Philosophy, in the Context of Innovation

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

This year’s Lincoln Douglas resolution is chock full of philosophical underpinnings, which should excite any debater interested in core concepts and deeper modes of reasoning. This article is intended to introduce you to some of the main philosophical concepts you will encounter this season. Knowing, understanding, and being comfortable with these philosophies will assist you in every area of competition: in argument structure, refutational strategy, and rhetoric and phrasing.

This article isn’t, and shouldn’t be, your only lens by which to understand these concepts. You are encouraged to research for yourself and to delve deeper into the philosophies, especially ones you expect to use in your cases. Additionally, follow through and dive into the citations presented in this article, they often give a more comprehensive understanding of the philosophies than we can present here, and are a great way to gather more knowledge. So, let’s dig in some philosophy.

1. **Deontology, Consequentialism, and Utilitarianism**

These three philosophical concepts are very closely related, and I want to introduce them first because they underlie every argument and value in this resolution. Each of these three concepts is primarily concerned with duty, in that they each seek to provide a framework that will tell you what actions you should and shouldn’t do, but they go about defining those frameworks in different ways. Let’s start by examining each philosophy individually.

**Deontology**

Deontology literally means “the study of duty”, from the Greek “deon” (duty) and “logos” (which means “study,” in this context). Because of its root words, deontology is often referred to as “duty ethics,” but remember that the consequentialism and utilitarianism are also concerned with duty, even though they don’t have “duty” in their name. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy writes:

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. *"Deontological Ethics" ; First published Nov 21, 2007, substantive revision Oct 17, 2016.* [*https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/*](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/)  
“In contemporary moral philosophy, deontology is one of those kinds of normative theories regarding which choices are morally required, forbidden, or permitted. In other words, deontology falls within the domain of moral theories that guide and assess our choices of what we ought to do (deontic theories), in contrast to those that guide and assess what kind of person we are and should be (aretaic [virtue] theories). And within the domain of moral theories that assess our choices, deontologists—those who subscribe to deontological theories of morality—stand in opposition to consequentialists.”

That’s a little hard to digest, so let’s turn to the Encyclopedia Britannica, which tells us that:

The Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica, *last updated May 21, 2020. "Deontological Ethics"; The Encyclopedia Britannica.* [*https://www.britannica.com/topic/deontological-ethics*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/deontological-ethics)

“In deontological ethics an action is considered morally good because of some characteristic of the action itself, not because the product of the action is good. Deontological ethics holds that at least some acts are morally obligatory regardless of their consequences for human welfare. Descriptive of such ethics are such expressions as “Duty for duty’s sake,” “Virtue is its own reward,” and “Let justice be done though the heavens fall.””

**Consequentialism**

While deontological reasoning says that an action is right or wrong in and of itself, *regardless of the consequences*, consequentialism says that we should determine the morality of an action based *only* on its consequences. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy writes:

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. *"Consequentialism"; First published May 30, 2003, substantive revision Jun 3, 2019.* [*https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/?PHPSESSID=8dc1e2034270479cb9628f90ba39e95a*](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/?PHPSESSID=8dc1e2034270479cb9628f90ba39e95a)

“Consequentialism, as its name suggests, is simply the view that normative properties depend only on consequences. This historically important and still popular theory embodies the basic intuition that what is best or right is whatever makes the world best in the future, because we cannot change the past, so worrying about the past is no more useful than crying over spilled milk.”

The Encyclopedia Britannica once again comes in handy here, because it simplifies some things and gives us a nice segue into utilitarianism. The Encyclopedia defines consequentialism as:

The Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica. *"Consequentialism"; No date.* [*https://www.britannica.com/topic/consequentialism*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consequentialism)

“In ethics, the doctrine that actions should be judged right or wrong on the basis of their consequences. The simplest form of consequentialism is classical (or hedonistic) utilitarianism, which asserts that an action is right or wrong according to whether it maximizes the net balance of pleasure over pain in the universe.”

Consequentialism is a broad philosophy that includes lots of other sub-philosophies, so it’s very simple when viewed broadly and quite complex when you get into the details of how exactly to calculate the net balance of an action’s outcomes. For now, just remember that it’s all in the name: consequentialism cares about consequences.

**Utilitarianism**

Since we already know that utilitarianism is a type of consequentialism, we can stick with a single definition of this philosophy. Oxford Dictionary defines utilitarianism as

Oxford Dictionary. *“Utilitarianism”* [*https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/utilitarianism*](https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/utilitarianism)

“1. The doctrine that actions are right if they are useful or for the benefit of a majority.

1.1 The doctrine that an action is right insofar as it promotes happiness, and that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the guiding principle of conduct.”

In other words, utilitarianism is a particular type of consequentialism, and it states that an action is morally right if that action creates the most good possible, for the highest number of people possible. Utilitarians may disagree over what constitutes the most good for the most people, but they agree that an action’s morality should be judged based on its overall effect.

**The Takeaway: Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic**

These three philosophies are so important to this resolution because they help classify values, arguments, cases, and overarching systems of reasoning into two groups: those concerned with intrinsic values, and those focused on extrinsic values. Intrinsic values are related to deontology and are important in and of themselves. For example, human rights like liberty to innovate and life are intrinsic values, because they don’t need to create any positive consequences to be important; they have stand-alone value. Extrinsic values are more closely related to consequentialism or utilitarianism, and are important because they lead to other good things. For example, allowing innovation can lead to massive positive societal change which increases general wellbeing, which increased overall happiness. Understanding these distinctions can help you choose what kind of case you want to run, and can help you analyze and respond to opposing arguments and reasoning.

1. **Theories of Government**

This resolution does not specify an actor (i.e. who or what is doing the valuing), which means that most cases will be run on the premise that society as a whole is the actor. However, governments are necessary components of civilization, they nearly always oversee innovation in some capacity, and it seems reasonable that some cases could justifiably assert that governments are the actors in the resolution. For those reasons, a few relevant philosophies of governance will likely be of great help to you this year.

Fundamentally, a government arises from a social contract. Social contract theory is a section of political philosophy that defines the obligations governments and people have to each other. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines a social contract as:

The Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica*.   
"Social contract"; Updated Aug 6, 2019.* [*https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-contract*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-contract)

“in political philosophy, an actual or hypothetical compact, or agreement, between the ruled and their rulers, defining the rights and duties of each. In primeval times, according to the theory, individuals were born into an anarchic state of nature, which was happy or unhappy according to the particular version. They then, by exercising natural reason, formed a society (and a government) by means of a contract among themselves.”

The various theories introduced by philosophers such as John Locke in his *First* and *Second Treatise of Government,* and Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan,* generally state that an individual gives up some of his rights in order to fuel the greater protection of those rights, such as paying taxes to fund a military. These theories also hold that governments have obligations to their citizens, and those obligations define what types of actions they take.

Those obligations typically fall into one of two categories: obligations to protect the human rights of their people, and obligations to promote popular prosperity. These are often called “negative” and “positive” obligations, where negative obligations refer to a government’s duty to prevent bad things from occurring and positive obligations refer to a responsibility to actively improve the wellbeing of citizens.

**Negative Obligations**

John Locke—one of the most oft-quoted philosophers in academic debate—wrote in his Second Treatise of Government that

John Locke.   
*Second Treatise of Government. Chapter XI. Of The Extent of Legislative Power.* [*https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm#CHAPTER\_XI*](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm#CHAPTER_XI)

“A man, as has been proved, cannot subject himself to the arbitrary power of another; and having in the state of nature no arbitrary power over the life, liberty, or possession of another, but only so much as the law of nature gave him for the preservation of himself, and the rest of mankind; this is all he cloth, or can give up to the common-wealth, and by it to the legislative power, so that the legislative can have no more than this. Their power, in the utmost bounds of it, is limited to the public good of the society. It is a power, that hath no other end but preservation, and therefore can never have a right to destroy, enslave, or designedly to impoverish the subjects.”

In other words, a man, in nature, has the right to preserve his human rights, and governments and societies have a deontological duty to preserve those rights. This is a more libertarian view of governmental purpose that is expounded upon by political philosopher Robert Nozick, as quoted in the New York Times:

Princeton Ph.D. of Philosophy Robert Nozik, 1975,   
*(Nozik received his A.B in philosophy from Columbia University, and his Ph.D in philosophy from Princeton. He has written multiple books on political philosophy, and was the president of the American Philosophical Association.)* *Quoted by Wolin, S. S. (1975, May 11). “Proposed: That the best government is the least government.”; The New York Times.* [*https://www.nytimes.com/1975/05/11/archives/proposed-that-the-best-government-is-the-least-government-anarchy.html*](https://www.nytimes.com/1975/05/11/archives/proposed-that-the-best-government-is-the-least-government-anarchy.html)  
“Individuals have rights and there are things no persons or group may do to them (without violating their rights)...The fundamental question of political philosophy…is whether there should be any state at all…the fact of our separate existences [means that] there is no moral outweighing of one of our lives by others so as to lead to a greater overall social good. There is no justified sacrifice of some of us for others.”

What he argues is simple, that man has rights, that man’s worth is protected by those rights, and violating those inherently violates that worth. Violating is unjustified because man has worth, so don’t do it. He would argue that the purpose of government inherently lies in protecting its people, and not doing any action that would harm them.

**Positive Obligations**

Another view of government it that its purpose is promotion of its people. This view includes, but places less emphasis on, the security of negative rights, while at the same time advocating for the promotion of positive goals. Pure protection might shirk away from taxes that provide roads, libraries, and schools because they violate property, but promotion says that that limitation on a natural right is justified because it allows upward mobility, or promotion, of the people. Aristotle wrote of this view in his *Politics,*

Aristotle. *Politics: Book III Part VII. Translated by Benjamin Jowett, MIT Internet Classics Archive.* [*http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.3.three.html*](http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.3.three.html)“The true forms of government, therefore, are those in which the one, or the few, or the many, govern with a view to the common interest; but governments which rule with a view to the private interest, whether of the one or of the few, or of the many, are perversions. For the members of a state, if they are truly citizens, ought to participate in its advantages.”

Aristotle differentiates between correct and incorrect forms of government with a simple litmus test: good governments seek—and exist for—the common good, bad governments do not. Sometimes, out of a concern for individual rights, we tend to balk at this idea of “common interest,” and in many cases that reaction is wholly justified. However, every society that puts criminals in prison, sends soldiers into combat, or uses tax dollars to fund roads, recognizes that some individual rights must be limited to promote the betterment of their people.

**The Takeaway: Negative vs. Positive Obligations**

We all recognize that we shouldn’t hurt others, oftentimes we also accept positive obligations to help others. For instance, a thought experiment in philosopher Peter Singer’s seminal essay *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* imagines a child drowning in a shallow pool, and a bystander who could save the child at no risk to himself. Most of us would say that the bystander has some moral obligated to help, because we would all feel terribly guilty if we were put in that situation and took no action. It’s a somewhat harsh example, granted, but it demonstrates that many of us feel moral pains if we neglect an opportunity to benefit others. A genuine question you need to ask yourselves is how to balance the obligations a government and people have to not harm people’s rights, but also promote their happiness. A debate round can be pictured where the affirmative argues that innovation improves society at large and thus a government or society has a positive obligation to encourage that innovation, while the negative argues that unfettered innovation can harm individual people’s rights, so a governments and societies have a negative obligation to act with precaution.

1. **Epistemology**

**Definitions**

Epistemology is the field of philosophy that deals with knowledge. The Encyclopedia Britannica states:

Encyclopædia Britannica, *Epistemology. Encyclopædia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/epistemology.*

“Epistemology, the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human [knowledge](https://www.britannica.com/topic/knowledge). The term is derived from the Greek epistēmē (“knowledge”) and logos (“reason”), and accordingly the field is sometimes referred to as the theory of knowledge.”

Why does this matter? It’s because this resolution looks to the future, to innovations that haven’t yet occurred and to consequences that we cannot fully predict, and asks us to make a decision in the present. By the very nature of this resolution, we’re faced with a knowledge problem, which means we need to understand a bit about epistemology. The most relevant concept here is that, even within our scientific processes, we still are burdened by our limited ability to understand causation and assess future outcomes. We don’t know for sure that embracing the proactionary principle will lead to increased human flourishing, just as we don’t know that even the most extreme precautions will sufficiently prevent detrimental consequences.

**The Impact**

I think this dimension is generally an area of concern for both affirmative and negative, though I see more issues for the negative. For the affirmative, a possibly harmful innovation may introduce a net benefit, but that benefit is both potential and unknown. Every modern medicine is created through an expensive process that includes extensive research, rigorous testing, and the death of an untold number of lab mice, with no guarantee of actual benefits. However, the very fact of innovation implies a high likelihood that some benefit will occur, or else there would be no incentive to even begin the innovation process. Second, even though the benefits can be uncertain, when the negative is valued to excess, any possible benefit is cut off. For the negative, there are persuasive deontological concerns about the ethics of restricting innovation, since doing so means limiting the free choice of individuals.

**Conclusion**

I’m excited to see where all of you current debaters take this resolution, and how you apply these philosophies in your case writing. Hopefully, this article has given you a better understanding of these issues, and a platform you can use to dig even deeper into them. Good luck in your debate year, and have fun with these philosophies.