Thinking Outside The Box

By Mark Csoros

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

This article, as you can probably guess from the title, is where we get to have some fun with this resolution. As you can tell from the header, it’s also the strategy overview for this resolution, which is why I have to add the disclaimer that not every strategy in this article is fit to cut and paste directly into your case and run in your next round. You can do that with some of the strategies in this piece, and every strategy in this article could conceivably be successfully run in a competition after undergoing some modifications. However, the point of this article is not to give you a cheat sheet on the basic tactics of this resolution, it’s to help teach your brain to constantly be on the lookout for ways to develop creative, inventive, and, ultimately, successful strategies. Let’s hop to it.

**AFF: The Rez Is On Your Side**

If we were inclined to take things too literally, we could point out that the resolution is always on the Affirmative’s side, because the Aff’s job is quite literally to take the side of the resolution by affirming it. But under this resolution, by selectively choosing our definitions, we can create a resolutional interpretation under which the topic area (the context of innovation) is directly aligned with the Affirmative’s proactionary principle and almost diametrically opposite the Negative’s precautionary principle. Here’s how we do it:

First, we set the stage by defining innovation. If you read the Resolutional Overview article, you might remember that this definition, because innovation is a gerund (meaning it’s the noun form of a verb), sends us on a bit of a wild goose chase until we reach the verb “innovate” and settle for that definition. Oxford tells us that 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).”

So far, so good. Next, we turn to the Negative side of the resolution to see what our opposing principle really means. Once again, Oxford dictionary brings us (and the judges) some very helpful insight by defining 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.”

Again, Oxford provides us with a very straightforward, no-nonsense definition, but the pieces are starting to fall gradually into place. After just two definitions—two innocent, run-of-the-mill definitions, from one of the most credible and unbiased sources in academic speech and debate—it’s already starting to look like the context of innovation is the wrong part of town for the precautionary principle to hang out in. Let’s push things a little farther, and make the Neg’s job a little harder, with an academic perspective on the concepts at play in this resolution.

Ph.Ds. J. Britt Holbrook and Adam Briggle, 2014.  
*(Holbrook holds a PhD in philosophy from Emory University and is a professor at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Briggle holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Studies from the University of Colorado, and is an Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at the University of North Texas.)* “*Knowledge kills action – why principles should play a limited role in policy-making”; Journal of Responsible Innovation* [*https://doi.org/10.1080/23299460.2014.882554*](https://doi.org/10.1080/23299460.2014.882554)“Precautionary politics tend to invoke scientific uncertainty to curb technological innovation (for example, we do not know enough about the health impacts of fracking to justify its promotion). Proactionary politics tend to encourage innovation as a way to test hypotheses (for example, we can improve drilling and production as we learn from successes and failures in practice).”

Now we’re really rolling. Our dual-Ph.D. source put the Negative’s principle even further at odds with the context of innovation, defined our proactionary principle as inherently supportive of the innovative context that the resolution asks us to debate in, and gives us a great segue to further contrast our resolutional alignment with the Negative’s staunch opposition to the very field in which we’re debating. Let’s hear from another dual Ph.D. source, though this time it’s from just one author with two doctorate degrees:

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*](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.”

That brief history and explanation of the proactionary principle gave us an even greater degree of differentiation from the Negative’s principle and an even greater degree of alignment with the progress-focused topic of our resolution. Since our last source just provided a short introduction for this author, let’s top things off with a quote directly from the source, directly from the mind in which our Affirmative principle originated, a quote published just a few months after the proactionary principle first came into existence. Let’s hear from Max More himself.

Now, I know I just spent the last several sentences hyping up this quote from Max More, and so I understand if you want to skip ahead and read it now. Just be sure to come back here once you’re done, because the context of the excerpt is really quite important. The context is that the proactionary principle isn’t just a single concept, but a conglomeration of several sub-principles. The number and exact wording of those sub-principles has varied a bit over the past eighteen years, but the very first tenet of the proactionary principle has remained almost exactly the same, and its text is reproduced in the excerpt below:

Ph.D. of Philosophy and originator of the proactionary principle Max More, 2004.

*(More holds a doctorate from the University of Southern California and a degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from Oxford University. He is the founder of the transhumanist philosophical movement and Extropy Institute, and is responsible for developing the proactionary principle.) “The Proactionary Principle”; Extropy Institute.*[*http://www.extropy.org/proactionaryprinciple.htm*](http://www.extropy.org/proactionaryprinciple.htm)“People’s freedom to innovate technologically is valuable to humanity. The burden of proof therefore belongs to those who propose restrictive measures. All proposed measures should be closely scrutinized.”

Due to the time constraints of LD debate, you likely won’t be able to perfectly recreate this method of framing the resolution. In addition, you may want to consider the extent to which you argue that the context of innovation inherently values the proactionary principle above the precautionary principle. Arguing that the topic area slightly tilts the playing field in favor of the Affirmative is a less persuasive reason to vote Affirmative, but it’s also a more moderate stance than an assertion that the resolution is inherently and fully biased towards your side. Finally, you should bear in mind that this strategy entails the assumption that the context of innovation is inherently in favor of innovation. There is room to argue that the phrase “in the context of innovation” could be taken to mean “when it comes to innovation,” and not as evidence that the resolution supports innovation or requires that it exist for the resolution to be debated. Under that framework, even if the proactionary principle is synonymous with innovation, and the precautionary principle is synonymous with restricting innovation, the resolution’s identification of context wouldn’t count as support for the affirmative principle.

**NEG: The Rez Doesn’t Work**

Being backed into a corner by a tilted resolution may seem like an impossible situation for the Negative. However, Affirmative overreaches regarding resolutional bias can give Neg an opportunity to implement a rarely used nuclear option: a Resolutional Kritik. A Resolutional Kritik (pronounced “critique” and usually abbreviated as “Rez K”) argues that the resolution cannot or should not be debated due to some fundamental flaw in its structure, wording, or implications.

This strategy only works under very specific situations, which is why it’s not a widely used tactic in LD debate. However, an Affirmative strategy that assert or implies fundamental bias within the resolution can give rise to one of the rare scenarios that justify a Rez K. Here’s how to capitalize if and when the Affirmative provides such a justification:

First, tell the judge that you agree with the Affirmative. The context of innovation is clearly aligned with the proactionary principle and at odds with the precautionary principle, and the Affirmative debate has appropriately defined and interpreted the resolution’s terms.

Second, remind the judge that the stated purpose of academic LD debate is to teach effective research, critical thinking, and argumentative skills through debaters’ advocacy for one of two competing values. Fundamentally, LD debate assumes that the resolution can reasonably be either affirmed or negated based on arguments for and against either value of the resolution.

Third, introduce the core of your Kritik, which is that this resolution violates that fundamental assumption of LD because it cannot be reasonably negated. By restricting our decision to value proaction or precaution to the context of innovation, the resolution forces us to debate these principles in an arena that not only encourages, but actually requires, that we value the proactionary principle above the precautionary principle. In effect, the true merits and demerits of the two resolutional principles are made irrelevant, because the resolution requires us to only analyze those principles within a context that definitionally values the Affirmative principle over the Negative. Imagine, for the purposes of an illustration, the resolution “In the context of speedy transportation, cars should be valued above bicycles.” If that resolution simply asked us whether cars or bicycles should be valued higher, we could reasonably advocate for either method of transportation by considering speed alongside other factors like affordability, safety, emissions, or enjoyment. But because our hypothetical resolution limits us to the context of *speedy* transportation, the negative can’t reasonably argue for the valuation of bicycles over cars.

In this final step, you argue that because of the inherent bias of the resolution, the judge should protest the resolution by negating it. Here, the key is convincing the judge that despite the truth of the resolution—in fact, *because* of the truth of the resolution—a negative ballot is warranted. It’s usually helpful, here, to frame the judge’s choice as a solution to the problems posed by the resolution. Should the judge solve the problem of resolutional bias by affirming that biased resolution? Or, is the better option to use the power of the ballot to negate such a clearly skewed resolution and vote in accordance with the foundational principles of LD?

**Both: Principles’ Outcomes Vary**

This section is primarily a reminder that both principles can give rise to a variety of positions on innovation, depending on the situations in which they are applied. For example, the precautionary principle could be used as justification to accelerate innovation or to pump the brakes.

Harvard Law Professor Cass Robert Sunstein, July 2008.   
*(Sunstein is a highly-regarded legal scholar and author who founded and directs the Program on Behavioral Economics and Public Policy at Harvard Law School.) “Throwing Precaution to the Wind”; The Boston Globe.* [*http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/07/13/throwing\_precaution\_to\_the\_wind/*](http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/07/13/throwing_precaution_to_the_wind/)

“Or consider the "drug lag," produced whenever the government takes a highly precautionary approach to the introduction of new drugs. Stringent review protects people against inadequately tested drugs; but it will also prevent people from receiving the benefits of new medications. Is it "precautionary" to require extensive testing, or to do the opposite?”

The precautionary principle also shouldn’t be confused for a call to inaction. In cases where the risk of harm exists, precaution sometimes requires that we implement innovative measures even if we lack full scientific certainty.

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*](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.”

On the Affirmative side, the proactionary principle (despite its reputation for accepting greater risk in the name of rapid innovation) is also concerned with lessening the same sorts of risks as the precautionary principle seeks to limit. The third tenet of the proactionary principle holds that we ought to:

Ph.D. of Philosophy and originator of the proactionary principle Max More, 2004.

*(More holds a doctorate from the University of Southern California and a degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from Oxford University. He is the founder of the transhumanist philosophical movement and Extropy Institute, and is responsible for developing the proactionary principle.) “The Proactionary Principle”; Extropy Institute.*[*http://www.extropy.org/proactionaryprinciple.htm*](http://www.extropy.org/proactionaryprinciple.htm)

“Give precedence to ameliorating known and proven threats to human health and environmental quality over acting against hypothetical risks.”

This principle’s seventh tenet even assumes that we need to impose some restrictions on innovation, and proposes a systematic way of determining which restrictions ought to be implemented:

Ph.D. of Philosophy and originator of the proactionary principle Max More, 2004.

*(More holds a doctorate from the University of Southern California and a degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from Oxford University. He is the founder of the transhumanist philosophical movement and Extropy Institute, and is responsible for developing the proactionary principle.) “The Proactionary Principle”; Extropy Institute.*[*http://www.extropy.org/proactionaryprinciple.htm*](http://www.extropy.org/proactionaryprinciple.htm)

“When choosing among measures to restrict technological innovation, prioritize decision criteria as follows: Give priority to risks to human and other intelligent life over risks to other species; give non-lethal threats to human health priority over threats limited to the environment (within reasonable limits); give priority to immediate threats over distant threats.”

**Conclusion**

One of the greatest challenges in debate, and in life, is our tendency to drift away from thinking about things as they are and towards thinking about things as characterizations or oversimplifications of themselves. To avoid falling into that trap, it helps to periodically experiment with new forms of thought, new ways of thinking about things, new perspectives on the topics at hand. Hopefully this article has demonstrated and sparked some outside the box thinking on this resolution, and encouraged you to practice this sort of creativity in your future endeavors in debate and in life.