. A framework that only weighs how big a harm is can still justify permanently destroying something because the present-day benefit is large enough. But justice is also about whether the person harmed ever has a chance at correction. Living people can vote, protest, or push for new laws to fix bad policies. Future generations don't get that option, by the time they exist, damage like extinct species or climate collapse may already be permanent.

Second, this is what impartiality requires. John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971) argues that principles of justice must be chosen impartially, without knowing your own position in society, the veil of ignorance. (Rawls)[2] If you didn't know whether you'd be born now or a hundred years from now, you wouldn't accept a rule letting whoever is alive first make permanent decisions for everyone who comes later, because you might be the one stuck living with them.

Third, this gives us a clear, practical rule: when our generation's interests clash with future generations', we should avoid the option that locks in permanent damage, even if that means accepting some cost now. Every contention below shows how this rule resolves a genuine conflict in favor of the future.

Contention 1: Some of Our Choices Could Cause Permanent, World-Altering Harm

Certain present-day decisions, like destroying ecosystems, unchecked climate change, or nuclear war, don't just burden future generations, they risk permanently damaging their ability to live good lives, or wiping out that possibility altogether. Weigh that against what the present generation gives up to prevent it: somewhat slower economic growth or reduced convenience. When the risk is "possibly permanent, catastrophic harm to all future generations" versus "some inconvenience for people alive today," the moral choice is clear.

This is a clear application of my criterion: when one side of a conflict is reversible and the other is irreversible and civilization-scale, minimizing irreversible harm tells us exactly which obligation must win. A just framework can't justify gambling with humanity's entire future for marginal present-day comfort.

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[2] Rawls, J. (1972). *A Theory of Justice*. Clarendon Press.

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Contention 2: We Have Obligations to People Who Don’t Exist Yet

The Negative might ask, "How can we owe anything to hypothetical people who aren't born yet?" Our obligation isn't to one specific future person, it's to ensure whoever is eventually born inherits a world that can support a decent life. If we destroy farmland, poison water supplies, or exhaust resources that can never be replaced, that action is morally wrong regardless of which future person lives with the consequences. Not knowing someone's identity doesn't erase the harm we cause them. Philosopher Derek Parfit calls these "impersonal harms," which are wrong because they damage the conditions of life itself, not because we can name a specific victim.

This satisfies my criterion directly: destroying farmland or poisoning water isn't just a large harm, it's an irreversible one, so future people never get the chance to undo it. That's precisely the harm justice requires us to prioritize avoiding.

Contention 3: Our Generation Knows About Irreversible Harms We Cause

Unlike almost every generation before us, we can't claim ignorance about the permanent consequences of our choices. Climate scientists can model exactly how much carbon pushes the planet past irreversible tipping points. Ecologists can track species toward extinction in real time. Past generations who depleted resources often lacked the scientific tools to know the damage was permanent. We don't have that excuse.

This matters because knowledge changes the weight of moral responsibility. A person who accidentally causes harm bears less blame than one who causes the same harm while fully aware of the consequences. Our generation has satellite data, climate models, and generations of accumulated science telling us, with real precision, which choices are reversible and which are not. Prioritizing short-term comfort despite this knowledge isn't excusable ignorance, it's a choice made with open eyes.

This reinforces my criterion directly: Minimizing Irreversible Harm doesn't ask decision-makers to predict an uncertain future, it asks them to act on harms we can already identify with confidence. We are the first generation with both the ability to know which harms are irreversible and the responsibility that knowledge creates.

Conclusion

Justice requires considering everyone our actions affect, including generations not yet born. Because some present choices risk permanent, irreversible harm, we should prioritize avoiding that harm whenever a genuine conflict arises. That's why, when in conflict, our obligations to future generations ought to be valued above our obligations to our own generation.

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Works Cited

Rawls, J. (1972). *A Theory of Justice*. Clarendon Press.

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