AMERICAN SPEECH & DEBATE ASSOCIATION

2026-2027
Lincoln-Douglas Debate
Sourcebook Case 6

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: Liberty

Around the year 410, the philosopher and theologian Augustine said, "Let us live good lives, and the times are good. We ourselves are the times. Whatever we are like, that's what the times are like."[1] Augustine's insight that we can make our times better simply by being good to the people around us still stands today, which is why I proudly negate the resolution:

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

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 climate change is an obligation, but the vast majority of people aren't doing anything significant to solve climate change, then solving climate change 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 our community when we save resources to pass on an inheritance to our families. By contrast, we can find obligations to our own generation practically upheld when we give away resources to make sure that our community has a good life today, such as when we participate in charity work and donations. These two sets of obligations are in conflict because they ask us to choose between either

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[1] Augustine of Hippo, "The Works of Saint Augustine, Part III: Sermons, Volume III: Sermons 51-94 on the New Testament," transl. Edmund Hill, 1990, 355-356.

[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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keeping excess resources away from people who certainly need them, or giving excess resources to people who certainly need them.

Value: Liberty

We can measure which of these two sets of obligations should be prioritized by assessing which one better upholds our community's highest values. Our highest value in modern America is *liberty* – 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 a simple 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 Our Own Generation Best Promote Conceptual Innovation

Therefore, in my first and only contention, I argue that prioritizing our obligations to our own generation best promotes conceptual innovation.

Conceptual innovation practically occurs in our own generation, and the quality of the conceptual innovation we can achieve depends on the quality of our community today. A strong, mutually supportive community will best allow us to pursue the research and debate necessary to best improve our concepts. Let's take a simple example: imagine that you want to write the best chess theory book that the world has ever seen. To have the best chance of succeeding, you must have your basic needs (such as food, water, shelter, and medicine) reliably fulfilled. Additionally, you need to have the time to dedicate to study, research tools like libraries, and good teachers and peers to learn from. Without a community that prioritizes these institutions, it will be much harder to write the best chess theory book, or make any other contribution to conceptual innovation, because you will be too busy fighting to survive on your own.

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When our community prioritizes personal savings to meet obligations to future generations, that's exactly what happens. We save for future generations because we're worried that the community won't support them in a time of need, but in the process, we help create a social norm of not supporting others who are facing a time of need – in other words, *we build the future we fear,* which leaves both current and future generations worse off.

Prioritizing our obligations to our own generation by giving to those in need today is our path out of this vicious cycle, because it helps build a community where everyone takes responsibility for each other through the generations. If we want future generations to have the community infrastructure required to best pursue conceptual innovation, we must NOT follow the obligations we currently observe toward future generations, and instead we must follow the obligations we currently observe toward our own generation.

Conclusion

By doing this, we ultimately leave future *and* current generations better off. If that sounds good to you, vote Negative.

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