Negative Case: Human Dignity

By Josiah Hemp

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

Lord Acton said that “Few discoveries are more irritating than those which expose the pedigree of ideas.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Those discoveries certainly are irritating, but they are important, and they can be especially helpful for debaters. This case exposes the “pedigree” of the proactionary principle, and argues that when we understand where the proactionary principle comes from and what it is, the proactionary principle violates human dignity.

Innovation is certainly often a good thing. Action is often a wise choice. But “action” and “innovation” are *not* synonymous with the proactionary principle. The proactionary principle is a dangerous ideology that is detrimental to human dignity. It is because of this that in the context of innovation, the proactionary principle ought *not* to be valued above the precautionary principle.

Definitions

Precautionary Principle

Collins English Dictionary, “Precautionary Principle.” Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/precautionary-principle>. Accessed July 21, 2021.

“the precept that an action should not be taken if the consequences are uncertain and potentially dangerous”

Proactionary Principle

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But some critics would reverse the priority of protection over promotion of humanity as the goal of government. 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.

Resolutional Analysis

Value: Human Dignity

The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity (a Christian Bioethics research center at Trinity International University) “Human Dignity” No Date. Accessed August 2, 2021. <https://cbhd.org/category/issues/human-dignity>

“Human dignity is the recognition that human beings possess a special value intrinsic to their humanity and as such are worthy of respect simply because they are human beings. This concept, once foundational to ethical reflection in such diverse areas of engagement as social ethics and human rights on to the clinical bedside and bioethics, has come under increasing criticism. As part of our institutional identity as a Christian bioethics center, The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity is firmly committed to the belief that human dignity is an inherent quality in all human beings in virtue of our having been created in the image of God. Thus every human being, regardless of age, ability, status, gender, ethnicity, etc., is to be treated with respect. Furthermore, we believe that how one understands this concept affects how one views and engages bioethical issues across the entire life span. The articles in this section explore this key concept in both its foundational development and its application to the broader concerns of bioethics.”

CONTENTION 1: The Proactionary Principle Undermines Human Dignity

A. The Philosophies Behind the Proactionary Principle Undermine Human Dignity

All ideas come from somewhere, and it is often critical to understand the pedigree of ideas. We have already noted that the proactionary principle was created by a transhumanist philosopher named Max More. It is also true that nearly all proponents of the proactionary principle are transhumanists.[[2]](#footnote-2) But what is transhumanism? And why is it so problematic? That is what we will be looking at in this subpoint.

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“This is the transhumanist project whose visionaries’ aims are summed up by Mark O’Connell in his book To Be a Machine, which won the Wellcome Book Prize in 2018: “It is their belief that we can and should eradicate aging as a cause of death; that we can and should use technology to augment our bodies and our minds; that we can and should merge with machines, remaking ourselves, finally, in the image of our own higher ideals.””

That is a summation of what transhumanists believe. Now we turn to why transhumanism is such a problematic idea, and how it threatens human dignity.

Dr. John J. Conley (Bernard P. Knott Chair of Philosophy and Theology, Loyola University) “Who's afraid of transhumanism? (We all should be)” America Magazine. September 05, 2017. Accessed August 2, 2021. <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/09/05/whos-afraid-transhumanism-we-all-should-be>

Two of the movement’s philosophers, Max More and David Pearce, have developed eloquent apologies for the transhumanist creed. But they also indicate the movement’s more ominous philosophical themes.

The very concept of human nature disappears in much transhumanist literature. The human body is dismissed as something of secondary, accidental importance. Mr. More argues that “the self has to be instantiated in some physical medium but not necessarily one that is biologically human—or biological at all.” Once again in the history of philosophy, the body has become a mere container for the human mind. The body is perceived as an impediment to the mind’s development rather than humanity’s natural site for thought. Tellingly, in this new version of anthropological dualism, the soul has disappeared; it is the sovereign self, a liberated will yearning for omniscience and omnipotence, that remains. Unsurprisingly, Ayn Rand is one of the movement’s favorite novelists.

Not only is humanity freed from its biological finitude in the transhumanist dream; it no longer enjoys any unique status as a subject of rights. Max More claims that “creatures with similar levels of sapience, sentience, and personhood are accorded similar status no matter whether they are humans, animals, cyborgs, machine intelligences, or aliens.” The religious claim that human beings are made in God’s image and the political claim that humans deserve respect because of their transcendental status crumble. Little of Renaissance humanism remains in a movement that glorifies the posthuman being to come and considers current humanity a fleeting phenomenon with no particular, intrinsic dignity.

I would like to remind you that this Max More who is quoted here dismissing human dignity and rights is the same Max More who invented the proactionary principle. Further, these transhumanist ideologies and the proactionary principle are inherently intertwined. In fact, Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipinska titled their definitive book on the proactionary principle *The Proactionary Imperitive: A Foundation For Transhumanism.*

Citation: “The Proactionary Imperative” Palgrave Macmillan. (The publishers page for the book) accessed August 2, 2021. [https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781137302977#](https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781137302977)

By valuing the proactionary principle, you value the foundation of a movement that stands against human dignity. But even if we were to look to the more practical results rather than the philosophical issues, the proactionary principle is harmful to dignity.

B. The Proactionary Principle Allows for Actions Which Harm Human Dignity

Innovation is often a good thing. But, especially in the modern world, innovation can threaten human dignity. Activities like cloning, mixing human and animal DNA to form chimeras to harvest organs, and dangerous medical procedures are closer than ever before to being real possibilities, and all these things would be supported by the proactionary principle transhumanists. This baggage that comes with the proactionary principle cannot be dismissed—proactionaries do not support human dignity philosophically, and so they are willing to harm human dignity in order to advance their agenda of “transcending humanity.”

Meisa Salaita “How Transhumanism Works” How Stuff Works. No Date. Accessed August 3, 2021. <https://science.howstuffworks.com/life/genetic/transhumanism.htm>

“Proponents of this philosophy say that we need to take evolution into our own hands. The current evolutionary goal is to pass on our genes to the next generation, but there needs to be a shift in paradigm where humans should want more for themselves, not just their genes. Transhumanists propose that we need to use science and technology to improve the human condition to evolve better humans -- and a better existence. Cyborgs, cryonics, cloning, gene therapy, space colonization, artificial intelligence, virtual reality ... all of this and more can contribute to turning the human race into the transhuman race.”

Humanity Plus (one of the largest transhumanist organizations. Note: Max More is an advisor to Humanity Plus.) “Transhumanist FAQ” No Date. Accessed August 3, 2021. <https://humanityplus.org/transhumanism/transhumanist-faq/#top>

The term “human cloning” covers both therapeutic and reproductive uses. In therapeutic cloning, a preimplantation embryo (also known as a “blastocyst” – a hollow ball consisting of 30-150 undifferentiated cells) is created via cloning, from which embryonic stem cells could be extracted and used for therapy. Because these cloned stem cells are genetically identical to the patient, the tissues or organs they would produce could be implanted without eliciting an immune response from the patient’s body, thereby overcoming a major hurdle in transplant medicine. Reproductive cloning, by contrast, would mean the birth of a child who is genetically identical to the cloned parent: in effect, a younger identical twin.

Everybody recognizes the benefit to ailing patients and their families that come from curing specific diseases. Transhumanists emphasize that, in order to seriously prolong the healthy life span, we also need to develop ways to slow aging or to replace senescent cells and tissues. Gene therapy, stem cell research, therapeutic cloning, and other areas of medicine that have the potential to deliver these benefits deserve a high priority in the allocation of research monies.

(The above quotes provide support for the previous statements, but you likely will not want or need to read them in rounds. The point is that transhumanists support these ideas).

CONTENTION 2: The Precautionary Principle Protects Human Dignity

Considering the state of our world today, it is actually surprising that more people are *not* pushing for these extreme ideas. The thing standing in the way is the precautionary principle. Lets look at what is happening in a country where the precautionary principle is not in place—China.

Dr. Albert Mohler, where he is quoting someone he is quoting Didi Kirsten Tatlow at the New York Times. (Dr. Mohler is the President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, host of the Briefing, author of several books, well known intellectual) “THE BRIEFING 06-16-16” The Briefing (a Christian daily news analysis and worldview podcast) June 16, 2016. Accessed August 3, 2021. <https://albertmohler.com/2016/06/16/briefing-06-16-16-2>

“Six years ago, Wang Huanming was paralyzed from the neck down after being injured wrestling with a friend. Today, he hopes he has found the answer to walking again: a new body for his head.”

This Chinese man, he’s 62 years old,

“Is one of several people in China who have volunteered for a body transplant at a hospital in the northern Chinese city.”

Tatlow goes on to explain the idea for a body transplant is the kind of thinking that has experts around the world alarmed at how far China is pushing the ethical and practical limits of science. Such a transplant is impossible, according to the New York Times, at least for now, citing leading doctors and experts, including some in China,

“Who point to the difficulty of connecting nerves in the spinal cord. Failure would mean the death of the patient.”

The big thing to note here is that China has become the Wild, Wild West of organ experimentation and transplantation. And in terms of bioethics, China is becoming increasingly the outlaw nation. All over the world medical ethicists are increasingly concerned about what is going on in China where the government does not exercise even the kind of oversight found in the United States and European nations. The idea of a full body transplant deservedly sounds like something out of science fiction, but as this article in the New York Times makes clear, that doesn’t mean that it’s not going to be attempted in China, as horrific as it sounds.”

The precautionary principle is what stands in the way by saying that we need to protect human dignity, protect human life. We need to make sure that our actions are safe, because if they are unsafe the consequences for human dignity could be disastrous.

In the words of

Dr. Andy Stirling (professor of science and technology policy at the University of Sussex, master's degree in archaeology and social anthropology (Edinburgh) and a D.Phil. in science and technology policy (Sussex)) “Why the precautionary principle matters” The Guardian. July 8, 2013. Accessed August 3, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2013/jul/08/precautionary-principle-science-policy>

Although there exist many versions of precaution, the general gist is that, where there are threats to human health or environment, scientific uncertainty is not a reason for inaction. This does not compel a particular action. It merely reminds us that lack of evidence of harm, is not the same thing as evidence of lack of harm. In other words, the crux of precaution lies in the rigour of taking similar care in avoiding the scientific error of mistakenly assuming safety, to avoiding mistakenly assuming harm.

The precautionary principle values safety, and thus protects us from harm to human dignity and life.

Conclusion

The proactionary principle philosophically rejects human dignity, and from there proceeds to undermine human dignity through dangerous and harmful actions and experiments in order to create their “utopia.” When we don’t have the precautionary principle in place, risk to human life and dignity is common. By siding with the precautionary principle, we can uphold human dignity and keep us safe.

How To Respond

The following is advice on how to respond to the case. Don’t think that these are the only possible responses (or even the best responses—these are just a few ideas to help you get started in responding to the case.

Note: the following section on the proactionary principle and transhumanism is also published as part of NEG: Human Dignity. If you have already read that section, you may want to skip to “The Precautionary Principle and Dignity” on the next page.

The Proactionary Principle and Transhumanism

To beat this case, you will almost certainly need to distance the proactionary principle from transhumanism. This is a difficult task, but it is an easier one than defending transhumanism. How do we do this? There are no easy answers. Here are a few ideas that you could use to start building responses.

Ad Hominin?

One potential is to paint this case as an ad hominin attack. Ad hominin attacks attack the person making an argument rather than the argument itself. If I were to say “the proactionary principle is bad because the people who argue for it (Max More, Steve Fuller, etc.) are transhumanists and transhumanism is bad” that would be an ad hominin fallacy—I would be attacking the people, not the argument. If someone is running a case similar to this where they make ad hominin mistakes, make sure to point that out—that sort of case will not be nearly as difficult to respond to. Point out that a broken clock is right twice a day. Then bring the focus back onto your arguments.

This case we can’t dismiss that way. The problem is that this case is not making an ad hominin attack. It is instead saying that the *idea* itself is transhumanist. The only reason that the people (More, Fuller, etc.) are mentioned is to point out that they are behind both sets of ideas (proactionary principle and transhumanism) and then to quickly move on to explaining how the two ideas are inherently intertwined. This argument is much harder to deal with, and accusing the negative of ad hominin in this situation will not work against debaters who know what they are doing (note to debaters planning to run this case—make sure you have a plan for how you will respond to claims that you are making an ad hominin attack).

Gloss over it

One strategy could be to ignore this issue as much as possible. Although this is a very weak way to deal with an argument, sometimes you can de-emphasize an argument enough that the other arguments (the arguments you can win) are the ones the judge pays attention to. I would caution against *only* glossing over this issue—good negatives won’t let you, and you will learn a lot more by grappling with tough arguments than by ignoring them—but in combination with other strategies, it could be helpful. So you could respond to the argument as best as you can, then shift the focus back to your arguments.

Argue that the Proactionary Principle is not transhumanist

This will be a very hard argument to win, but you could try. You could attempt something along the lines of acknowledging that the proactionary principle was initially transhumanist, but arguing that the resolution is simply speaking about the narrow definition of the proactionary principle as meaning that we follow the 5 sub-principles—without the transhumanist baggage. This has potential to be a strong argument if developed further. However, you still have a problem other issues in those five principles (see NEG: Reason, which either has been or will be published by Monument).

If I had to guess, this will be an issue that affirmatives struggle with well into the season—we will see what responses end up working.

The Precautionary Principle and Dignity

This case makes a strong argument that the proactionary principle harms human dignity, but you could also attack this case by saying that the precautionary principle is not much better. You could argue that severe poverty and starvation harms human dignity, and then argue that the precautionary principle causes these things. See *Social Issues Research Centre. (SIRC is an independent, not-for-profit organization based in Oxford, UK. They conduct research on a wide range of social topics and combine robust qualitative and quantitative methods with innovative analysis and thinking. They also conduct continuous monitoring of social and cultural trends, and have received research contracts from numerous companies and governments ranging from Coca-Cola to the European Commission to various departments of the UK Government to Proctor & Gamble.) “Beware the Precautionary Principle.” No Date. Accessed July 26, 2021.* [*http://www.sirc.org/articles/beware.html*](http://www.sirc.org/articles/beware.html)

1. Lord Acton, “Review of Sir Erskine May’s *Democracy in Europe”* [1878], reprinted in *The History of Freedom and Other Essays,* quoted in F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom: Text and Documents, The Definitive Edition*, 1944, 2007. Ed. Bruce Caldwell. University of Chicago Press. Print. Page 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Here you could point out your opponent’s use of transhumanist sources in their AC—it is quite likely they will cite such sources. However, even if they do not cite such sources these arguments still work.] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)