What We Owe the Future

Below is a comprehensive summary of *What We Owe the Future* by William MacAskill, including its central themes, main points, conclusions, and a chapter-by-chapter review. The book, published in 2022, is a philosophical exploration of **longtermism**, the idea that positively influencing the long-term future is a key moral priority of our time. MacAskill argues that our actions today can shape the lives of billions, potentially trillions, of future people over millions of years, and he provides a framework for making ethical decisions to ensure a better future.

Central Themes

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Longtermism: The core thesis is that we have a moral obligation to consider the well-being of future generations, as they could vastly outnumber those alive today. Longtermism emphasizes actions that have significant, persistent, and contingent effects on the future.

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Moral Responsibility for Future Generations: Future people count morally, just as present people do. The timing of a harm or benefit does not diminish its moral weight.

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Potential Scale of the Future: Humanity's future could span millions of years, with vast numbers of people living lives of flourishing or suffering, depending on our actions. This "big future" underscores the importance of our choices.

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Existential Risks and Trajectory Changes: We can improve the future by preventing catastrophic risks (e.g., extinction from AI or pandemics) and by shaping societal values to avoid "value lock-in" or stagnation.

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Effective Altruism: MacAskill advocates for using evidence and reason to maximize positive impact, whether through career choices, donations, or activism, particularly from a longtermist perspective.

Main Points

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Future People Matter: MacAskill argues that future generations have moral significance equal to our own. A thought experiment illustrates this: a broken glass bottle left in a forest is wrong to leave if it harms a child, regardless of whether

the harm occurs tomorrow or in a century.

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The Future Could Be Vast: If humanity avoids extinction, billions or trillions of people could live over millions of years, dwarfing the 100–110 billion humans who have lived so far. Our actions could determine whether these lives are flourishing or miserable.

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Two Ways to Improve the Future:

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Ensuring Survival: Preventing existential risks like misaligned AI, engineered pathogens, nuclear war, or climate catastrophe to ensure humanity's survival.

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Trajectory Changes: Shaping societal values (e.g., promoting moral progress like abolitionism) to improve the quality of future lives and avoid lock-in of harmful values.

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Moral and Cultural Contingency: Historical examples, like the abolition of slavery, show that values are not inevitable but result from specific actions and conditions. We must foster a "morally exploratory world" to allow for continued progress.

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Practical Actions: Individuals can make a difference through career choices (e.g., via 80,000 Hours), targeted donations (via Giving What We Can), political activism, and reducing personal environmental impact (e.g., eating less meat).

Conclusions

MacAskill concludes that we are at a pivotal moment in history, where our actions can shape a future that is vastly better or worse. He advocates for a **morally exploratory world** that avoids locking in harmful values, mitigates existential risks, and promotes flourishing for future generations. While acknowledging moral uncertainty, he emphasizes that we should do much more to benefit future generations than we currently are, using evidence-based strategies to maximize impact. The book is both optimistic about humanity's potential and realistic about the challenges, urging collective and individual action to secure a thriving future.