Intergenerational moral inequality and the long-term future

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Abstract. According to longtermism, present persons ought to promote the value of the far future. While this view has so far been primarily discussed within a consequentialist normative framework, less has been said about what longtermism entails from a deontological perspective. This paper aims to address this shortcoming. I argue that, from a deontological standpoint, distant future people have a *present* moral status *qua* "expected persons". Therefore, they have at least some *present* rights *qua* moral status-holders. But distant future people do not have *equal* moral status *at the present time*. Therefore, their present rights are not as stringent as those of present persons, other things being equal. However, I demonstrate that the most fundamental longtermist concerns do not rest on a commitment to intergenerational moral equality: even if distant future people are not our moral equals, respecting their present rights should be *a* key moral priority of our time.

Keywords: deontology; future persons; intergenerational ethics; longtermism; moral equality; moral status.

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1. Introduction

At no point in human history have present actions carried such far-reaching consequences for the long-term future. From existential risks like AI misalignment and nuclear war to climate change and biodiversity loss, our decisions today could determine the well-being, or even the existence, of distant future persons. For instance, a large-scale nuclear war would kill millions, prevent countless future people from coming into existence, and devastate the environment for thousands of years. Conversely, promoting sustainable economic development would help preserve the ecological and material conditions necessary for people in the distant future to lead flourishing lives.

Many philosophers have therefore argued that "positively influencing the longterm future is a key moral priority of our time" (MacAskill, 2022, p. 2). This view is known as *longtermism*. More precisely, longtermists argue that:

1. Distant future people matter morally no less than present people.
2. The number of lives in the far future is expected to be much greater than the number of people alive today.
3. Present persons can affect the lives and prospects of distant future people.
4. Therefore, present persons ought to promote the value of the far future (MacAskill, 2022).[1]

Longtermism has so far been mainly discussed within a consequentialist normative framework, whereby what matters is to bring about the best state of affairs. On this view, present persons have an *undirected duty* to do good by promoting the well-being of distant future people. However, relatively less has been said about longtermism from a deontological perspective.[2] This paper aims to fill this gap by addressing two key questions:

(i) The question of future persons' moral status: do distant future persons have *present* moral status, such that present persons have *directed duties* towards them?

(ii) The question of future persons' *equal* moral status: if so, is their present moral status *equal* to that of present persons, such that the directed duties present persons have towards distant future persons are *as stringent as* those they have towards one another, other things being equal?

To answer these questions, I will draw on the literature on the basis of moral equality to shed light on a crucial, yet surprisingly overlooked, issue for understanding the obligations that present persons have towards distant future people: the question of intergenerational moral equality. While there is significant disagreement about what specific duties present persons have towards distant future persons,[3] it is often assumed that present persons and distant future persons are moral equals and therefore should be treated accordingly (Barry, 1997; Caney, 2014; Finneron-Burns, 2024; Kumar, 2018). Arguably, however, the question of the basis of *intergenerational* moral equality – namely, the question of what, if anything, grounds the equal moral status of present and future persons – has so far been largely neglected in the literature.[4]

This paper addresses this shortcoming by developing a novel theory of intergenerational moral *inequality* between present and distant future persons. This theory has two original and significant implications. First, it shows that deontological longtermists must hold that distant future people have a *present* moral status *qua* right-holders, but their moral status is not *equal* to that of present persons. Consequently, the rights of the former are not as stringent as those of the latter, other things being equal. Second, it reveals that whilst rejecting intergenerational moral equality is incompatible with *strong longtermism*, whereby "impact on the far future is the *most* important feature of our actions today" (Greaves and MacAskill, 2025, p. 17), it is consistent with *moderate*

longtermism, according to which "positively influencing the longterm future is *a* key moral priority of our time" (MacAskill, 2022, p. 2; emphasis added). Thus, contrary to what is often assumed, the most fundamental longtermist concerns do not depend on the assumption that present persons and distant future people have equal moral status.

This article is structured as follows. In Section 2, I outline a deontological account of the meaning and justification of moral status and moral equality. In Section 3, I propose a theory of the present moral status of distant future people. I argue that there is a plausible sense in which distant future persons have a present moral status *qua expected persons*, that is, persons with a sufficient degree of probability of existence. Therefore, distant future people do matter morally at the present time. However, in Section 4, I argue that they do not matter as much as present persons. This is because while distant future persons have a present moral status *qua* expected persons, present persons have moral status *qua moral persons*. But "moral personhood" is a more valuable status-conferring property than "expected personhood". Therefore, the unequal value of these status-conferring properties provides a principled justification for ascribing to present persons a moral status that is superior to that of distant future persons *at the present time*. In Section 5, I then illustrate what is entailed, and what is not, by a rejection of intergenerational moral equality. I argue that, although distant future persons do not have equal moral status, they nonetheless have at least some present rights against present persons, and some of their rights can even override some of the rights of present persons. Therefore, even if distant future people are not our moral equals, respecting their present rights should be *a* key moral priority of our time.

2. Moral status and moral equality: their meaning and justification

To understand whether distant future persons matter morally from a deontological perspective – and, if so, whether they matter more or less or equally than present persons – it is necessary first to address the following questions:

(i) The question of the meaning of (equal) moral status: In what sense does an entity, *A*, matter morally from a deontological perspective? What does it mean for entities *A* and *B* to matter *equally*?

(ii) The question of the justification of moral equality: When and why do *A* and *B* have equal moral status and, therefore, matter equally?

I address these questions in order.

From a deontological perspective, an entity that matters morally in and of itself has moral status. An entity that has moral status enters our moral landscape in a particular way: it is the object of *directed duties* – that is, duties that are *owed to* it regardless of their consequences – the violation of which does not merely constitute wrongdoing, but specifically *wrongs* that entity (Kamm, 2007, p. 229).[5] Yet, more specifically, the possession of moral status generates a duty of respect to be considered and treated as a self-originating source of valid claims (Rawls, 1980, p. 543). In other words, then, an entity that has moral status is a right-holder.[6,7]

However, having moral status *simpliciter* neither amounts to nor entails having *equal* moral status. This is because the former is a *non-comparative* concept, which determines what is owed to an entity in particular and for its own sake, regardless of what is owed to other entities. In contrast, the latter is a *comparative* notion that concerns what is owed to an entity relative to what is owed to other entities. Accordingly, if entities *A* and *B* have *equal* moral status, this means that

not only do *A* and *B* have *some* rights *qua* moral status-holders, but they also have *equal* rights *qua moral equals*.

To appreciate this, consider a standard rescue case. Suppose that a boat is sinking with two persons on board, Tom and Elena, and only one can be rescued. If Tom and Elena have moral status *simpliciter*, this implies that they both have a right to be saved. But this alone does not preclude giving priority to Tom's right (or Elena's). However, prioritising Tom's right would amount to affirming that Tom's life *counts more than* Elena's, thus violating the moral imperative to treat them as equals. A commitment to moral equality, then, entails that Tom and Elena's right to be saved are equally stringent – or, equivalently, that Tom and Elena are the objects of equally stringent directed duties. Thus, we must resort to a suitably non-arbitrary procedure, such as a coin flip, to decide who should be saved (Taurek, 1977). Having equal moral status, therefore, entails having *equally stringent* rights (Floris, 2023a, pp. 35-36).

Having clarified the meaning of moral status *simpliciter* and *equal* moral status, we can turn to the question of the *basis* of moral equality: in virtue of what do entities, *A* and *B*, have equal moral status? As noted above, entities that have moral status count morally in and of themselves. This means that they possess a *valuable* property (or set of properties) that makes them matter morally for their own sake, thereby conferring upon them moral status *qua* right-holders. Consequently, *A* and *B* have equal moral status if they share the *same* status-conferring property (or properties) that makes them *equally morally valuable* (Arneson, 2024; Carter, 2011; Christiano, 2024; Floris, 2023b; Rawls, 1971; Waldron, 2017). Thus, for example, in the rescue case, it is impermissible to prioritise Tom's right to be rescued over Elena's because what matters is that both Tom and Elena are *persons*. "Moral personhood"[8] is the morally significant property that grounds their *equal* moral status and, therefore, their equally stringent right to be saved.

To summarise, from a deontological perspective, (i) entities that matter morally have moral status *qua* right-holders; (ii) entities that matter equally have *equal* moral status and therefore hold equally stringent rights *qua* moral equals; and, (iii) entities have equal moral status if they share the same valuable property (or properties) which makes them equally morally valuable.

3. Non-existence and distant future persons' present moral status

Accordingly, to understand what, if anything, present persons *owe to* distant future persons from a deontological perspective, we need to address the following two questions:

(i) The basis of moral status: what, if anything, grounds the moral status of distant future persons, such that they have at least some rights against present persons?

(ii) The basis of intergenerational moral equality: what, if anything, grounds distant future persons' equal moral status, such that their rights are as stringent as the rights of present persons?

I take up the first question in this section, and I tackle the second in the next.

As observed above, having moral status entails being a right-holder – or, equivalently, being the object of directed duties – thereby being an entity that can be wronged. Therefore, to determine what kind of moral status, if any, distant future people have, we need to examine whether present persons can wrong distant future people and, if so, when and how future persons are wronged. Consider then the case of *Climate Change*:

> Present persons know that climate change will dramatically affect the lives of people who will live in two thousand years. Suppose they must choose between two policies: Policy X allocates resources to mitigate and adapt to the worst effects of climate

change. Policy Y uses the same resources to secure trivial benefits for the present generation. Present persons opt for Policy Y.

Few would deny that choosing Policy Y is morally impermissible: by prioritising trivial personal benefits over climate action, present persons act wrongly. Yet many would agree that this is an incomplete moral assessment: this is because present persons *owe it to* distant future persons, in particular, to adopt Policy X. In what follows, I explain how we can make sense of this view by examining how present persons *wrong* distant future persons, specifically, by opting for Policy Y. This, in turn, will enable us to establish in what sense the latter have a *present* moral status in the eyes of the former.

Let us begin by analysing the timing of the wrong. It is sometimes observed that when evaluating the wrongness of an act, we should focus solely on its consequences rather than the timing of the act itself – time, like space, is morally irrelevant (Parfit, 1984). But if we adopt a deontological account of wronging – whereby an act is wrong if it constitutes a failure to respect the moral status of the wronged, regardless of the consequences of the act itself[9] – understanding the timing of the wrong is important when assessing the permissibility of an act. This is not because the timing of the wrong is morally relevant in itself, but because it will help us determine *who* exactly has been wronged.

In *Climate Change*, I suggest that the timing of the wrong coincides with the time at which the act – i.e., the decision to opt for Policy Y – has been performed: in short, the wrong occurs in the present. To appreciate this, imagine that, while present persons take no action against climate change, some near-future generation – e.g., the future persons who will live in 100 years – is successful in tackling the climate crisis. Consequently, the distant future people who will live in two thousand years will avoid the worst impacts of climate change. It is hard to see why this should

change the moral status of present persons' actions: the fact that some near-future generation prevents their decision from *harming* the distant future persons that will live in two thousand years does not entail that the latter have not been *wronged* by it. From a deontological standpoint, the wrongness of present persons' decision does not fundamentally consist in, or depend on, its eventual outcome – that is, on whether future persons are in fact harmed – but on whether present persons have taken into proper account how the claims of future persons should constrain how they ought to act (Kumar, 2003). Therefore, by failing to take the necessary steps to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, present persons have *presently* wronged distant future people, regardless of how the future unfolds.

It might be objected that even if it is true that present persons have done something wrong in *Climate Change* and that the wrong has occurred in the present time when the action has been carried out, it is misleading to maintain that distant future persons have been *wronged* by present persons' decision to opt for Policy Y. This is because, as explained in section 2, wronging – as opposed to wrongdoing – presupposes the violation of a directed duty owed to an entity, in particular.[10] However, so the objection goes, an agent, *A*, cannot have a *present* directed duty *to* an entity, *B*, unless *B exists presently*. Yet distant future persons do not currently exist. Thus, present persons cannot have a present directed duty to distant future people. Therefore, present persons have presently acted wrongly in *Climate Change*, but they have not presently wronged distant future people, in particular. This is the *non-existence objection*.

One common answer to the non-existence objection is to ascribe *future rights* to future people. On this view, present persons' actions violate future persons' rights only (if and) when those persons come to exist; accordingly, the rights violation occurs in the future rather than in the present. As Axel Gosseries points out, the future-rights strategy rejects the "obligation-right

contemporaneity requirement" (Gosseries, 2008, p. 456). Thus, in *Climate Change*, this view holds that present persons have violated their moral obligation to mitigate and adapt to the worst effects of climate change, but that the rights of future persons have not been violated at present. Instead, any rights violation will occur in the future, once future people come into existence and will be affected by present persons' decision to adopt Policy Y.

The problem with this view, however, is that it is unable to account for the *present wronging* of future persons. If present persons' decision to opt for Policy Y merely violates an obligation whose corresponding rights violation occurs only in the future, then it becomes unclear on what grounds we can say that present persons have wronged future persons here and now, regardless of what happens in the future. On a deontological account, *A* wrongs *B* when *A* violates their directed duty to *B*, which *consists in* a violation of *B's* right against *A*. But if *A* can violate their directed duty to *B* without violating *B's* right, then this entails that *A* can violate their duty to *B* without wronging them because the wrong occurs when *B's* right is violated.

The future-rights strategy, then, seems to face a dilemma. Either present persons do not wrong future persons at the time of action because future persons do not exist at that time. On this reading, opting for Policy Y constitutes *mere wrongdoing* rather than wronging future persons, in particular.[11] This, however, fails to capture what I take to be a compelling conclusion, namely, that present persons can wrong future persons, *in particular*, here and now. Alternatively, present persons wrong future persons only *retroactively*, once those persons come into existence and their rights are violated. On this reading, wronging is made contingent upon whether future events actually materialise. But this is a high theoretical cost to pay for a deontological account of wronging. As explained earlier, on such an account, the wrongness of an action does not fundamentally depend on whether the victim is made worse off as a result of it, but on whether the action fails to

respect the claims that constrain how agents ought to act at the time of action. Thus, as observed above, in *Climate Change*, even if the future people who will live in two thousand years are not harmed by the present persons' decision to adopt Policy Y, they are still wronged by it.

For these reasons, I conclude that we need an alternative response to the non-existence objection, which can explain how present persons can wrong future persons, in particular, at the present time, independently of what later happens in the future. In what follows, I develop such an alternative response. I argue that there is a plausible sense in which future persons can be ascribed *present moral status* such that they have *present rights* against present people. By this, I mean that they stand in a *normative relation* in virtue of which present persons have directed duties towards them, the violation of which wrongs them in particular, here and now, regardless of the eventual effects of those actions.[12]

Rejecting the non-existence objection while maintaining that distant future persons have present moral status requires denying that present existence is a necessary condition for having a present moral status. To see how this can be the case, it is important to note that, *ex hypothesi*, the dramatic impact of climate change on the lives of distant future persons is a morally relevant factor that present persons ought to take into account when deliberating over which policy to adopt. Therefore, distant future persons ought to enter the moral landscape of present persons as a morally relevant factor that informs their deliberation. But what exactly are distant future persons at the present time, that is, the time in which present persons must decide in *Climate Change*? I suggest that, at the present time, distant future persons are *expected persons*, namely, persons with a sufficient degree of probability of existence.[13] And, it is precisely in this sense, I argue, that future persons have a *present* moral status in the eyes of present persons: future persons *qua* expected persons generate claims on what present persons ought to do here and now.

To illustrate this, it will be instructive to consider the analogy with the obligations that present persons have towards the dead.[14] As Zofia Stemplowska observes, "someone's death is no obstacle to us being able to nonetheless guide our actions in light of her being a source of value" (Stemplowska, 2020, p. 34). A person's current existence is not necessary to respect their moral status by recognising that their value constrains what is required of us to do *for their own sake*. For example, respecting the wishes of a deceased person *because* they are their wishes entails regarding the dead as a self-originating source of claims upon us. Analogously, even if distant future people do not exist presently, this does not imply that present persons cannot respect their present moral status by recognising them as sources of value that constrain and guide their actions. In both cases, what grounds present persons' obligations is not *present existence* but the recognition that moral personhood – whether past or expected – is a source of value that shapes what they ought to do.

Accordingly, I argue that the present moral status of distant future persons is grounded in being *expected persons*, that is, persons with a sufficient degree of probability of existence in the future. Therefore, present persons ought to respect the present moral status of distant future people by recognising that their moral value *qua* expected persons affects and constrains how they ought to act here and now.

Let me now clarify and strengthen further this account of the present moral status of distant future persons by addressing three objections. The first objection holds that we cannot owe anything to entities that do not exist presently and may *never* exist in the future. This worry highlights the epistemic uncertainty that characterises any longtermist view of the scope of moral status.[15] As William MacAskill notes:

> The future of civilisation could be very short, ending within a few centuries. But it could also be extremely long. The earth will remain habitable for hundreds of millions of years. If we survive that long, with the same population per century as now, there will be a million future people for every person alive today. And if humanity ultimately takes to the stars, the timescales become literally astronomical (MacAskill, 2022, p. 11).

It is simply impossible to predict how many distant future people, if any, will exist at any given time or over the course of human history. However, the salient point is that present persons should take the interests of distant future people into account when deliberating about what morality requires of them here and now. As *Climate Change* illustrates, it is morally impermissible to take actions now that could result in terrible consequences for future persons, even if they are fortunate enough to avoid being harmed by such actions. The moral status of present actions should not depend on unpredictable events beyond the control of present persons. Accordingly, from a deontological perspective, present persons have a range of directed duties towards future people *qua* expected persons, the violation of which wrongs them, regardless of whether they are ever actually affected by the consequences.

Second, it might be objected that it is implausible to maintain that expected persons have moral status and therefore are right-holders because it is conceptually incoherent to ascribe rights to expected persons "as if" they were present moral persons (Earl, 2011, p. 65). But a view that ascribes rights to expected persons is not committed to this logical fallacy. On the contrary, this view maintains that expected persons have rights, but *precisely because* they are not present moral persons, they do not have the same rights as the latter. For example, it is widely accepted that present persons have a right against stigmatisation because being stigmatised violates a person's

sense of self-respect and self-worth. However, whilst it is plausible to maintain that distant future people have a right to be provided with the social conditions necessary to develop an adequate sense of self-respect and self-worth (e.g., just institutions and a sufficient level of material resources), it is conceptually incoherent to affirm that they have a present right against stigmatisation because this kind of treatment can only occur among co-existing persons (Caney, 2018, p. 485).

It might be objected that stigmatisation does not always require coexistence. For example, present persons might characterise future persons as "parasites" for whom significant sacrifices must be made, and future people might later come to feel stigmatised upon learning of such attitudes.[16]

Two points are worth noting in response. First, *if* the wrongness of stigmatisation lies in undermining a person's sense of self-respect and self-worth, it is not clear that such wronging straightforwardly occurs across distant, non-overlapping generations. For instance, imagine that ancient Romans had systematically described persons living in the twenty-first century as undeserving beneficiaries of their institutions. It is not obvious that such attitudes would, by themselves, undermine our sense of self-respect and self-worth. This suggests that at least some forms of intergenerational stigmatisation between distant non-overlapping generations do not *wrong* their targets, although they might still be morally objectionable.

Second, it is at least unclear that *all* relational egalitarian concerns apply to relations between non-overlapping future generations.[17] Thus, the important point here is that holding that future persons have present moral status *qua* "expected persons" does not entail that they should be treated "as if" they are present persons. This is because their moral status is grounded in different status-conferring properties, which therefore generate non-coextensive, though partially overlapping, sets of fundamental rights *qua* moral status-holders (Floris, 2023a).

Finally, it is often argued that it is implausible to affirm that distant future people have rights because their identity depends on present actions; accordingly, they cannot be wronged by the very actions upon which their identity ultimately depends. To see this, return to *Climate Change*: suppose that in two thousand years future persons find out that present persons decided to opt for Policy Y. According to the view defended in this section, future persons have a legitimate moral complaint against present persons because, when opting for Policy Y, they failed to respect their moral status *qua* expected persons by ignoring the claims that their moral status *at that time* generated on what they ought to do. Yet, had present persons adopted Policy X, *those* distant future persons would not have existed, since the slightest change in a range of factors has identity-affecting consequences. But then how can those distant future persons have a legitimate complaint against present persons for not having adopted Policy X, if their existence is due to their decision to opt for Policy Y? This is the well-known "non-identity problem" (Parfit, 1984, ch. 16).

The non-identity problem has been extensively discussed in the philosophical literature,[18] and offering a comprehensive solution to it lies beyond the scope of this paper. Two points, however, are worth noting: first, since both consequentialist and deontological longtermist views must face this problem, it follows that the non-identity problem cannot be used to favour one account over the other.[19]

Second, as Rahul Kumar argues, it seems plausible to maintain that, from a deontological perspective, for an agent, *A*, to have a moral obligation towards an entity, *B*, it is sufficient that *B* is characterisable in normative terms, namely, that *B* is a *token* of a value-type. As he puts it, "There need be no fact of the matter concerning the particular token identity of [B], as her token identity is irrelevant for fixing what it is she is owed as a matter of respect for her value" (Kumar, 2009, pp. 261-262). Distant future persons, therefore, have a legitimate claim to have been

wronged by present persons' decision to opt for Policy Y because present persons failed to respect their moral status as expected persons, independently of their specific identities. Put differently: the wrongness of the present persons' decision to adopt Policy Y consists in a failure to respond appropriately to particular tokens of a morally relevant property – "expected personhood" – regardless of the specific identity of those tokens.

To conclude, in this section, I argued that, from a deontological perspective, when present persons make decisions that concern the long-term future, they *owe it to* distant future people to take them into account in their deliberative process. I suggested that we can make sense of this by recognising that there is a plausible sense in which distant future people have a *present* moral status *qua* expected persons, that is, persons with a sufficient degree of probability of existence in the future. Therefore, present persons wrong distant future persons if they fail to respect the claims that their present moral status *qua* expected persons generates on what they ought to do here and now, regardless of what happens in the future as a result of their actions.

4. Distant future persons' unequal moral status

However, as observed in section 2, the possession of moral status *simpliciter* neither amounts to nor entails the possession of *equal* moral status. Thus, in this section, I address the question of the basis of intergenerational moral equality: is the moral status of distant future people *equal* to that of present persons, such that the directed duties present persons have towards distant future persons are *as stringent as* those they have towards one another? In brief, my answer is "no".

Before presenting the argument for intergenerational moral inequality, a comment is in order: it is often suggested that asserting that distant future people do not have equal moral status amounts to maintaining that they count less just because they *exist* in the future (Caney, 2014, p.

322). But, as it will become clear, my contention is that the *present* moral status of distant future persons is inferior to their *expected* moral status, that is, the moral status that they will have in the far future when they come into existence. Similarly, in his defence of a positive social time preference, Joseph Heath observes that discounting should be understood not as the idea that "future welfare is less important than present welfare", but that "the *present* value of future welfare is less than its eventual value, at the time when it is brought about" (Heath, 2017, p. 442).

This has two significant implications. First, the claim that present persons have a moral status that is superior to that of future persons does not rest on the claim that existence as such confers higher moral status. Existence is a necessary condition for instantiating moral personhood, but it is not itself the property in virtue of which moral personhood is valuable. Rather, the inequality of moral status between present and future persons is explained by and grounded in their different and unequally valuable status-conferring properties.

Second, my argument is that the *present* moral status of distant future people is inferior to that of present persons, but their *future* moral status – that is, the moral status that they will have when they are present persons – is equal to the moral status of present persons. To illustrate: if my argument is correct, at time t_x, a present person, A, has a moral status *qua* moral person that is superior to the present moral status *qua* expected person of a future person, B, and therefore the former has more stringent rights than the latter. However, at t_{x+1} when B is a present person, they will have a moral status, which is equal to that of A at t_x, and superior to the present moral status of a distant future person, C, who, in turn, will have a moral status that is equal to that of A at t_x and that of B at t_{x+1}, and superior to that of a distant future person, D, at t_{x+2}, and so on. Thus, my main contention is not that present persons and distant future persons have unequal moral status

throughout time, but rather that they do not have equal moral status *at simultaneous segments of time*.[20]

Let us now begin by recalling that, as discussed in section 2, entities *A* and *B* have equal moral status if they share the same status-conferring property (or properties) that confers equal moral value upon them. It follows from this that any theory of intergenerational moral equality must identify a morally significant property shared by both present persons and distant future people, which thus makes them each other's equals.

The relevant question is thus the following: is the moral status of present and future persons grounded in the same equally valuable status-conferring property such that they have equal moral status at the present time? In the previous section, I argued that while present persons have moral status *qua moral persons*, distant future people have a present moral status *qua expected persons*. Based on this, I now suggest that present persons and distant future persons do not have equal moral status, as their moral status is grounded in *different and unequally valuable* status-conferring properties. Specifically, I argue that "moral personhood" – that is, the possession of the morally significant property that confers the status of "moral person" – is a more valuable status-conferring property than "expected personhood" – that is, the property of having a sufficient degree of probability to become a "moral person" in the future. Since "moral personhood" is a more valuable status-conferring property than "expected personhood", and the moral status of present persons is grounded in the former while the moral status of future persons is grounded in the latter, it follows that present persons have a moral status that is superior to that of future persons, at the present time.[21]

Accordingly, to justify intergenerational moral inequality, it is not sufficient to note that moral personhood and expected personhood are metaphysically distinct status-conferring

properties. What is required is an independent argument that establishes an axiological asymmetry between them – that is, an argument that explains why "moral personhood" is a *more valuable* status-conferring property than "expected personhood" – which therefore justifies ascribing to present persons a moral status that is superior to that of future persons.

Admittedly, it is difficult to provide a direct argument for why a status-conferring property is more or less valuable than another – or why two status-conferring properties might be considered equally valuable. Consider, for example, the view according to which nonhuman animals have a moral status that is inferior to that of human beings. Proponents of this view typically argue that while nonhuman animals have moral status because they are sentient beings (Singer 2011), their moral status is nonetheless inferior to that of human beings, for (nearly all) human beings possess the capacity for moral and rational agency. This capacity is morally more significant and valuable than sentience and, therefore, confers upon human beings a moral status that is superior to that of nonhuman animals (Arneson 2024). However, it is difficult to offer an independent argument for why the capacity for moral and rational agency is more morally significant than sentience (Floris 2021). What, after all, makes the capacity for moral and rational agency intrinsically more valuable than the capacity to feel and suffer? This difficulty might ultimately lead to a reasonable disagreement about the comparative significance of different status-conferring properties.

Nevertheless, I will now show that there is a principled and plausible argument for why "moral personhood" is a more valuable status-conferring property than "expected personhood." My central claim is that we have compelling reasons to maintain that if the value of a good Y is *derivative from* the value of a good X, then X is more valuable than Y, all else being equal. More specifically, if X is the *source* of the value of Y – that is, if X is the *end for the sake of which* Y is valuable – then X is more valuable than Y.[22,23]

For example, consider the difference between having the opportunity to provide education to underserved communities (Y) and actually providing it (X). The opportunity to provide education to underserved communities is morally significant because it represents the possibility of benefiting those communities. However, its value depends on the value of its end, namely, the actual provision of education to underserved communities. If the actual provision of education added no value to the possibility of providing education, then there would be no plausible explanation for why we would consider the possibility valuable in the first place (Burgess 2010). Accordingly, since the actual provision of education (X) is what gives value to the possibility (Y) – i.e., it is the end for the sake of which the possibility (Y) is valuable – it follows that the former is more valuable than the latter.

Similarly, I argue that "moral personhood" is a more valuable status-conferring property than "expected personhood". This is because maintaining that "expected personhood" is a morally significant property, which confers present moral status upon future persons, presupposes that "moral personhood" is also a morally relevant property that grounds moral status. More precisely, the former derives its moral significance from the latter. It would not only be incoherent to claim that "expected personhood" is valuable unless "moral personhood" is also valuable; more fundamentally, "expected personhood" is valuable only if and because "moral personhood" is valuable. In other words, the moral significance of "expected personhood" necessarily depends on the moral significance of "moral personhood". We would have no plausible explanation for why we would care about future persons *qua* "expected persons" if we did not first accept that being a "moral person" is something of fundamental moral value. Therefore, "moral personhood" is the source of value for "expected personhood" – the former is the end for the sake of which the latter is valuable. Accordingly, "moral personhood" is a more valuable status-conferring property than "expected

personhood" because it is what gives value to "expected personhood". This priority of value, therefore, provides a principled justification for ascribing to present persons a moral status that is superior to that of future persons, at the present time.

We have now come full circle. The argument for the intergenerational moral inequality between present persons and distant future persons can be formulated as follows:

1. Present persons have moral status *qua* "moral persons", whereas distant future persons have *present* moral status *qua* "expected persons".
2. "Moral personhood" is a distinct and more valuable status-conferring property than "expected personhood" because the former is the source of the value of the latter.
3. Therefore, "moral personhood" confers a superior moral status than "expected personhood".
4. Accordingly, present persons have a moral status that is superior to that of distant future persons *at the present time*.

5. Implications

The previous analysis of deontological longtermism yields two main conclusions:

1. Distant future persons have present moral status *qua* right-holders. Therefore, present persons have directed duties to respect their present rights here and now, regardless of how the future unfolds.
2. Distant future people do not have equal moral status at the present time: present persons have a moral status *qua* moral persons that is superior to distant future people's present moral status *qua* expected persons.

In this section, I examine how this theoretical framework informs the way present persons should balance their duties towards one another with their duties to distant future people.

To start with, it will be helpful to recall the distinction between moral status *simpliciter* and *equal* moral status discussed in section 2. The former determines what is owed to a moral status-holder *independently of* what is owed to other moral status-holders. The latter, in contrast, concerns what is owed to a moral status-holder *compared to* what is owed to other moral status-holders.

This conceptual distinction enables us to explain what is entailed, and what is not, by a rejection of intergenerational moral equality.[24] First, we can see that denying that distant future persons have *equal* moral status does not imply that (i) they lack moral status altogether, or that (ii) they have a *low* moral status. Thus, holding that distant future people do not have equal moral status, and therefore they do not have *equally stringent* rights *qua* moral equals, is compatible with (i) affirming that they have *some* rights *qua* moral status-holders, as argued in section 3. Furthermore, it is also consistent with (ii) maintaining that they have a *high* moral status, which grounds a wide range of rights, such as, for example, the right to be provided with a sustainable environment and the right to be left with sufficient material resources.

Second, and perhaps more surprisingly, affirming that distant future persons do not have equal moral status does not even entail that *every* right of present persons overrides *every* right of distant future people. This is because the degree of stringency of rights depends not only on the degree of an entity's moral status but also on the weight of the interests at stake in cases of scarce resources and conflicting claims. To illustrate: many believe that nonhuman animals have a moral status that is inferior to that of human beings. However, this does not imply that inflicting a significant amount of pain on nonhuman animals is morally preferable to causing a very small amount

of pain on human beings. Proponents of human moral superiority can consistently hold that the inequality of the weight of the interests at stake outweighs the inequality of moral status between human beings and nonhuman animals in this case. Hence, even if human beings have a moral status that is superior to that of nonhuman animals, this does not entail that the most fundamental rights of nonhuman animals should always be overridden by the less fundamental rights of human beings.

Similarly, then, in *Climate Change*, the wrongness of the present persons' decision to adopt Policy Y does not rest on a commitment to intergenerational moral equality. Even if distant future persons do not have equal moral status, it is difficult to deny that the inequality of the weight of the interests at stake – suffering from severe consequences due to climate change vs. being provided with some trivial benefits – outweighs the inequality of moral status between present and distant future persons. It follows from this that even if distant future persons do not have equal moral status, *some* of their fundamental rights might trump *some* of the less fundamental rights of present persons.

Rejecting intergenerational moral equality, however, entails that at least when the interests at stake are *equally* weighty, priority should be granted to the rights of present persons over those of distant future people. To appreciate this, consider *Revised Climate Change*. In *Revised Climate Change* Policy X, which allocates resources to mitigate and adapt to the worst effects of climate change, does not change. Policy Y, instead, now uses the same resources to alleviate the conditions of those present persons who are unable to meet their basic nutritional needs for a sustained period of time. If we assume that Policy X and Policy Y now represent two equally weighty interests, then rejecting intergenerational moral equality suggests that present persons should opt for Policy Y. This is because, from a deontological perspective, when the interests at stake are equally weighty, the degree of moral status of the status-holders is the only morally relevant factor to

determine the degree of stringency of the right to those interests. Therefore, the rights of those beings with a superior moral status should have priority in cases of conflicting claims to *equally weighty interests*.

To conclude, in this section, I explored the implications that the rejection of intergenerational moral equality has for deontological longtermism. I argued that denying that distant future people have *equal* moral status is consistent with affirming that they have at least some rights against present persons, and that some of their most fundamental rights can even override some of the less fundamental rights of present persons. Accordingly, a commitment to intergenerational moral equality is not necessary to justify moderate longtermism, whereby positively influencing the future is *a* key moral priority of our time. However, if present persons and distant future people do not have equal moral status, this means that the rights of the former are more stringent than the rights of the latter when the interests at stake are equally weighty. Therefore, rejecting intergenerational moral equality is incompatible with strong longtermism, whereby positively influencing the future is *the* key moral priority of our time. At least when the interests at stake are equally weighty, our obligations towards our contemporaries trump our obligations towards distant future people.

6. Conclusion

Many of our actions can profoundly impact the lives of people who will inhabit this world in hundreds, thousands, or even millions of years. Thus, longtermists argue that present persons should promote the value of the far future by choosing those actions that will improve the well-being of distant future people. This view, however, has so far been primarily discussed within a

consequentialist normative framework. In this paper, I addressed this shortcoming by analysing longtermism from a deontological perspective.

I argued that, from this perspective, distant future people have present moral status *qua* expected persons, that is, persons with a sufficient degree of probability of existence. Thus, present persons have directed duties to respect their present rights, independently of the consequences. However, distant future people do not have *equal* moral status *at the present time*. This is because while distant future persons have a present moral status *qua* "expected persons", present persons have a moral status *qua* "moral persons". But "moral personhood" is a more valuable status-conferring property than "expected personhood". Therefore, present persons have a moral status that is superior to that of future persons. Consequently, distant future people do not have equally stringent rights *qua* moral equals, other things being equal.

This account of intergenerational moral inequality provides a coherent and plausible way to navigate the obligations that present persons owe to both one another and future generations. It demonstrates that the most fundamental longtermist concerns do not rest on a commitment to intergenerational moral equality: we, present persons, have a wide range of stringent directed duties towards distant future people, the violation of which entails wronging them, in particular, here and now, regardless of what happens in the future. However, we have an even wider set of more stringent directed duties *towards each other* as moral equals.

Notes

[1] See also Greaves, Thorstad, and Barrett (2025), Mogensen (2021), and Ord (2020).

[2] For some recent exceptions, see Curran (2025) and Hupfer (2025).

[3] For an instructive overview, see Meyer (2021).

[4] The question of the basis of *intragenerational* moral equality – that is, the question of what grounds the equal moral status of contemporaries – instead has recently gained increasing attention. See, for example, Carter (2011), Floris and Kirby (2024), Sangiovanni (2017), and Waldron (2017). This paper contributes to the literature on moral equality by investigating an aspect of this issue that has not yet been explored.

[5] To affirm that an agent, *A*, has acted wrongly is to say that *A's* action is morally impermissible. To affirm that *A* wronged an entity, *E*, in particular, is to say (in addition) that *A* has violated a directed duty *to E* (that is, a moral obligation that *A* has towards *E*, in particular), and thereby infringed *E's* claim-right against *A*. For further discussion of the distinction between "mere wrongdoing" and "wronging", and its connection to directed duties and rights, see Cruft (2013), May (2015), and Thompson (2004).

[6] According to a consequentialist account of moral status, instead, entities that have moral status are the object of an *undirected duty* to have their basic interests considered in the moral calculus, which aims to maximise the interests of all and only those entities that have moral status. See Singer (2011). For a typology of theories of moral status, see also Floris and Timmer (2025, pp. 3-5).

[7] On this deontological framework, "being a right-holder", "being the object of directed duties", and "being an entity that can be wronged" are equivalent descriptions of what it means to have moral status. As Frances M. Kamm puts it, "For to claim that you have a right to be helped by me […] is to claim that I have a directed duty *to you* (as subject), so that if I do not act I would not only be acting wrongly, I would also *wrong* you" (Kamm, 2007, p. 244). Therefore, in what

follows, what I say in the language of rights can be translated in the language of "directed duties" and "moral wrongs", and *vice versa*.

[8] Notice that "moral personhood" is a placeholder for *a* morally relevant property that confers the moral status of "persons". Moral philosophers disagree on what *specific* property grounds the moral status of a "person" (e.g., the capacity for rational agency or the capacity to care). For discussion, see Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2023). For the purposes of this paper, however, it is sufficient to assume that (nearly) all human beings have equal moral status *qua* moral persons. The salient question here is whether distant future persons also have moral status, and, if so, whether their moral status is equal to that of present persons.

[9] To be sure, I am not suggesting that deontologists completely disregard consequences when assessing the wrongness of an action. Rather, following Rahul Kumar, my suggestion is that, from a deontological perspective, the wrongness of an agent *A's* action does not *fundamentally* depend on its consequences for the victim, *V*, but primarily on the character of *A's* action itself, independently of whether *V* is harmed or benefited as a result (Kumar, 2003). For further discussion of different ways of distinguishing consequentialism and deontology, see Pettit (1989).

[10] By "owed to an entity, in particular", I mean that the duty is directed rather than undirected. Whether directed duties require the prior determination of the duty-holder's personal identity is a separate question, which I address below.

[11] See also Tim Mijers's instructive analysis of "zipper arguments" in intergenerational justice, which justify duties *regarding* future people rather than directed duties *to* future people (Meijers, 2023).

[12] In this paper, then, I adopt a "relational", rather than an agential, conception of moral status and rights. On this conception, to "have" moral status or rights is not to possess a capacity that one can

exercise. Rather, to have moral status consists in standing in a normative relation to moral agents; to have rights is to stand in a specific kind of normative relation in virtue of which others have directed duties, the violation of which wrongs the right-holder, in particular. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for inviting me to clarify this point.

[13] It is important to distinguish the notion of "expected persons" from other notions commonly used in population ethics and axiology, such as "potential persons" and "merely possible persons" (see, e.g., Feinberg, 1974, pp. 64-67; Weinberg, 2008). "Potential persons" is typically used to indicate those presently existing beings (e.g., infants) who are not yet actual moral persons – that is, they do not hold basic agential capacities up to a sufficient level – but have the *potential* to become moral persons. "Potentiality" thus refers to a latent ability that actual beings possess (Floris, 2021). Therefore, future persons are not potential persons in this sense. "Merely possible persons", by contrast, are defined as "those people who could have existed but didn't and those who might exist but won't" (Hare, 2007, p. 498). Accordingly, distant future people *qua* "expected persons" are not "merely possible persons", for they are not persons that *will not* exist in the future, but rather persons with a sufficient degree of probability of existence in the future.

[14] To be sure, this analogy is meant only to show that present existence is not a necessary condition for having a present moral status, rather than to defend a specific account of posthumous harm and posthumous interests. For further discussion of this point, see Bonnin (2019), Feinberg (1977), and Partridge (1981).

[15] Note that the question of the *content* of the moral obligations towards distant future people is also affected by epistemic uncertainty. For example, it is difficult to determine exactly what the fundamental interests of distant future persons are because we lack specific knowledge about what they will need. Additionally, it is hard to understand how to address such interests because we

cannot precisely predict the impact that our present actions (or inactions) will have on the distant future. For further discussion, see Ferretti (2023) and Finneron-Burns (2024).

[16] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

[17] For instructive discussion, see Cass and Santos Campos (2025).

[18] For an instructive overview, see Roberts (2022).

[19] It might be objected that consequentialist accounts avoid the non-identity problem, insofar as they embrace "impersonal views" that do not rest on the "person affecting intuition" according to which "*what is bad must be bad for someone*" (Parfit, 1984, p. 321). From the standpoint of consequentialist impersonal views, we ought not to improve the well-being of specific individuals but rather to ensure that, regardless of who exists now or in the future, the total well-being of the entire group is maximised compared to any alternative group of individuals who might have existed. However, impersonalism runs up against another challenging problem in population ethics: if what matters is the total and average well-being, then a decrease in the quality of lives within a population can be offset by a sufficiently large increase in the population size (Arrhenius, Ryberg, and Tännsjö, 2026). This leads to the so-called "repugnant conclusion" (Parfit, 1984, ch. 17).

[20] I address the question of the relevant temporal unit of *intragenerational* moral equality in (Floris and Spotorno, 2024: 581-585)

[21] Notice that affirming that future persons have a moral status that is inferior to that of present persons has no direct implications for whether future persons have equal moral status *among themselves*. Call this the question of *intra-moral equality among future persons*.

Indeed, one might worry that my view yields a binary structure – two moral tiers – rather than a gradual decrease in moral value as we move away from the present. But I think this conclusion can be resisted. If future persons' moral status is grounded in being "expected persons", and

if "expected personhood" is plausibly understood as a *scalar* property (insofar as different future persons have different degrees of probability of existence in the future), then it follows that the degree of moral status of future persons varies with the degree to which they possess the relevant status-conferring property. For further discussion of the so-called "variations objection", see, for example, Arneson (1999) and Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2024).

That said, nothing in my argument requires treating expected personhood as scalar rather than as a *range* property, whereby future persons would count as moral equals once a sufficient threshold of probability of existence is met. Whether expected personhood should be considered as a scalar or a range property, however, is a further question, which would require an independent argument. For further discussion on range property views, see Carter (2011), Floris (2023b), Rawls (1971), and Waldron (2017). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for inviting me to address this question.

[22] Here, I am indebted to Christine Korsgaard's insightful analysis of Aristotle and Kant's views on the priority of value of the final good. As she observed, despite disagreeing about the exact nature of the final good – contemplation for Aristotle and the goodwill for Kant – they agreed that, being the source of value for any other good, the final good is unconditionally and uniquely valuable. In other words, by conferring value on other things, the final good is more valuable than the things it bestows value upon. See Korsgaard (1986).

[23] It might be objected that a property X can be the source of value of a property Y without necessarily implying that X is more valuable than Y. For instance, a suspenseful plot might be necessary for a novel's value, but it does not follow that the novel is less valuable than the plot itself. This objection, however, misunderstands what it is for X to be the source of Y's value. As defined in this context, X is the source of Y's value not because X is a necessary constituent of what makes

Y valuable, but because X is the end for the sake of which Y is valuable. In this sense, the suspenseful plot is not the source of value of the novel, since the plot is not the end for the sake of which the novel is valuable.

[24] I discuss the implications of rejecting *intragenerational* moral equality in (Floris, 2023a).

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