

Preventing Existential Risks and Other Disasters

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On 30 and 31 May 2025, The Center for the Study of Bioethics, The Hastings Center and The Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics organized in Montenegro a conference: “Existential Threats and Other Disasters: How Should We Address Them?”. The conference built on the Center for the Study of Bioethics’ tradition of bringing together top experts in the field of (bio)ethics and other disciplines in order to discuss novel issues. This time it partnered with The Hastings Center and The Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics.

The Center for the Study of Bioethics (CSB), founded by Vojin Rakić, was designed to stimulate scientific debate on a variety of bioethical issues, including the establishment of morally responsible policies of creating better humans and better lives. With the passing of time, CSB broadened its activities to other, mostly ethical, issues: i.e., the relation between cognitive and moral enhancement, rare diseases, the ethics of genome editing, the ethics of AI, the ethics of (creating) posthumans, space travel and other means of communicating with extraterrestrial intelligence, the ethics of surrogate motherhood, pandemics and bio-terrorism. CSB is located in Belgrade, Serbia, but is global in scope. To that end, it regularly organizes international conferences and events, as well as global partnerships. Its members publish books primarily in European countries and in the United States, as well as articles in international scientific journals.

The Hastings Center, founded in 1969, has been addressing fundamental ethical issues in health, health care, life sciences research, emerging technologies, and the environment for over 50 years. The Hastings Center accomplishes its mission by producing original research, publishing two journals, engaging the public through a variety of in-person and online events, and providing service to the field of bioethics through its visiting scholar program, widely read blog, workshops for journalists, and other platforms.

The Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, founded by Julian Savulescu in 2003, with funding generously provided by the Uehiro Foundation on Ethics and Education, chaired by Mr Eiji Uehiro, established the Uehiro Chair in Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford. The goal of the Centre was to encourage and support debate and deeper rational reflection on practical ethics. The Centre as a whole did not promote a particular philosophy, approach, solution or point of view, though its individual members were able to provide arguments to a substantive conclusion as a basis for dialogue, engagement, and reflection. It is the method of rational analytic practical ethics that it aimed to advance. The vision was Socratic, not missionary. The Centre sought to be inclusive, encouraging debate between different approaches to ethics, aiming to resolve disagreements and identifying key areas of consensus. The Centre has now been succeeded by the Uehiro Oxford Institute, which continues the mission of the Centre, with its roots in philosophy, while promoting inter-disciplinarity and public engagement.

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In light of the potential existential threats humanity has been facing during the previous years, and still may be facing, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the ever-present threat of nuclear war, it is nowadays difficult to imagine a more important issue in various scientific disciplines than the issue of existential risks to humanity and the ethically responsible possibilities of lowering their likelihood.

The Montenegro conference brought together not only the heads of the three institutions that organized the event (Vojin Rakić, Vardit Ravitsky and Roger Crisp), but also many of the most important (bio)ethicists in the field, including Peter Singer, Julian Savulescu, Josephine Johnston, Ingmar Persson, Anders Sandberg, James Hughes, Nicholas Agar, Arthur Caplan, and many others.

The conference addressed themes such as pandemics; bio-terrorism; nuclear threats; artificial intelligence as an existential threat to humans; cognitive and moral bio-enhancement as a means of decreasing existential threats to humanity; climate change as an existential threat to humanity; food safety; food production and population growth as a possible existential risk to humanity, as well as risks of germ-line genome editing and other forms of genetic engineering for the future of humanity.

An essential outcome of the conference was a statement on various existential threats to humanity and ethically responsible means of lowering their likelihood. This statement was in a sense a summary of the conference, as well as (some of) the conclusions formulated in the framework of a panel at the end of the conference. The statement contained a call on governments and international organizations to appreciate existential risks and other disasters humanity faces, as well as to act upon this appreciation (<https://www.csb.eu.com/conference/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Montenegro-Existential-Risk-Conference-URGENT-APPEAL.6.25-1.pdf>).

The statement emphasizes the risks to the survival of humankind, most of them created by human beings, whether intentionally, like bio-terrorism, or unintentionally, like climate change or the risk posed by the creation of an artificial super-intelligence that is not aligned with our values. It warned that these risks are not being treated by governments with the seriousness or urgency that they deserve.

The statement gains support through reference to two claims made by Toby Ord in his 2020 book, *The Precipice*. Ord estimated the probability of our species becoming extinct in the next 100 years to 16-17%, or one in six. He also estimated that the proportion of world GDP that humanity spends on interventions aimed at reducing this risk is less than 0.001%.

In an update that appeared in July 2024 (<https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/iKLLSYHvnhgcpoBxH/the-precipice-revisited>), Ord argues that because new evidence suggests that the most extreme climate-change scenarios are unlikely, the existential risk posed by climate change is less than he thought it was in 2020. On the other hand, the war in Ukraine means that the risk of nuclear war causing our extinction is higher, while the risks from super-intelligent AI and pandemics are, in his view, lower in some respects and higher in others. Ord sees the focus on chatbots as taking AI in a less dangerous direction, because chatbots are not agents. Nonetheless, he regards the increased competition in the race to create advanced artificial general intelligence as likely to lead to cutting corners on AI safety.

Overall, Ord has not changed his estimate – which he admits is very rough – that there is a one in six chance that our species will not survive the next 100 years. He welcomes the fact that there is now increased global interest in reducing the risks of extinction, and

offers as examples the inclusion of the topic in the 2021 report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations (<https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/>), and its prominence on the agenda of the international group of former world leaders known as The Elders (<https://theelders.org/news/elders-new-strategy-sets-out-address-humanity-s-existential-threats>).

The Montenegro statement urges governments to work cooperatively in order to prevent existential risks and other disasters and calls especially on affluent countries' governments to invest "significant resources" in finding the best ways to reduce risks of human extinction. Although the statement gives no indication of what "significant" means in this context, Ord has elsewhere suggested a commitment of 1% of global GDP to reduce the risks of our species becoming extinct (<https://www.nti.org/risky-business/nti-seminar-philosopher-toby-ord-existential-risk-and-future-humanity/>). That is a thousand times more than his 2020 estimate of how much governments were then spending on this task, but it would be hard to argue that it is too much (see Peter Singer's arguments and formulations in <https://www.csb.eu.com/conference/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/singer-234-Will-We-Survive-the-Next-100-Years.pdf>).

In addition to the conference statement as an essential outcome of the Montenegro event, *The Journal of Ethics and Emerging Technologies* (JEET) offered conference participants the opportunity to publish in a Special Issue the papers they presented at the conference or other texts that foster the debate on existential risks to humanity. In the articles that follow, various key themes of the conference are addressed by Anders Sandberg, Vojin Rakić and Ana Katić, Nicholas Agar and Murilo Vilaça, James Hughes, Josephine Johnston, Oliver Feeney, Simon Knutsson, Alice Cavolo and Alexandra Kornienko.

References

Ord, Toby 2020. *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.