Affirmative Case: Moral Duty

By Josiah Hemp

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

The theme of this case is Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous quote that “Not to act is to act, not to speak is to speak.” (However, I strongly advise you to **NOT** use this quote in rounds. See footnote as to why).[[1]](#footnote-1) This case argues that in the context of the resolution we have a moral duty to take action. Rhetoric and language are very important to making this argument. In some rounds, proving this case could rely on language—especially the language of “necessity” and “duty.” It is obvious that there is a strong connection between these two, but this case makes it a close connection. That language could be very important throughout the round.

However, do not think that this case is just semantics or rhetoric. When we get into the specifics of innovation that is arguably blocked by the precautionary principle (see Contention 2), there is a strong argument to be made that we do have a moral duty to take action in the context of the resolution.

In order to prove these arguments, you will most likely need to prove that the definition of the precautionary principle you provide is correct. Make sure you understand the common arguments against this definition and know how to respond to them (see the response brief at the end of this document).

We often think that if we don’t do anything, we are innocent. That couldn’t be further from the truth. When we have a moral duty to act and fail to do so, we are morally responsible. Because we have a moral duty to act, in the context of innovation, the proactionary principle ought 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”

Essentially, the precautionary principle requires that we be certain that about the consequences of taking an action and make sure that there is no potential for danger before acting.

Proactionary Principle

More, Max. (2013). The Proactionary Principle. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118555927.ch26>.

Proactionary Principle is motivated by the need to make wise decisions about the development and deployment of new technologies and by the crucial need to protect technological experimentation and progress. It applies to all complex decisions involving technology, not just those with obvious relevance to transhumanist concerns. In this chapter, the Principle is offered as a guide to address problems effectively and wisely, considering concerns, answering objections, and developing solutions and strategies – for both personal and group decisions. This Principle emerged out of a critical discussion of the well-known precautionary principle, which does not embody structural wisdom guiding decision-making by the smartest possible methods. The chapter discusses the failure of the precautionary principle. Next, it presents five component principles or Pro-Actions that comprise the Proactionary Principle. They are be objective and comprehensive, prioritize natural and human risks, embrace diverse input, make response and restitution proportionate, and revisit and revise.”

Resolutional Analysis

Why We Innovate

The philosopher Plato wrote in The Republic Plato (famous ancient Greek philosopher, founder of the first Western institution of higher education), 375 BC. The Republic Translated by Benjamin Jowett (famous translator of Plato and Thucydides). Accessed via Project Gutenberg on July 21, 2021. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm

“Then, I said, let us begin and create in idea a State; and yet the true creator is necessity, who is the mother of our invention.”

This saying from over 2000 years ago developed into our current saying that “necessity is the mother of invention.” But this is not just a saying—it’s true. We innovate because we have to innovate. It is important to remember that in the context of the resolution, the context of innovation, we are dealing with necessity.

Value: Moral Duty

The resolution asks us what we *ought* to do.

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines “ought” https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ought Accessed July 21, 2021.

“ : moral obligation : DUTY”

Thus the resolution asks us what we have a moral duty to uphold. What is our moral duty? That brings us to our…

CRITERION: Life and Livelihoods

We as innovators have a moral duty to protect and improve the life and livelihood of the world. This translates to our first contention,

CONTENTION 1: Moral Duty to Act

When it comes to the context of innovation, we have a moral duty to act. Innovators are faced with grave necessities. Whether it be creating a new life saving surgery technique, inventing new weapons to defend us from a foreign enemy, or figuring out a new way to get food and water to starving children in war torn, poverty-stricken nations, or any other difficult situation, innovators don’t have the luxury of sitting on the sidelines and waiting for 20 years of slow, redundant tests to come back. We have a moral duty to act.

CONTENTION 2: The Precautionary Principle Prevents Necessary Action

Certainty is too high a standard

Innovators are often faced with difficult situations where taking an action that we don’t know with certainty will work is necessary. We are faced with a choice—will we use the arbitrary standard of the precautionary principle and wait until we have certainty? Or will we lean towards taking action to save lives and promote flourishing? This is explained by the UK Social Issues Research Centre.

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>

“In itself the precautionary principle sounds harmless enough. We all have the right to be protected against unscrupulous applications of late twentieth century scientific advances – especially those which threaten our environment and our lives. But the principle goes much further than seeking to protect us from known or suspected risks. It argues that we should also refrain from developments which have no demonstrable risks, or which have risks that are so small that they are outweighed, empirically, by the potential benefits that would result. In the most recent application of the doctrine it is proposed that innovation should be prevented even when there is just a perception of a risk among some unspecified people.”

**Later on in the article, they continue,**

“A culture in which people do not take chances, where any form of progress or development is abandoned 'just to be on the safe side', is one with a very limited future. The very nature and structure of all human societies are what they are because individuals, in co-operation with each other, have taken their chances – seeking the rewards of well-judged risk-taking to the enervating constraints of safe options. Had the precautionary principle been applied the Pilgrim Fathers would never have set sail for America in their fragile ships. Life-saving advances in medicine would have been halted when the first patient died on the operating table.”

We have a moral duty to innovate, and the precautionary principle sets a high and unreasonable standard that effectively prohibits innovation. Thus, we need an alternative to the precautionary principle. Fortunately, the resolution provides an alternative.

Contention 3: The Proactionary Principle Upholds Our Moral Duty to Innovate

The proactionary principle was created in response to the problems of the precautionary principle. It rejects the high burdens of the precautionary principle and instead allows for action.

The creator of the proactionary principle, Max More, explained that we ought to

Max More, (philosopher, creator of the proactionary principle.) quoted by Judith Curry, “Proactionary Principle” Climate Etc. (Judith Curry’s personal blog). August 19, 2013. Accessed July 26, 2021 <https://judithcurry.com/2013/08/19/proactionary-principle/>

“Proportionality: Consider restrictive measures only if the potential impact of an activity has both significant probability and severity. In such cases, if the activity also generates benefits, discount the impacts according to the feasibility of adapting to the adverse effects. If measures to limit technological advance do appear justified, ensure that the extent of those measures is proportionate to the extent of the probable effects.”

Thus the proactionary principle does take into account risk and precaution, but it does so in a reasonable way. Rather than requiring the ultra-high standard of certainty, it uses a thoughtful version of cost-benefit analysis. When we have a moral duty to act, we act. When the risks are too great (and thus we have a moral duty to not act) we do not act.

We need innovation if we are to continue to advance. The precautionary principle, which has been a significant concept over the past few decades, has stifled innovation. If we use the proactionary principle instead, we can move forward, upholding our moral duty to act.

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.

Definitions

This year, definitions are very important. Both the definition of the precautionary and proactionary principles in this case are very important, and attacking the affirmative on these issues will likely be effective strategies. First, the precautionary principle.

[The following section is similar to the notes on how to respond to AFF: Moral Duty, so if you have already read that, you don’t necessarily need to read this—you can just skip to the Resolutional Analysis section.]

The definition of the precautionary principle in this case is what is called the “hard” version of the precautionary principle. This is a strict version that requires absolute certainty. Critics this definition point out that while it may be used in dictionaries, it is not used in actual practice. In actual practice a “soft” version is used. See *Dr. Sven O. Hansson (Holds a PhD in theoretical philosophy and a second PhD in practical philosophy. Division of Philosophy, Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Teknikringen Stockholm, Sweden) “How Extreme Is the Precautionary Principle?” Nanoethics 14, 245–257 (2020).* [*https://doi.org/10.1007/s11569-020-00373-5*](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11569-020-00373-5) for more on this.

The proactionary principle definition used in this case comes from Max More, who is a prominent transhumanist. That opens up this case to a wide range of attacks relating to the ties between transhumanism and the proactionary principle. See NEG: Human Dignity and NEG: Reason (both by myself) that either will be or have been published by Monument for two different approaches to making this argument.

Resolutional Analysis

Another weak point in the case is in the resolutional analysis. There are several people who argue that necessity is not actually the mother of invention, and you could use that to try to pull apart the foundations of the case. I personally don’t think it’s the best argument against this case, but you may find it compelling. For a few resources that might be helpful, see *Hindle, Brook. “Necessity is Not the Mother of Invention” American Heritage December 1982.* [*https://www.americanheritage.com/necessity-not-mother-invention*](https://www.americanheritage.com/necessity-not-mother-invention)and also *de Jong, Henk “Why Necessity May No Longer Be the Mother of Invention” Philips. No Date. Accessed August 5, 2021.* [*https://www.philips.com/a-w/about/news/archive/blogs/innovation-matters/why-necessity-may-no-longer-be-the-mother-of-invention.html*](https://www.philips.com/a-w/about/news/archive/blogs/innovation-matters/why-necessity-may-no-longer-be-the-mother-of-invention.html)Neither of these articles are particularly strong or compelling, and thus I don’t think this is the strongest response to the case. However, you may find better sources and arguments and may think this is a stronger argument.

1. The full quote is “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to act is to act, not to speak is to speak.” (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/601807-silence-in-the-face-of-evil-is-itself-evil-god>) He was specifically talking about resisting the Nazis, not about the context of this resolution. However, the theme that not acting can be immoral is key to this case. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)