

Climate breakdown, the loss of biodiversity, unaligned artificial intelligence, uncontrollable pandemics, and escalating armed conflicts: humanity faces cascading and overlapping risks that threaten its long-term survival. While each of these emerging crises alone has the potential to significantly degrade our species' future prospects, their interaction causes a danger even larger than the sum of its parts: a so-called polycrisis. At the extreme, a global polycrisis poses an existential challenge that could lead to civilisational collapse and ultimately human extinction. As a result of converging shocks, the World Economic Forum 2023 warned that the world may see such an event by the end of the decade.

How, then, do we tackle this new and burgeoning risk landscape? The traditional frameworks for managing risks are ill-equipped to deal with the complexity and magnitude of today's challenges. New ways of thinking and acting are urgently required for this task.

Against this background, a growing movement of researchers, policymakers, and activists is dedicated to the study and mitigation of existential risks. Toby Ord, a moral philosopher and leading figure in this field, offers the following definition: "An existential risk is a risk that threatens the destruction of humanity's long-term potential." On this account, humanity would not have to go literally extinct for an existential risk to be realised, since the destruction of its potential would already occur if humanity were no longer the master of its own fate. While this notion is thought-provoking, the idea of humanity's 'potential' is certainly open for different interpretations. 800 years ago, the European intellectuals of these times would have expressed views about the human potential that were entirely different from those of today. And academics in other parts of the world today might give quite different answers about the human potential than Oxford scholars (who sometimes delve in techno-utopian dreams).

An alternative definition of 'existential risks', offered here by the editors, has it that they are risks that lead to a breakdown of human-made systems to an extent that the survivors can barely fulfil their basic needs. While still being open to different interpretations as to which kind of ecological, social, technological or other catastrophes might cause this sort of breakdown, the idea of human needs provides a solid basis for assessing the standard of living of the residual mankind.

Existential threats can be divided into anthropogenic risks – those that stem from human actions – and natural risks – those that originate from conditions beyond human control, for instance major asteroids, massive volcanic eruptions, or gamma-ray bursts from stellar explosions. The odds of natural catastrophes have remained rather constant over the last millions of years, that is: constantly low. If they were different, we would likely not be here. From this, it seems reasonable to expect that their likelihood will remain low over the next thousands of years as well. On the other hand, anthropogenic risks, to the extent that we are aware of them, have massively increased and accelerated in the era of the Anthropocene.

The unfolding of such risks could involve massive immediate casualties, but also sustained and widespread decline in the quality of life of future generations. For this reason, protection from existential risks is an intergenerational public good on a global scale. To embrace this responsibility, today's societies urgently need to overcome their myopic biases and radically expand their timescales to encompass long-term futures. In this way, humanity could not only reduce existential risks but also imagine and unlock a pathway toward the flourishing of life in the long run – a pathway that could be called existential hope.

Within intergenerational justice research, the connection to the risk literature is rarely made. That is why the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations devoted its biannually Intergenerational Justice Award to this topic. The best papers are published in a special double issue, IGJR 1-2022 and 2-2022.

In the first article, Johannes Kattan suggests that 'extinction risks' ought to be distinguished more sharply from other aspects of 'existential risks'. Human extinction is an outcome that can be ascertained rather precisely in biological terms. According to Kattan, however, it should be analysed separately from scenarios in which the subjective quality of human life is the concern. Nuclear war is taken as a primary example for illustrating an extinction risk and for discussing humanity's resilience to such threats. Kattan concludes that, despite the unprecedented damage it might cause, it is unlikely that a nuclear war would lead to the end of the human species.

The second article, written by Marina Moreno, covers a different aspect. To understand the background of her concerns, one should be aware that myopia is usually seen as something negative in the literature on intergenerational justice. Long-term thinking is key to human survival, write dozens of scholars, unisono. For Moreno, anti-presentism comes with its own problems, however. She takes issue with longtermism understood as a theory which holds that our moral focus should be on the long-term future, and that current and medium-term moral problems are comparatively insignificant. Moreno's paper explores the implications of rejecting the premise of moral aggregation of individuals. She concludes that non-aggregationism does not support longtermist conclusions.

Issue 1-2022 then concludes with two book reviews. Tolga Soydan reviews Toby Ord's influential: *The Precipice. Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*. Finally, Grace Clover reviews William MacAskill's second monograph *What We Owe the Future*.

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