Proactionary vs Precautionary Principles

By Breck Frauenholtz

Resolved: In the context of innovation, the proactionary principle ought to be valued above the precautionary principle.

Imagine a small forest in front of you. You’re sitting there without shelter or firewood. Picture the forest with all its lumber as a perfect opportunity to build yourself a house. However, as you ponder the sight of the trees, you envision the possibility of exploiting the use of the lumber for home building, ultimately depriving you of possible firewood to keep you warm. You are met with a dilemma. You are presented with the opportunity to build a house, but the possible risk of losing future warmth and comfort.

This is the struggle between the proactionary and the precautionary. The proactionary looks at the opportunity and decides it’s too good to pass up, so you build your house. The precautionary deems it dangerous to risk the destruction of the forest and is more cautious in its use. Both have valid points: the proactionary without firewood and the precautionary without shelter. This is the question of the resolution: within innovation, is it better to take the opportunity now and risk future harm, or is it better to be cautious now and risk missing an opportunity?

This resolutional overview is meant to give you a jump on your preparation this year by examining various terms presented in the resolution. The first three parts define key terms presented in the resolution: innovation, the precautionary principle, and the proactionary principle. The fourth section goes into what it means for something to be a principle. Each of the six sections contains at least one dictionary definition of the term in question, plus an explanation of the term’s deeper meaning and impact on the resolution.

# Part I: Innovation

## Definitions

Innovation is a relatively simple term, which Oxford Dictionaries defines as

Oxford Dictionary. “Innovation.” https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/innovation

“The action or process of innovating.”

Unfortunately, that doesn’t really help us unless we know what “innovating” is, but Oxford helps us out once again. To innovate means to

Oxford Dictionary. “Innovate.” https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/innovate

“Make changes in something established, especially by introducing new methods, ideas, or products,” or in reference to an object, to “Introduce (something new, especially a product).”

Innovation is a pretty easy term to define, and I don’t anticipate that you’ll have much trouble with it while debating, so let’s turn to something a bit more complex: the functions and motivations for innovating.

## Clarity of Purpose

This definition doesn’t present a purpose of innovation, but rather simply a function. Why would someone innovate? It’s a relatively easy answer that is contextualized by looking at various definitions collected from various authors and presented by Dr. Ken Hudson.

Ph.D. Ken Hudson, March 2014. (Hudson holds a Ph.D. in organizational creativity, and a master’s in business administration. He has held directorial and managerial positions at major corporations like American Express and Citibank, and has written extensively on the organizational processes and innovation.) “What is the best definition of innovation?”; Dr. Ken Hudson.com. <https://drkenhudson.com/best-way-define-innovation/>

*“*Innovation issomething fresh (new, original, or improved) that creates value.” - Jeff Dance

“Innovation is change that creates a new dimension of performance.” - Peter Drucker

“Innovation is the successful exploitation of new ideas.” - UK Department of Innovation and Skills

Although many of these sources may have a personal reason for presenting innovation as a positive thing (as their own product may be the “innovation”) they do let us understand that the purpose of innovation is to try and make the world a better place. The innovator believes that his product, idea, or method will create a more healthy, productive, or efficient world that will be better off with his innovation than without. It may be argued that an innovator could be malevolent, but this is counterintuitive to the purpose of innovation, as an action that attempts to create a net benefit in a system.

## Applicability

One of the issues one can see with the definition of innovation is its broad applicability. One can innovate a philosophy, a technology, a governmental structure, and so on. We tend to imagine an “innovator” as some scientist, engineer, or programmer toiling in a laboratory to create technological and scientific inventions; the innovator is a much broader actor. This means two things. First, you will likely have to be prepared to counter all manner of applications from a large swath of areas (an innovative policy, technology, idea, or business). These all may fall prey the principles in the resolution. Second, because broad principles must be applied you may have to struggle to find a proper measuring stick — a bright line — that gives a judge an indication of what way their vote should swing.

# Part II: The Precautionary Principle

## Definitions:

Definitions for this principle are easier to find than for the other. Noted by Google Trends, web searches for the precautionary principle outnumber the proactionary principle by 21 to 1 over the past 5 years. Simply put, abiding by the precautionary principle means adhering to the maxim “better safe than sorry.”

Ph.D. of Philosophy Tanya Rechnitzer, in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (Rechnitzer received her Ph.D. in philosophy in 2018 from the University of Bern in Switzerland. She is a widely published and accoladed scholar in various fields of practical and theoretical philosophy.) “Precautionary Principles”; The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/pre-caut/>

“The basic idea underlying a precautionary principle (PP) is often summarized as “better safe than sorry.” Even if it is uncertain whether an activity will lead to harm, for example, to the environment or to human health, measures should be taken to prevent harm.”

Similarly, but with a bit more specificity, Oxford defines the precautionary principle as

Oxford Dictionary, “Precautionary Principle” <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/precautionary_principle>

“The principle that the introduction of a new product or process whose ultimate effects are disputed or unknown should be resisted. It has mainly been used to prohibit the importation of genetically modified organisms and food.”

This principle comes into play in various summits and international agreements and is usually coupled with a commitment to preventative measures. The 1992 Rio Declarations on Environment and Development states that

The General Assembly of the United Nations, June 1992. “Rio Declaration on Environment and Development”; Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf>

“In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.”

Similarly, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union mandates that

The European Union, October 26 2012. “Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union”; The European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012E%2FTXT>

“Union policy on the environment shall aim at a high level of protection considering the diversity of situations in the various regions of the Union. It shall be based on the precautionary principle and on the principles that preventive action should be taken, that environmental damage should as a priority be rectified at source and that the polluter should pay.”

These commitments to the precautionary principle illustrate an important (and somewhat confusing) aspect of the precautionary principle, which is that it sometimes requires “proactive” actions in the interest of avoiding harmful outcomes. In fact, this element of the precautionary principle comes in a weaker form (the negative precautionary principle) and a stronger form (the positive precautionary principle).

Ph.Ds. Julian J. Koplin, Christopher Gyngell, and Julian Savulescu, June 2019. (Koplin holds a Ph.D. in bioethics from Monash University, and is a Research Fellow with the Biomedical Ethics Research Group, at the University of Melbourne. Gyngell holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Australian National University, and is a Team Leader and Research Fellow in Melbourne University’s Biomedical Ethics group. Savulescu earned his Ph.D. from Monash University, and holds the Uehiro Chair in Practical Ethics at the University of Oxford.) “Germline gene editing and the precautionary principle”; Bioethics. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bioe.12609>

“**Negative precautionary principle**. When an activity may cause harm we should not abstain from taking precautionary action because we lack certainty that the activity in question would cause harm. **Positive precautionary principle.** We should take (some form of) precautionary action against activities that may cause (some kinds of) harm.”

The positive and negative precautionary principles both say, with varying degrees of emphasis, that the precautionary principle can mandate action. This goes back to the second half of the definition by Dr. Rechnitzer, which states that the precautionary principle includes measures taken to prevent harm. Thus, the precautionary principle isn’t fundamentally about avoiding action, it is fundamentally about minimizing risk.

It’s also important to note that the United Nations and European Union, like many other bodies committed to the precautionary principle, use it in a careful, legally applicable sense as a comprehensively defined principle that governments and organizations must apply. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but you can lose some clarity with an audience if you use a definition that is as exhaustive or long-winded as many organizational ones. Additionally, many definitions direct the principle towards an application, mainly the environment, although the resolution directs it simply towards innovation. Using an operational definition, a personally handcrafted one that used real definitions as a foundation, may be useful for brevity. A judge will appreciate taking these seemingly daunting principles and putting them in terms laymen can understand.

# Part III: The Proactionary Principle

The proactionary principle is a relatively new term with explicit origins that only date back to 2004. This principle places the emphasis on the freedom to innovate, encouraging risk-taking instead of caution.

Ph.Ds. Francis X Remedios and Val Dusek, 2018. (Remedios has a Ph.D. in Social Epistemology, and is a widely published author in philosophy and sociology. Dusek has a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin, and is a professor of philosophy at the University of New Hampshire.) “Proactionary and Precautionary Principles and Welfare State 2.0”; pp 107-120 in “Knowing Humanity in the Social World.” <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-37490-5_7>

“The proactionary principle, which was formulated by transhumanist philosopher Max More, encourages risk-taking in which the freedom to innovate technologically is critical to humanity. In 2004, the proactionary principle was used in reaction to George Bush’s bioethics panel to not federally fund stem cell research.”

Dual Ph.D.in History and Philosophy Steve Fuller, August 2013. (Fuller’s dual Ph.D. is from the University of Pittsburgh. He also holds a Master of Philosophy degree from Cambridge University. Fuller is widely regarded as the founder of the field of Social Epistemology, and is currently the Auguste Comte Chair in Social Epistemology in the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick.) “The Proactionary Principle”; The Breakthrough Institute. <https://thebreakthrough.org/articles/the-proactionary-principle>

“In one of the seminal meetings of the transhumanist movement, the philosopher Max More (now CEO of Alcor, the leading US cryonics company) advanced the "proactionary principle" as a foil to the precautionary principle. The proactionary principle valorizes calculated risk-taking as essential to human progress, where the capacity for progress is taken to define us as a species.”

Thus, we see that the proactionary principle was developed in reaction to the precautionary principle, as an alternative mode of thinking that accepts a higher level of risk in exchange for greater innovative potential.

# Part IV: Principles

One of interesting inferences of the resolution is the acceptance of these ideas as principles. The resolution might have used the word “concept” or “mindset” or “ideology,” and we might think that all of those terms are synonyms for the word “principle” in the resolution. But the resolution’s phrasing is specific for a reason: because principles have special legal and moral connotations, even to the extent that the term “principle” is a point of international dispute.

Ph.D. and J.D. Miguel Recuerda, 2008. (Recuerda holds a Ph.D. from the University of Grenada and a J.D. from the University of Alcala. He is a widely published scholar whose work focuses on law, policy, and risk assessment.) "Dangerous interpretations of the precautionary principle and the foundational values of the European Union Food Law: Risk versus Risk". Journal of Food Law & Policy. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/jfool4&id=3&men_tab=srchresults>

“In the negotiations of international declarations, the United States has opposed the use of the term principle because this term has special connotations in legal language, due to the fact that a principle of law is a source of law. This means that it is compulsory, so a court can quash or confirm a decision through the application of the precautionary principle. In this sense, the precautionary principle is not a simple idea or a desideratum but a source of law. This is the legal status of the precautionary principle in the European Union. On the other hand, an 'approach' usually does not have the same meaning, although in some particular cases an approach could be binding. A precautionary approach is a particular "lens" used to identify risk that every prudent person possesses.”

A principle is legally important because it serves as an authoritative framework from which to pass and enforce laws, and that authority stems from the moral importance that principles bear. A principle by definition is

Oxford Dictionary. “Principle.” <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/principle>

“A fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behavior or for a chain of reasoning.”

So, keep in mind that the principles you argue about this year are weighty things. They are truths that will bind the actors and relevant parties in this resolution. There is significant difference between asking someone to abide by basic approach and asking that someone to abide by a moral principle. Believing salads are better than pizza can be a simple approach: “more often than not they are better.” But a principle indicates moral force: “it is a fundamental truth that salad is better than pizza.”

# Conclusion

It’s tempting to think of the precautionary principle as a way of codifying Benjamin Franklin’s proverb “when in doubt, don’t,” and it’s easy to think of the proactionary principle as a “do *something*, even if it’s wrong” mindset. Lots of debaters will head into this season thinking that the proactionary principle is all about action, and the precautionary principle is all about inaction. But as we’ve seen throughout this overview, the two sides of this resolution represent different ways of approaching risk and bear the moral and legal weight carried by the term “principle.” This resolution has great potential, and I’m excited for what this year of competition has in store.