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Lincoln-Douglas Debate
Sourcebook Case 5

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

ASDA

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Affirmative Case: Liberty

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in 1922 that, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."[1] Wittgenstein's insight here is that as we develop our language to express a broader range of concepts, we become freer to understand more and do more in the world. I proudly affirm the resolution:

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

because I believe that doing so will help us best develop our language, maximizing our liberty in the process.

Definitions

According to Martin Wicker et al in 2026, "'Obligation' … refers to a moral duty to a particular course of action,"[2] and "'When in conflict' establishes that the resolution concerns genuine trade-offs…. where honoring one set of obligations requires accepting costs to the other…."[3]

The only *genuine* tradeoffs are between incompatible obligations that our community actually seeks to uphold *in practice*; therefore, I propose that we not discuss any obligations that exist only in theory. For example, if someone has declared that solving poverty is an obligation, but the vast majority of people aren't doing anything significant to solve poverty, then solving poverty is only an obligation in theory, and it is irrelevant to this debate. As the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars wrote in 1980, "… a rule, properly speaking, isn't a rule unless it lives in behavior…"[4]

We can find obligations to future generations practically upheld in historically rooted social practices such as engineering, architecture, and baseball, where current participants accept an obligation to solve problems in the practice's concepts (such as its theories, principles, and rules) as they are discovered, so that a more refined set of concepts can be passed on to future participants. Our community practically upholds this as an obligation today, for example, by

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," transl. C.K. Ogden, 1922, § 5.6.

[2] Martin Wicker et al, "2026-2027 Lincoln-Douglas Debate Resolution White Papers," 2026. Accessed September 18 2026. https://www.americanspeech.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/2026-2027-Lincoln-Douglas-Debate-Resolution-White-Papers.pdf.

'Obligation' in this context refers to a moral duty to a particular course of action.

[3] Ibid.

'When in conflict' establishes that the resolution concerns genuine trade-offs. The debate should be framed by situations where honoring one set of obligations requires accepting costs to the other. Debaters are not required to argue that such conflicts are universal or inevitable, only how we are to act when they do occur.

[4] Wilfrid Sellars, "Language, Rules, Behavior," in "Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds: The Early Essays of Wilfrid Sellars," ed. J. Sicha, 1980, 155.

We saw that a rule, properly speaking, isn't a rule unless it lives in behavior, rule-regulated behavior, even rule-violating behavior.

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enforcing anti-plagiarism rules such as the one in the ASDA Handbook, which recognize the importance of hard work in developing the wisdom and reasoning skills that we need to improve our concepts for future generations.

On the other hand, we can find obligations to our own generation upheld in social competition over maximizing our own wealth and consumption. The philosopher Jason Blakely writes in 2020 that, "… beginning in … the twentieth century, … people learned to interpret themselves as … *Homo economicus*…,"[5] which is "… a … theory of human behavior that assumed all actions were motivated by self-interest."[6] This was raised to the level of an obligation in the work of philosophers like Ayn Rand, who argued in 1964 that "… man must live for his own sake… the achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose."[7] The economist Milton Friedman applied this idea to our everyday business practices, writing in 1970 that "…there is … only one … responsibility of business—to … increase its profits…"[8] Our community practically upholds this as an obligation today, for example, by firing workers who fail to prioritize maximizing the profits of their employers.

These two sets of obligations are in conflict because they ask us to spend our time in fundamentally different ways – one that prioritizes passing down a better set of ideas to future generations (which requires sacrificing a lot, and will not likely lead to great wealth), and one that prioritizes accumulating excess value for ourselves, while sacrificing as little as possible.

Value: Liberty

We can measure which of these two sets of obligations should be prioritized by seeing which one better upholds our community's highest values. In modern America, our highest value is *liberty* –

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[5] Jason Blakely, "We Built Reality: How Social Science Infiltrated Culture, Politics, and Power," 2020, 25.
Specifically, beginning in the later part of the twentieth century, millions of people learned to interpret themselves as preference maximizers or an extreme version of what philosophers call Homo economicus (economic man).

[6] Ibid.
In their place they adopted a highly technical theory of human behavior that assumed all actions were motivated by self-interest.

[7] Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," 1964, ARI Campus. Accessed October 5 2026.
https://courses.aynrand.org/works/the-objectivist-ethics/
The basic social principle of the Objectivist ethics is that just as life is an end in itself, so every living human being is an end in himself, not the means to the ends or the welfare of others - and, therefore, that man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. To live for his own sake means that the achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose.

[8] Milton Friedman, "A Friedman Doctrine: The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits," The New York Times, 13 September 1970. Accessed October 4 2026.
https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/13/archives/a-friedman-doctrine-the-social-responsibility-of-business-is-to.html
That is why, in my book 'Capitalism and Freedom,' I have called it a 'fundamentally subversive doctrine' in a free society, and have said that in such a society, 'there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud.

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the ability to do things – which is enumerated in the opening lines of our Declaration of Independence, emblazoned on our currency, and used as a standard for evaluating our other beliefs and practices by politicians of every political party.

Criterion: Conceptual Innovation

I propose that we measure which set of obligations better upholds liberty through the criterion of which one better promotes *conceptual innovation*, in the sense of refining the concepts in our language to better reflect the world as it actually is. Conceptual innovation is the motor behind every liberty-enhancing development in human history, from farming to vehicles to language itself. For example, if our language contains only a single concept for *orangey metal*, we will sometimes wind up with wires that don't conduct electricity very well, and with wedding rings that turn green. But once we come up with distinct concepts of *copper* and *gold*, we become able to say and do more in the world.

Contention 1: Our Obligations to Future Generations Best Promote Conceptual Innovation

Therefore, in my first and only contention, I argue that prioritizing our obligations to future generations best promotes conceptual innovation. To show why this is the case, take the example of an electrical engineering professor who seeks to write the best textbook on the subject yet, so that future generations of electrical engineers can have better resources. This professor must sacrifice huge amounts of time and effort to understand the existing library of textbooks on the subject even better than their own authors understood them, so it will be possible to write a new book that expresses an even broader and more detailed set of electrical engineering concepts.

By contrast, an electrical engineering professor who prioritizes maximizing his own happiness and profits would seek to *minimize* sacrifices wherever possible, since profit is calculated by revenue minus expenses, and a sacrifice is an expense. At best, prioritizing this obligation to our own generation means we would grind to a halt in conceptual innovation, and at worst, it means that our concepts (and the liberty they enable) will slowly wither away and be forgotten.

Conclusion

Vote for the Affirmative to prioritize making sacrifices to pass down a better set of concepts to future generations, so they can have more liberty than we had.

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