

# The Life-Years Movement

A Unifying Perspective For Plural Futures

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## Executive Summary



- Writing in a time of deep division, I suggest a new pragmatic approach to grounding governance & ethics based on **maximizing total life-years over the long term** (e.g. reaching and maintaining maximum **sustainable** population, in the context of a country)
- By fixing the form of ethical concern & political responsibility in this more empirical way, we are able to foreground the crux of current practical disagreement: **whose life-years are of primary concern?**
- I argue **it is critical to accept different perspectives** on the answer to this question, both as both a matter of practical pluralism, and ethical irreducibility
- A government following this view, aiming to eg. maximize citizen life-years (CITLYs) per dollar over its planning window, would have **the following emerge as top priorities**:
  - **Reduce infant and child mortality**
  - **Reduce suicide, drug overdose, and failure to thrive among young adults**
  - **Increase rate of family formation**
  - **Rationalize end-of-life spending given budgetary constraints**
- Recentring policy focus away from e.g. GDP and tax revenue, I briefly discuss the implications of understanding 'money' as a store of human motivational energy (more precisely just one form of it) from a personal, practical, and societal perspective.
- In this framing 'money' is comparable to oil or uranium- all forms of potential energy we use to do work, but without moral content in and of themselves, contra classical liberal or Marxist theories.
- A more grounded view of human motivation allows **a productive, balanced critique of capitalism**. This also yields suggestions for non-traditional, and at times classical policy interventions towards the goal of maximizing life-years
- Even for a government (or person) with a given working definition of focal lives, **much uncertainty remains**. We discuss the hot-button issues of immigration and integration, attempting to lay productive lines for empirical questioning, as opposed to unending debate.
- On longer planning horizons, new insights from evolutionary theory suggest **strategies to prevent ruin to our life-years of primary concern**, via restraint, innovative exploration, and pursuit of non-zero-sum dynamics, with deference given to inherited enduring mechanisms from key societal 'founding' events.
- I briefly outline the underlying **"Heirs of Life-Years" (HOLYs) meta-ethical framework**, based in true libertarian choice on a meta-ethical identitarian access, with maximizing life-years fixed as the form of ethical concern.

## Finding Unity Amongst Division

Let's start with some places where most people agree:

- If someone asked you to risk your life to save a baby, it would be unethical not to at least consider it. Why?
- Most people recoil when hearing insurance actuaries assign dollar values to years of lost life. Why?
- Most of us reject the idea that the rise of AI and robots means human beings won't have any "value." Why?

The answers are straightforward once we look past the emotions—there's a pattern here, almost mathematical in its clarity. The most obvious fact about the baby versus yourself: the baby has far more **expected years of life** remaining. And despite living in a capitalist society where we're conditioned to think our economic value defines us, we still don't want to hear the actuary's cold calculations.

I have a simple proposal: Let's take what the baby example reveals and build from there. We should aim for more "years of life"—life-years—as the fundamental good. Putting money ahead of that inverts the proper order. Money is a tool (and I'll unpack this more later), not an end. The only thing that should ever take priority over life-years... is more life-years. Never dollars.

### What We're Actually Measuring

We live in an era of unprecedented material abundance. By most economic measures, we have never been more successful. Gross Domestic Product continues its upward march in most developed nations. We produce and consume more goods and services than at any point in human history. Our technological capabilities would seem like magic to our grandparents. The fruits of production, by any measure, are astounding.

And yet, there is a deep unease. Depression and anxiety rates are rising, particularly among the young. Loneliness has reached epidemic proportions. Trust in institutions, in communities, and in each other has declined precipitously. And perhaps most telling: across nearly every developed nation, people are having far fewer children than would be needed to sustain current populations.

We keep checking the numbers we know how to check—GDP, stock markets, productivity metrics—and finding success. But we've been measuring fruit production while missing that we're eating our seeds. The question is: what should we be measuring instead?

**The Life-Years Movement proposes a simple reframing: we should measure life-years. Not just how much we produce and consume in the present, but how many years of life we enable,**

both now and in the future.

- How many infant deaths can we prevent?
  - How many years are we losing to suicide, overdose, and despair among the young?
  - Are we supporting people in forming families and raising the next generation?
  - Are we spending our final medical resources wisely, or pouring them into marginally extending lives already well-lived while neglecting those just beginning?

When you frame the question this way, our priorities start to look strange. We spend enormous resources on end-of-life care in the final months of life, but struggle to provide basic support for young families starting out. We treat teenage suicide as a mental health crisis to be managed with therapy and medication, but rarely ask what it says about the environment we're asking young people to navigate. We watch fertility rates collapse across the developed world and treat it as a series of individual choices, rather than a system-level failure.

Life-years thinking cuts through this confusion. It asks: what maximizes the total length of human lives, both in the present and into the future? The answer isn't always obvious, and it certainly isn't captured by GDP.

## Money, Motivation, and What We're Missing

LYM makes clear that it believes the ultimate source of 'value' is life-years. More broadly, it believes modern usage of the word 'value' keeps confusing different things:

- What people's *motivations* show as 'desirable' ('These goods will fetch good value in the market'; 'The community showed how much it valued the church through high attendance')
- The pluralistic and contextual *norms* different societies use to help them coordinate and succeed ('These values represent who we are')
- *The universal source of value* (the lives that make up a community or polity, now and in the future)

To understand why we ended up here, it helps to think clearly about what money actually is. In the most fundamental sense, money, following the first usage of 'value', above represents stored motivational energy—a claim on someone else's future effort. When I receive payment for my work, that money embodies the energy I expended, stored in a form that can be exchanged for others' energy later.

This works beautifully for economic transactions. Money enables specialization, trade, and the complex coordination of human effort that creates prosperity. The problem isn't that money is bad—it's that **money only captures one channel of human motivation**. We're economic beings, yes, but we're also social beings, communal beings, and meaning-seeking beings. We're motivated by connection, purpose, reciprocity, legacy, and love. These motivations don't convert easily to economic form.

When we optimize purely for economic metrics like GDP, we're optimizing for satisfaction of economic motivations while ignoring or actively starving these other channels. You can't buy friendship, though you can buy entertainment. You can't buy meaning, though you can buy distraction. You can't buy the experience of raising a child, though you can pay for childcare. The economic channel and the social, communal, and reproductive channels operate on different frequencies, and they don't harmonize as well as we've assumed.

This is why rising GDP accompanies declining well-being. We've gotten very good at producing and consuming in the economic channel while the other channels atrophy. We're richer than ever in economic terms, and poorer than we've been in generations in terms of connection, community, and the confidence to bring new life into the world.

## **The AI Question: A Mirror Showing What We Actually Believe**

There's another way to see that our current metrics have failed us, and it's coming at us fast: artificial intelligence and robotics. As these technologies advance, we're increasingly forced to confront an uncomfortable question in economic terms. If machines can do most of what humans currently do for wages—and do it better, faster, and cheaper—what happens to human economic value? The logical endpoint of pure economic thinking is a world where most people have zero or even negative economic value. They consume resources but produce nothing that can't be produced more efficiently by machines.

When stated this baldly, something in us recoils. And that recoil is important—it's telling us something about the inadequacy of the frame itself.

This is what philosophers call a *reductio ad absurdum*—a reduction to absurdity. When following your premises to their logical conclusion produces something manifestly absurd, it's time to question your premises, not accept the conclusion. If our framework for thinking about human value leads inexorably to "most humans will be worthless," perhaps we're measuring the wrong thing.

The life-years perspective cuts through this confusion cleanly. People don't have value because they're economically productive. They have value because they're alive, because their years of life matter, because the future they might create and the experiences they might have are intrinsically meaningful. A person who produces nothing in economic terms but lives a full life surrounded by family and community hasn't failed at being human. They've succeeded at what actually matters.

**This doesn't mean economics is useless or that productivity doesn't matter.** Resources are genuinely scarce. The ability to produce goods and services efficiently creates real benefits. Trade and specialization unlock enormous potential energy. These insights from economics remain true and important. But they're insights about means, not ends. **The economy is meant to serve human life, not the other way around.** When economists speak of economic efficiency, we should remind them - efficiency is about how good you are at converting energy into something. If we're not sure the system cares about human life-years- what is being made

'efficient', then? 'When we find ourselves asking "what will humans be worth when machines can do everything," we've confused the tool for the purpose.

The AI transition gives us an opportunity—perhaps a final one—to get our priorities straight. Are we building systems that maximize economic productivity at the expense of human life and meaning? Or are we building systems that use our productivity to enable more and better human life-years? Are we measuring success by GDP growth, or by whether people can form families, build communities, and live full lives?

The choice becomes stark when we imagine a world of material abundance created by AI and automation. Do we treat that abundance as making humans obsolete, or as finally freeing us to focus on what we're actually here for—living good lives, raising the next generation, and passing on something worth having to those who come after us? The economic frame gives you the first answer. The life-years frame gives you the second. Choose wisely.

## What Should We Prioritize?

If we adopt life-years as our metric—with citizen life-years (CITLYs) being a natural starting point for a given polity—certain priorities become immediately obvious, cutting across traditional political divides.

**Reduce infant and child mortality.** Every infant death is fifty to eighty years lost. Every childhood death is a tragedy measured in decades. Modern medicine has made enormous progress here, but inequalities persist, and in some communities, infant mortality rates would shock us if we paid attention. From a life-years perspective, there are few higher-return investments than ensuring every child makes it to adulthood.

**Address the youth crisis.** Youth suicide and drug overdoses represent massive life-years losses—each death is sixty or seventy years that won't be lived. But the crisis goes beyond mortality. We're raising a generation reporting unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. Something about the environment we've created is hostile to young humans finding their footing and forming families. Whether you think the problem is social media, economic precarity, loss of community, or something else entirely, the life-years framework says this should be our highest priority. These are the years we're losing first.

**Support family formation.** Across the political spectrum, people are having fewer children than they report wanting. The barriers are both economic—housing costs, childcare costs, career penalties—and cultural. Whatever your politics, if people want children but feel unable to have them, we've failed. And the math is stark: falling fertility means fewer total life-years in every generation that follows.

**Rationalize end-of-life spending.** Modern medicine can extend life in its final months and years through increasingly expensive interventions. Some of this spending genuinely improves

the quality of remaining life. But much of it marginally extends life that's already been well-lived, at enormous cost. From a life-years perspective, shifting even a fraction of this spending to support young families or prevent youth deaths would yield far greater returns. This isn't about death panels or devaluing elderly lives—it's about honest accounting of where our resources go and what they accomplish.

These priorities are, or should be, non-partisan. The left can frame them as addressing inequality and providing social support. The right can frame them as supporting families and traditional values. The libertarian can note that many barriers to family formation are policy-created. What unites these perspectives is the recognition that GDP growth is a poor proxy for what we actually care about, and that life-years gives us a better target.

## The Hard Question: Who Counts?

Life-Years Based Governance (LYBG) focuses on citizen life-years as the bedrock of a government's primary concern, and this raises immediate questions. What about non-citizens? What about immigration? In our current moment, where these questions touch raw political nerves, we need to address them directly.

The life-years framework doesn't provide easy answers, but it does provide clearer thinking. Immigration with naturalization increases CITLYs directly—more citizens means more citizen life-years. However, **proper LYBG recognizes there are tradeoffs**, and they should be framed from the perspective of current citizens' life-years. In other words, LYBG asks:

- Given the benefits and costs to current citizens of accepting and integrating immigrants—across financial, social, and political channels:
  - 1. What immigration regime maximizes expected CITLYs over our planning window?
  - 2. What tail-risk or high-reward scenarios should we be concerned with?

### **Neither "zero immigration" nor "open borders" obviously maximizes citizen life-years.**

The answer depends on capacity for integration, speed of cultural adaptation, and maintenance of the social trust and institutional stability that enable high-quality life-years for all citizens. The planning horizon matters greatly: policies optimizing for the next decade may differ from those optimizing for the next century.

This isn't about ethnicity, culture war, or identity politics. It's about what is pragmatically possible to enable the human lives a planner or official is taking responsibility for, at scale. High-trust societies with strong norms and functioning institutions produce better life-years outcomes. Rapid demographic change can strain these, regardless of who's arriving. But overly rigid boundaries can produce stagnation, loss of dynamism, and missed opportunities for human connection and innovation.

The honest answer is that we don't know the optimal immigration policy from a life-years perspective. It's probably somewhere between extremes, varies by context, and needs to be

discovered through careful attention to outcomes rather than declared from first principles. What matters is that we can discuss this in terms of life-years—a concrete, measurable, and unequivocal source of value—rather than in tribal terms designed to signal political loyalty.

Some will argue that focusing on citizens at all is morally suspect, that we should care about all human life-years equally. Others will argue that even citizen-focused policy is too expansive, that the proper focus is one's own family, community, or nation more narrowly defined. These disagreements are real and, we argue, irreducible. Which brings us to the deeper question: how do we think about ethics when we disagree about who counts?

### Heirs of Life-Years: A Meta-Ethics for Plural Futures

The Life-Years Movement emerges from a broader ethical framework - 'Heirs of Life-Years', or 'HOLYs'. The core insight is deceptively simple:

- If it's unethical to consider only yourself, **you have an obligation to consider at least some other lives.**
- If it's unethical to consider only the present, **you have an obligation to think about the future.**
- But as finite beings, **we cannot possibly consider all lives equally.**

**So we choose.** We define our "heirs"—those future people or lives we place first in our consideration, the intended inheritors of our life's effort. For some, their heirs might be their genetic descendants. For others, their nation's citizens. For others still, all of humanity, or even all sentient life. These choices are not derivable from pure reason. They're ethical primitives, acts of commitment that define who we're optimizing for.

Here's what's crucial: these different heir-definitions are not "right" or "wrong" in some absolute sense. They're different choices about scope and priority. Someone who defines their heirs as all humanity will support different policies than someone whose heirs are their nation's citizens, who will differ from someone focused on their own genetic lineage. **And that's fine.** That's not a bug in ethics—it's a feature of genuine pluralism.

What we can agree on, across these different heir-definitions, is that once you've chosen your heirs, **you should seek to maximize their life-years.** And in doing that work, we find unexpected convergences. Nearly everyone's heirs benefit from reduced infant mortality, from addressing youth crisis, from maintaining social trust and functioning institutions. Nearly everyone's heirs are hurt by short-term optimization that destabilizes systems or makes unnecessary zero-sum conflict more likely.

The HOLYs framework also draws on deep patterns from evolutionary history. Lineages that survived over deep time—from the earliest replicating molecules to modern human societies—are those that evolved certain architectural features: restraint rather than maximum exploitation, maintenance of diversity rather than ruthless optimization, cooperation rather than pure competition. The wisdom accumulated over billions of years of evolutionary filtering

suggests that longevity comes not from "survival of the fittest" in the naive sense, but from "longevity of the wisest"—those lineages that learned to avoid the self-destructive dynamics that killed off their competitors, and harnessed competition successfully.

This is directly relevant to our current situation. Modern civilization is optimizing hard along certain dimensions—economic growth, technological capability, information processing—while losing the restraint, diversity of approaches, and social cooperation that enabled survival through past transitions. We're acting like a naive Darwinian optimizer in a situation that historically has killed such optimizers. The Life-Years Movement is, in essence, an attempt to install the kind of wisdom that let complex systems survive major transitions in the past.

## **Where We Disagree and Where We Converge**

Let's be explicit about where genuine disagreements lie. If your heirs are all of humanity, you might support open borders and global redistribution. If your heirs are your nation's citizens, you might support selective immigration and prioritized domestic investment. If your heirs are your own children and their descendants, you might support policies that maximize intergenerational wealth transfer within families.

These positions follow legitimately from different heir-definitions. The debate isn't settled by pointing to logic or facts—it's a question of values and commitments. Someone who thinks all humans should count equally isn't more rational than someone who prioritizes their own people; they've just made a different choice about scope of concern.

What matters is being honest about these choices rather than pretending there's one obviously correct universal answer. And then, crucially, we need to find ways for people with different heir-definitions to coexist and cooperate. This requires something our current political discourse lacks: the ability to acknowledge deep disagreement while still negotiating in good faith.

Here's what we should be able to converge on, regardless of heir-definition:

Life-years is a reasonable metric. It's countable, meaningful, and captures something common to human flourishing and vitality. Whether your heirs are your family, your nation, or all humanity, their life-years matter.

We should avoid excessive zero-sum dynamics. Nearly everyone's heirs are worse off in a world of constant conflict and competition for fixed resources. Finding positive-sum paths benefits heirs of all kinds.

We should learn from history. Societies and systems that endured developed certain patterns—maintenance of trust, investment in the young, balance between innovation and stability. These patterns aren't arbitrary; they reflect hard-won wisdom about what enables human flourishing over time.

We should think long-term. Whatever your heir-definition, short-term extraction at the expense of long-term sustainability hurts the people you're trying to help.

And perhaps most importantly: we should be able to talk about these questions directly, without hiding behind claims of pure rationality or objective morality. The question "who are your heirs?" is a question about values and commitments. Answer it honestly, then let's discuss how different heir-definitions can coexist in a world where we have to share space and resources.

## Learning from Deep Time: Strategies for Long-Term Survival and Avoiding Ruin

On longer planning horizons—thinking in generations rather than election cycles—new insights from evolutionary theory offer guidance. The living ecosystems we see around us are the result of not simple 'survival of the fittest', but 'longevity of the wisest'. 'This meant - avoiding catastrophic mistakes: restraint over maximum exploitation, maintaining diversity of approaches rather than ruthless optimization, and preserving cooperative arrangements rather than pure zero-sum competition.

We use immigration again to illustrate this tail risks and rewards analysis.

### The High-Risk Tail

Even if average impacts are positive, rapid demographic change beyond integration capacity creates fragility in social trust and institutional function. The tail risk isn't just economic—it's political instability, breakdown of shared norms, loss of the social cohesion that enables cooperation at scale. When large segments of the population feel their communities are changing faster than they can adapt, the political system becomes vulnerable to disruption. From one perspective, this manifests as authoritarian backlash or ethnic nationalism gaining power. The restraint principle suggests maintaining immigration at rates that preserve buffer capacity in integration systems, even if this means forgoing some short-term benefits.

### The High-Reward Tail

Conversely, well-integrated immigration offers enormous upside over long horizons. Immigrant entrepreneurs create outsized numbers of successful companies and jobs. Cultural cross-pollination generates innovation—new perspectives solving problems that homogeneous groups couldn't see. Skills and networks spanning multiple countries provide adaptive capacity when global conditions shift. The reward isn't just economic productivity—it's civilizational resilience through maintained diversity of approaches and connections.

### The Planning Horizon Trade-Off

Over 10-20 years, integration costs and social friction dominate—the risk tail looms large. Over 50-100 years, the adaptive benefits become more salient, assuming successful integration preserved rather than destroyed social trust. Neither "zero immigration" (sacrifices long-term adaptive capacity and reward tail) nor "open borders" (ignores integration constraints and risk tail) is likely to maximize expected citizen life-years.

The framework doesn't tell you the exact right immigration rate—that depends on current institutional capacity, economic conditions, and geopolitical context. But it does clarify the trade-offs: you're balancing integration capacity constraints (risk of social fracture) against adaptive benefits (reward from diversity), with the optimal point shifting based on your planning horizon and current slack in your integration systems.

### Deference to Enduring Mechanisms

Traditional institutions around citizenship, naturalization requirements, and integration expectations evolved over centuries of trial and error. They may encode wisdom about maintaining social trust at scale that isn't obvious from first principles. This doesn't mean blindly preserving all traditions, but it does mean the burden of proof lies with radical changes. Before eliminating citizenship distinctions or naturalization requirements entirely, we should ask: what function were these serving? What kept societies stable through past transitions? Are we certain those stabilizing mechanisms are no longer needed?

The immigration debate often presents as pure values conflict. Life-years thinking reframes it as an empirical question: what regime maximizes expected citizen life-years while managing tail risks on both sides? Both excessive rigidity (losing adaptive capacity) and excessive speed (breaking social cohesion) reduce expected life-years over long horizons. The answer lies somewhere between, informed by honest assessment of current integration capacity and willingness to think in generational time scales.

## A Path Forward

The Life-Years Movement is not a political party or a single policy platform. It's a perspective, a way of thinking about what we're trying to accomplish as individuals, communities, and civilizations. It says: measure what matters, think about the future, and be honest about who you're optimizing for.

For policymakers, this means shifting focus from GDP growth to citizen life-years. It means asking, with every major expenditure and policy choice: does this increase the total life-years we enable, both now and in generations to come? It means being willing to redirect resources from low-return investments (marginal end-of-life interventions) to high-return ones (supporting young families, preventing youth deaths, building the social infrastructure that enables flourishing).

For individuals, this means clarifying your own heirs—who are you working for, and what kind of future are you trying to build for them? It means recognizing that economic success isn't the same as success in the other domains that make life worth living. It means being willing to invest in relationships, community, and the patient work of raising the next generation, even when those investments don't show up in any economic metric.

For all of us, it means recovering a sense of intergenerational obligation. We've lost sight of their role as stewards for the future making the same mistake. The demographic collapse across the developed world is the clearest signal we could receive: we've lost confidence in the future.

Life-years thinking gives us a framework for recovering that confidence. It says: your heirs, which you chose, matter, their lives matter, and the length and quality of their lives should be your highest priority. It says: the systems we build should be judged by whether they enable human flourishing across generations, not just quarterly profits or GDP growth. It says: we can disagree about scope and priorities while still recognizing our shared interest in a future where human life continues and flourishes.

That choice is before us now. We can continue optimizing for the metrics we know how to measure, watching our numbers rise while our societies hollow out. Or we can shift to measuring what actually matters: the lives we enable, the years we make possible, the future we're building for the people we've chosen to care about.

The Life-Years Movement is an invitation to make that shift—to see clearly what we've been missing, to name what we actually value, and to build systems that serve human flourishing across generations. It won't be easy. It will require difficult conversations about priorities, trade-offs, and who counts. It will require changing policies, institutions, and habits that feel entrenched.

But the alternative is watching the life-years of our heirs shrink, while congratulating ourselves on our huge pile of joules. And we're running out of time to choose differently.

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*"Ad Vitam, Cum Sapientia"*  
*Towards Life, With Wisdom*