Negative Case: Responsibility of Government

By Breck Frauenholtz

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

Could you get through a dangerous intersection that has no stoplights without harm? Maybe. But maybe not. Because of the high risk involved with driving through this intersection we place a roundabout, stop signs, or stoplights to prevent harm to people. It may be a restriction of the freedom to ‘drive right through the intersection,’ but the threat is great enough for a government to get involved and place the lights there. On a bigger scale, the precautionary principle is the stoplight to the speeding car of innovation, so we stand **resolved: in the context of innovation, the proactionary principle ought to be valued above the precautionary principle.**

Definitions

Proactionary Principle

Max More, *the transhumanist philosopher who formulated the principle. “The Proactionary Principle.” 2004. http://www.extropy.org/proactionaryprinciple.htm*

People’s freedom to innovate technologically is highly valuable, even critical, to humanity. This implies several imperatives when restrictive measures are proposed: Assess risks and opportunities according to available science, not popular perception. Account for both the costs of the restrictions themselves, and those of opportunities foregone. Favor measures that are proportionate to the probability and magnitude of impacts, and that have a high expectation value. Protect people’s freedom to experiment, innovate, and progress.

Precautionary Principle

The United Nations defined the precautionary principle in the 1992 Rio Declarations on Environment and Development *The Precautionary Principle: decision-making under uncertainty. (2017). European Commission: Science for Environment Policy.*

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

Resolutional Analysis

Definition Analysis: Serious Threat

 The definition of precaution introduces the limit of irreversible damage. And although the exact bounds of serious damage may be debated, they can at least be understood to be objectively significant harms. Catastrophic environmental harm, harm to human life, or negative impacts to quality of life obviously are accounted here, not trivial inefficiencies or minor harms.

Actor: Government

 Since the result of precaution would require a restriction of the individual threatening, the obvious actor would be a government in some form. This is heightened by the fact that a government has the responsibility to protect their citizens, so a serious threat would be of interest to a government.

Value: Responsibility of Government

 Understood as having a duty to do something, often responsibility is considered on the individual level, “you are responsible for X,” but an actor like a government also has a responsibility to keep others from doing certain things. Professor of philosophy Jay Wallace*, who is the president of Philosophy at U.C Berkeley and specializes in the philosophy of action, wrote for the Harvard University Press in an article titled Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments.*  He writes that responsibility “is not directed exclusively toward the individual agent who has done something morally wrong, but takes account of *anyone else* who is susceptible to being influenced by our responses.” In other words, you also must consider the effects of your actions on others and if you are morally required to act because of those effects. Today, because we are dealing with governing bodies, we understand that they have a responsibility to protect their people, so if one side or the other is harming the people, the government has a responsibility to protect them through action.

Reason for Decision: Moral Action

 The word “ought” in the resolution indicates we have moral question. We are asked what is moral to do and what is immoral to do. We inherently see that we are dealing with the moral responsibilities we have.

Contention One: Threats Can Harm

 Think of the principle of a vaccination: the sickness hasn’t come yet, it is simply a looming threat in the future, but you still administer a vaccine to prevent that disease. The action of prevention is seen to be an incredibly beneficial action when you consider how many died to smallpox before its’ vaccine was invented. You take on the cost of pain, money, and side effects to prevent a greater harm later.

 Precaution asks us to consider this type of prevention on a greater scale – in both threat and prevention.

 Marco Martuzzi stated*, who is the manager of the Environment and Health Impact Assessment Programme at the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, writing in a 2004 W.H.O. report “The precautionary principle: protecting public health, the environment and the future of our children”* [*https://www.euro.who.int/\_\_data/assets/pdf\_file/0003/91173/E83079.pdf p.28*](https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/91173/E83079.pdf%20p.28)*.*

“However, there are other, often highly uncertain and complex risks associated with industrialization, which affect society at large and children in particular, such as exposure to dangerous chemicals, radiation, hazardous waste and industrial pollutants through food, water, air and direct exposure from everyday products.”

An unchecked company may not necessarily harm someone, but they could. And if they do it could cost lives. Because threats have the potential to harm, governments should take some action to prevent that harm, so let’s look at two possible actions to see if they are functional for this purpose.

Contention Two: Proaction is Irresponsible

 By allowing the unfettered innovation which often comes with threats of danger, a government that supports proaction cannot be a responsible government. That government is looking in the face of harm to its citizens and deciding to turn a blind eye.

A relevant example of this falls in the realm of genetically modified foods and lax regulations on one. Despite concerns of its impact, the Federal Drug Administration allowed this specific one:

Berman, E. and Bui, L.T.M. *(2001), ”Environmental Regulation and Productivity: Evidence from Oil Refineries”, Review of Economics and Statistics, Vol. 83, No. 3, 498-510.* In 1994 the recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH), a genetically engineered hormone manufactured by Monsanto Company under the name of Posilac, is injected in the cows every week to force the cows to produce more milk than their bodies normally would. This causes a number of problems with the milk, among them, raising levels of pus, antibiotics residues and breast, prostate, and colon human cancers.

Various countries have banned the substance, but allowance of the GMO by the FDA shows the negligence of the proactionary principle. “Innovation is better than caution,” it claims, but that claim is irresponsible for a government to apply.

Contention Three: Precaution is Responsible

 Just a parent must consider the lives of their children and prevent some more serious threats to their lives, a government has a responsibility to institute barriers of caution to prevent harm. Because a government must protect the lives of their people, we should place the precautionary principle in practice so that we guarantee that no harm comes.

 In the previous application we saw the failure of inaction, what the FDA should have done is shelved the product until substantial testing was done. When the substance is insured to be safe then we can go ahead and put it our for the public. Innovation must be stifled by the need for caution.

 To uphold the value of government responsibility, we must do the same as stoplights and stop-signs and place some limits on the freedom to innovate. We protect life by upholding the precautionary principle.