

How Much Should We Spend to Reduce A.I.'s Existential Risk?

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Amazing progress in A.I.

- OpenAI, Anthropic, Deepmind
 - Coding, math, browsing the internet to write reports
 - Protein folding, understanding DNA, medical diagnoses
- Scaling compute + algorithms = $\sim 10\times$ each year
 - Huge opportunities — could accelerate innovation and growth
- But also potentially large risks...
 - Highlighted by many experts (Hinton, Hassabis, Altman, Amodei, etc.)

Can we use economic analysis to think about the serious risks?

Two Versions of Existential Risk

- Bad actors:
 - Could use Claude/GPT-7 to cause harm
 - E.g. design a new virus that is extremely lethal and takes 3 weeks for symptoms
 - Nuclear weapons manageable because so rare; if every person had them...
- Alien intelligence:
 - How would we react to a spaceship near Pluto on the way to Earth?
 - “How do we have power over entities more powerful than us, forever?”
(Stuart Russell)

Outline

- Quick review of “The A.I. Dilemma” (2024 *AERI*)
- How much should we spend to reduce existential risk?
 - Covid-19 example
 - Using VSL (value of a statistical life) numbers
 - Model and calibration
 - Monte Carlo simulations to incorporate uncertainty regarding risk and effectiveness of mitigation

Even a selfish perspective suggests we are underinvesting in A.I. safety

Related Literature

- A.I. and Growth
 - Brynjolfsson-McAfee (2014), Aghion, Jones, and Jones (2019), Korinek-Trammell (2020), Nordhaus (2021), Acemoglu (2025), Jones-Tonetti (in progress)
 - Brynjolfsson, Korinek, and Agrawal (2024). Growiec and Prettnner (2025)
- Costs of A.I.?
 - Acemoglu and Lensman (2024), Restrepo (2024), Autor and Thompson (2025)
 - Jones (2016), Aschenbrenner (2024), Aschenbrenner and Trammell (2024)
- Catastrophic risks
 - Posner (2004), Matheny (2007), Ord (2020), MacAskill (2022), Shulman and Thornley (2025), Nielsen (2024)

A Thought Experiment (Jones, 2024 AERI)

- AGI more important than electricity, but more dangerous than nuclear weapons?
- The Oppenheimer Question:
 - If nothing goes wrong, AGI accelerates growth to 10% per year
 - But a one-time small chance that A.I. kills everyone
 - Develop or not? What risk are you willing to take: 1%? 10%?

What does standard economic analysis imply?

Findings:

- Log utility: Willing to take a 33% risk!
(Maybe entrepreneurs are not very risk averse?)
- More risk averse ($\gamma = 2$ or 3), risk cutoff plummets to 2% or less
 - Diminishing returns to consumption
 - We do not need a 4th flat screen TV or a 3rd iphone.
Need more years of life to enjoy already high living standards.
- But 10% growth \Rightarrow cure cancer, heart disease
 - Even $\gamma = 3$ willing to take large risks (25%) to cut mortality rates in half
 - Each person dies from cancer or dies from A.I. Just total risk that matters. . .
 - True even if the social discount rate falls to zero

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⇒ spend at least this much?
 - Are we massively underinvesting in mitigating this risk?

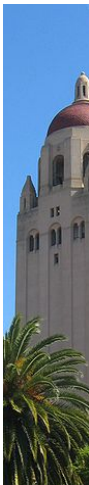
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- **Better intuition**
 - VSL = \$10 million
 - To avoid a mortality risk of 1% ⇒ $WTP = 1\% \times \$10 \text{ million} = \$100,000$
 - This is more than 100% of a year's per capita GDP
 - Xrisk over two decades ⇒ **annual investment of 5% of GDP**
- Large investments worthwhile, even with no value on future generations

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Incomplete so far: how effective is mitigation?



Model

Model

- Setup
 - One-time existential risk at probability $\delta(x)$
 - One-time investment x to mitigate the risk ($\delta'(x) < 0$)
 - Exogenous endowment y_t (grows rapidly via A.I.)

- Optimal mitigation:

$$\max_{x_t} u(c_t) + (1 - \delta(x_t)) \beta V_{t+1}$$

$$s.t. \quad c_t + x_t = y_t$$

$$V_{t+1} = \sum_{\tau=0}^{\infty} \beta^{\tau} u(y_{t+1+\tau}) \quad (\text{consume } y_t \text{ in future})$$

Optimal Mitigation

- FOC:

$$u'(c_t) = -\delta'(x_t)\beta V_{t+1}$$

- Let $\eta_{\delta,x} \equiv -\frac{\delta'(x_t)x_t}{\delta(x_t)}$ and $s_t \equiv x_t/y_t$

$\frac{s_t}{1-s_t}$	=	$\eta_{\delta,x}$	\times	$\delta(x_t)$	\times	$\beta \frac{V_{t+1}}{u'(c_t)c_t}$
		effectiveness of spending > 0.01?		risk to be mitigated 1%?		value of life > 180

- Taking the smallest numbers:

$$\frac{s}{1-s} \geq 0.01 \times 1\% \times 180 = 1.8\%$$

Additional considerations

- Future generations
 - So far, we place no value on future generations — selfish perspective
 - Easily included: add welfare of future generations W_F to V_{t+1}
- Other existential risks
 - Framework applied to A.I. but can be used to study other risks
 - Competing risks: nuclear war, asteroid impact — include in β

Functional forms

- Existential risk:
$$\delta(x) = (1 - \phi)\delta_0 + \phi\delta_0 e^{-\alpha Nx}$$
 - δ_0 is the risk without mitigation
 - ϕ is the share of the risk that can be eliminated by spending
 - with infinite spending, risk falls to $(1 - \phi)\delta_0$
 - α is the effectiveness of spending
 - N is the number of people each spending x
- To calibrate α :

$$\alpha N = -T \log(1 - \xi) \approx \xi T$$

ξ is the share of the risk that can be eliminated by spending 100% of GDP for one year
 T is “time of perils” = years until risk gets realized (period length)

Calibration

$$\delta(x) = (1 - \phi)\delta_0 + \phi\delta_0 e^{-\alpha Nx}$$

	Parameter	Value	Distribution
Extinction risk, no mitigation	δ_0	1%	Uniform (0%, 2%)
Share that can be eliminated	ϕ	0.5	Uniform (0, 1)
Effectiveness of spending	ξ	0.5	Uniform (0, 0.99)
Value of life	$V_{t+1}/u'(y_t)y_t$	180	Uniform (0.5*180, 1.5*180)
Time of perils (period length)	T	10 years	Uniform (5, 20)
CRRA	θ	2	...
Discount factor	β	0.99^T	...
Value of future generations	W_F	0	purely selfish for now

Baseline case: Spending a year's GDP reduces risk from 1% to 0.75%

Analytic Results and Intuition

- Using the functional forms:

$$e^{\alpha N x_t} = \underbrace{\alpha N \phi \delta_0}_{\text{effectiveness term}} \cdot \underbrace{\beta \frac{V_{t+1}}{u'(c_t)}}_{\text{value of life (in dollars)}}$$

Notice that $u'(c_t) = (y_t - x_t)^{-\theta}$, so RHS is decreasing in x .

- Using approximations:

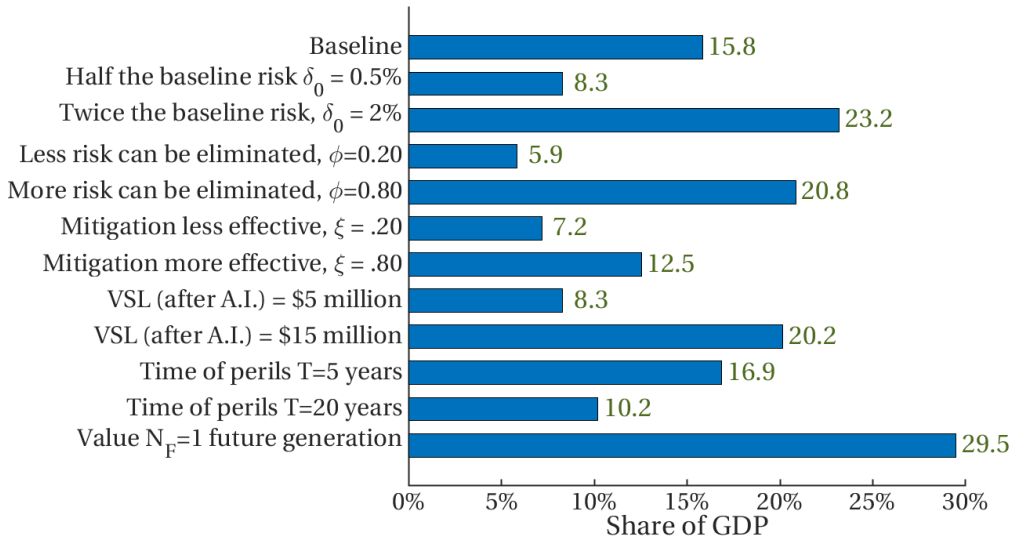
$$s \equiv \frac{x_t}{y_t} \approx \underbrace{\phi \delta_0 \beta \frac{V_{t+1}}{u'(y_t) y_t}}_{\text{WTP = willingness to pay}} - \underbrace{\frac{1}{\xi T y_t}}_{\text{effectiveness of mitigation}}$$

Intuition

$$s \equiv \frac{x_t}{y_t} \approx \underbrace{\phi \delta_0 \beta \frac{V_{t+1}}{u'(y_t) y_t}}_{\text{WTP = willing-ness to pay}} - \underbrace{\frac{1}{\xi T y_t}}_{\text{effectiveness of mitigation}}$$

- WTP term (intuition from an early slides using VSL):
 - $T = 10$, so 40 year old has 30 years remaining \Rightarrow VSL term = 120x consumption
 - $\phi = 1/2$ and $\delta_0 = 1\%$
 - WTP is $0.5 \times 1\% \times 120 = 60\%$ of GDP!
- Mitigation term: $\xi = 1/2$, $T = 10$, and $y_t = 1$ subtracts off 20%
- So approximation is $0.60 - 0.20 = 0.40$, suggesting $s = 40\%$ of GDP!
 - Alternative: $\delta_0 = 0.5\% \Rightarrow s = 10\%$ of GDP, very close to correct 8.3%

Optimal Spending to Reduce Existential Risk



When should we not invest in mitigation?

- From FOC: Do not invest if $u'(y_0) > -\delta'(0)\beta V_{t+1}$
- Using functional forms and approximations:

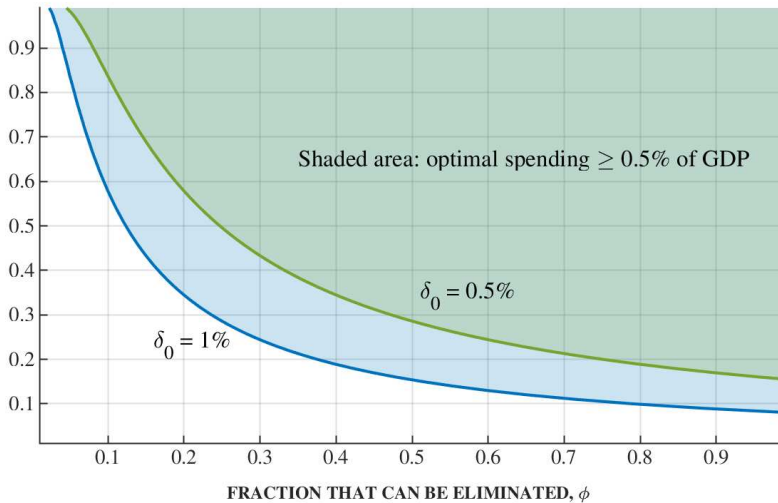
$$1 > \alpha N \cdot \phi \delta_0 \beta \frac{V_{t+1}}{u'(y_0)} \approx \underbrace{\xi T}_{\text{effectiveness of spending}} \cdot \underbrace{\phi \delta_0 \beta \frac{V_{t+1}}{u'(y_0)}}_{\text{WTP = EV of lives lost to x-risk}}$$

$$\implies \xi T \cdot \text{WTP} < 1$$

- $\xi = 1/2$, $T = 10$, and $\text{WTP} = 60\%$ of GDP, LHS = 3
 - But ϕ or ξ or $\delta_0 \Rightarrow 5x$ smaller \Rightarrow invest zero (Little risk, or not much can be done)

When is optimal spending $\geq 0.5\%$ of GDP?

EFFECTIVENESS OF SPENDING, ξ





Monte Carlo Results

10 million simulations

Optimal Mitigation: Monte Carlo Simulation

Uniform distributions over:

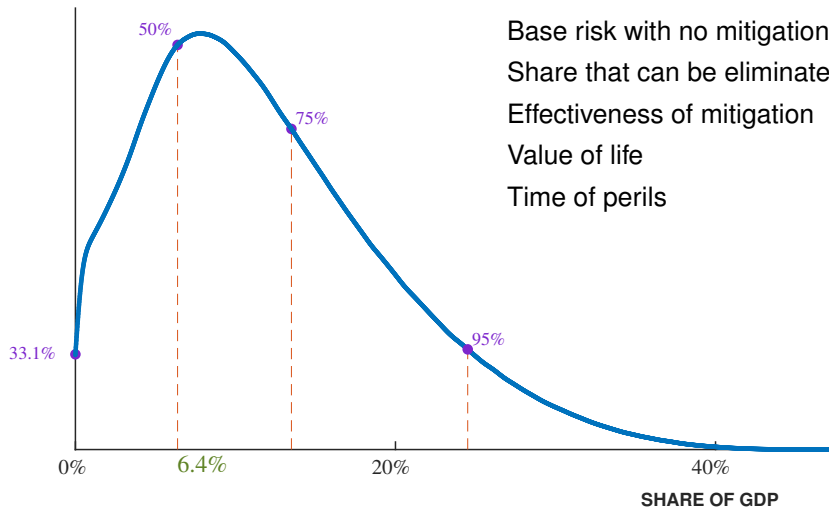
Base risk with no mitigation 0 – 2%

Share that can be eliminated 0 – 100%

Effectiveness of mitigation 0 – 99%

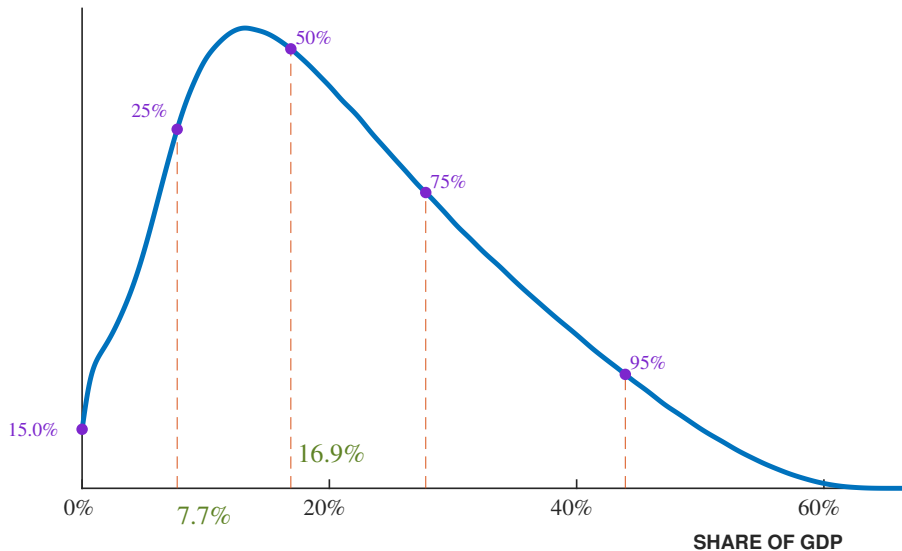
Value of life \$5m – \$15m

Time of perils 5 – 20 years

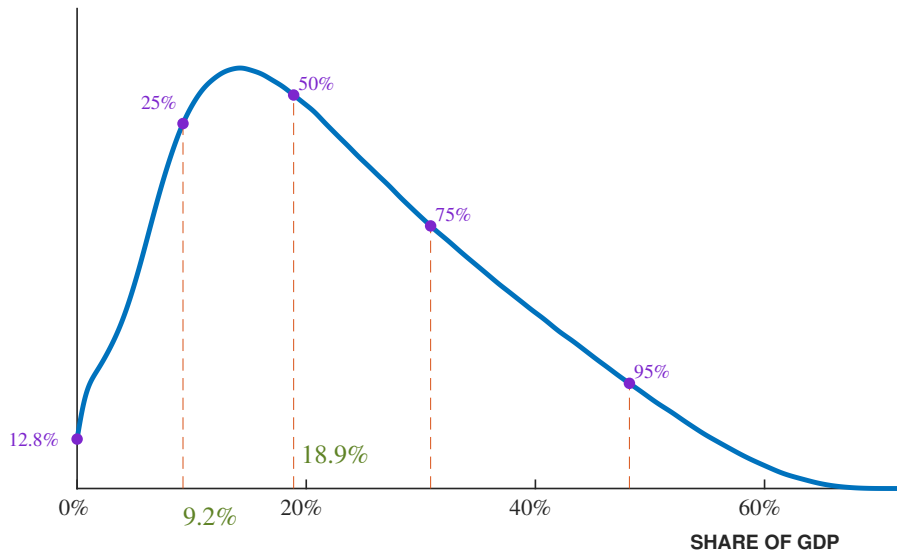


Mean = 8%. 65% of runs have $s \geq 1\%$

Modest Altruism toward a Same-Size Future ($N_F = 1$)



Higher Potential Risk (δ_0 is Uniform[0, 10%])



Summary Statistics for Monte Carlo Simulations

	Selfish baseline ($N_F = 0$) $\delta_0 \sim \text{Uniform}[0, 2\%]$	Modest altruism ($N_F = 1$)	Higher risk ($N_F = 0$) $\delta_0 \sim \text{Uniform}[0, 10\%]$
Optimal share, mean	8.1%	18.4%	20.7%
Fraction with $s_t = 0$	33.1%	15.0%	12.8%
Fraction with $s_t \geq 1\%$	65.1%	84.2%	86.5%

Concluding Thoughts

- Straightforward to justify spending 1/3 of 1% of GDP on mitigation = \$100 billion
- What are some effective mitigation strategies?
 - Slow down and invest in safety research?
 - Focus on narrow A.I.? E.g. medical research
- How should we think about A.I. competition and race dynamics?
- How can we get A.I. labs to internalize the x-risk externalities?
 - Should we tax GPUs and use the revenue to fund safety research?