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Sourcebook Case 4

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: Justice

John Maynard Keynes famously wrote, "In the long run we are all dead."[1]

It is because I share his skepticism of grand promises to a distant future that I stand resolved:

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

Definitions

Before advancing my case, I'd like to clarify some key terms:

"Obligations" refer to moral duties we hold toward others, grounded in some relationship — consent, agreement, or the capacity for mutual accountability — that makes the duty enforceable rather than merely aspirational.

"Future generations" refers to people who do not yet exist and whose specific needs, values, and circumstances cannot be known with confidence.

"In conflict" refers to situations where fulfilling an obligation to the present generation would require action or inaction that arguably harms future interests, such that both obligations cannot be simultaneously honored.

These definitions matter for one crucial reason: obligations are not a theoretical concept. They arise from somewhere. The Affirmative asks us to treat obligations to an unknowable future as morally weightier than obligations to real people whose needs we can verify. That claim needs justification, not just good intentions.

Value: Justice

The highest value in this debate round is ***Justice***.

Justice, per the American Heritage Dictionary, is "the principle of moral rightness."[2] But moral rightness cannot be separated from moral accountability. A just society is one where obligations are owed to those who can be identified, whose needs can be verified, and to whom we can actually be held responsible. Justice that dissolves into vague duties toward hypothetical people abandons the very structure that makes obligation meaningful in the first place.

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[1] Keynes, John Maynard. *A Tract on Monetary Reform*. London: Macmillan, 1923, Chapter 3, p. 80.
[2] *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 Upholding Verifiable and Reciprocal Obligations. To achieve justice, we must direct our strongest obligations toward those whose needs are known and who can participate in the moral relationship that obligation requires. This is the superior criterion for three reasons.

First, obligation requires reciprocity. Social contract theorists from Hobbes to Locke to Rawls ground moral and political obligation in relationships between parties who can hold one another accountable. This can be through consent, agreement, or shared membership in a community. Future generations cannot consent to the terms we set, cannot negotiate them, and cannot hold us accountable if we get it wrong. A relationship with only one party able to act is not a relationship of obligation; it is a one-sided guess.

Second, obligation requires knowledge, and we lack it. We cannot verify what future generations will actually need, want, or value. Their technology, resources, and circumstances may be radically different from what we imagine. Even Rawls, whom the Affirmative may cite, recognized this limit: his "just savings principle" asks each generation to contribute a reasonable share toward future wellbeing, not to subordinate its own certain needs to speculative future ones. Rawls never argued the present should be sacrificed wholesale to an unknown future. My opponent's use of his framework goes further than Rawls himself was willing to go.

Third, this criterion gives judges a workable standard. When present needs are concrete and future claims are speculative, justice directs us toward the verifiable obligation, which is the one we can actually discharge responsibly. Every contention below shows how this standard resolves real conflicts in favor of the present.

Contention 1: Obligations Without Reciprocity Are Not Obligations

The Affirmative asks us to treat unborn people as rights-holders whose claims can override the claims of people alive today. But a claim requires a claimant. Future generations cannot articulate what they need, correct our mistakes, or renegotiate the terms we impose on them. When we act "on their behalf," we are not fulfilling their wishes — we are projecting our own assumptions onto people who have no way to object. Genuine obligation exists between parties who can hold each other to account; treating a one-directional guess as equivalent to a binding duty inflates the concept of obligation past the point of meaning.

This satisfies my criterion directly: a duty that cannot be verified or reciprocated cannot be weighted more heavily than a duty to real people who can actually confirm what they need from us.

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Contention 2: Present Suffering Is Certain; Future Harm Is Speculative

Poverty, disease, and injustice affecting people alive right now are not hypothetical — they are measurable, urgent, and verifiable through direct evidence. Future harms, by contrast, depend on chains of prediction about technology, policy, and circumstance that we cannot fully know. A framework that values future obligations above present ones asks us to divert resources and attention away from certain, documented suffering toward speculative scenarios that may never fully materialize as predicted, or that future innovation may resolve without our sacrifice.

This satisfies my criterion because it protects the obligation we can actually verify. Justice cannot ask us to treat a guess about tomorrow as more binding than a fact about today.

Contention 3: Subordinating the Present Undermines the Very Generations Meant to Benefit the Future

Healthy, prosperous, well-governed societies are what actually produce good outcomes for the future — not sacrifice for its own sake. A present generation that is economically stable, educated, and politically secure is far better equipped to innovate, adapt, and pass on strong institutions than one that has been asked to subordinate its own wellbeing to uncertain future claims. Historically, the greatest gains for future generations — scientific breakthroughs, stable democratic institutions, medical advances — emerged from generations investing in their own flourishing, not from generations treating themselves as expendable.

This is the clearest application of my criterion: verifiable investment in present wellbeing reliably produces future benefit, while speculative sacrifice does not guarantee it. A just framework should direct our obligation toward the approach we can verify actually works.

Conclusion

Justice requires that our obligations be owed to those who can be identified, whose needs are known, and to whom we can be genuinely accountable. Because future generations cannot reciprocate, because present suffering is certain while future harm is speculative, and because present flourishing is what actually secures a good future, we should not value obligations to future generations above our obligations to our own generation.

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Works Cited

Keynes, John Maynard. *A Tract on Monetary Reform*. London: Macmillan, 1923, Chapter 3, p. 80.

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

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