Negative Case: Utilitarianism

By Justin Dasher

Resolved: In the field of biomedical engineering, restraint ought to be prioritized over scientific advancement.

This case seeks to prove that we have a moral imperative to advance: to promote utility. It argues that the radical improvement that scientific advancement has caused far outweighs the need for restraint. The resolution analysis allows you to prep a defense against examples such as China, Nazi Germany, etc. That would potentially make it look like advancement does more harm than good. If there is no such example, you may be better off using that time for refutation.

The world around us has been defined by scientific advancement. Innovation in medicine and technology has transformed the lives of people across the globe, saving millions over the past century alone: reforming medical care, and developing new innovative solutions to the world's most difficult problems. It is because of the radical impact that Scientific Advancement has had that I negate the resolution: In the field of biomedical engineering restraint ought to be prioritized over scientific advancement.

Definitions

*“Biomedical engineering.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster,* [*https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/biomedical%20engineering*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/biomedical%20engineering)*. Accessed 13 December 2021.*

“the application of engineering principles, practices, and technologies to the fields of medicine and biology especially in solving problems and improving care.”

Value: Human Flourishing

Especially in the field of biomedical engineering, we must promote human flourishing. Human flourishing is an important end in and of itself.

Human flourishing means that we ought to promote the overall wellbeing of our fellow humans.

Resolution Analysis: No Unnecessary Abuses

As we evaluate the resolution, it's important to understand that as the negative it is my job to defend scientific advancement, and its necessary components. But what I will not be defending are the extreme outliers of unnecessary abuse, as excessive harm obviously ought to be avoided. Treating human life with reckless abandon is obviously violent and reprehensible, but it is not scientific advancement.

Value: Utility

As the philosopher John Stuart Mills put it his famous book Utilitarianism, “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest-Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”

What Mills means by happiness is simply this, when we evaluate whether or not something is right or wrong, we ought to look primarily at the consequences it produces, that is: if it produces the most overall good or “Utility.” This is the highest moral good when evaluating the resolution, and thus ought to be the highest value in today's round.

Contention 1: Scientific Advancement Promotes the most Utility

Scientific advancement has taken many forms over the past century, but it is an undeniable fact that Scientific advancement has revolutionized the way we live, it has saved millions of lives, and helped even more. We can see this more clearly in:

Application 1: Yellow Fever Experimentation

Laura Cutter, January 2016 (American Registry of Pathology, in support of the National Museum of Health and Medicine, U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command, 2500 Linden Lane, Silver Spring, MD 20910.) <https://academic.oup.com/milmed/article/181/1/90/4158283> 10/3/2021 “Walter Reed, Yellow Fever, and Informed Consent”

“In May 1900, Surgeon General George M. Sternberg commissioned a board of Army research scientists to pursue “scientific investigations with reference to the infectious diseases prevalent on the Island of Cuba,” and, especially, yellow fever.1 Yellow fever was perhaps the most feared of epidemics; its mortality rate was known to reach 85%. It was unpredictable, catastrophically virulent, and there was no effective treatment.”

During these clinical trials Sternberg made a critical decision to conduct human experimentation. He intentionally exposed a group of volunteers to mosquitos, testing the hypothesis that they were responsible for spreading the disease. This incurred significant risk to the individuals involved in the trial, but each of them recognized the risk was worth it, that the dangers were necessary to promote the greater good or- Utility. Using the information from this trial Sternberg and other scientists were able to more effectively treat, care for, and prevent Yellow Fever, saving millions of lives over the following decade. This clearly demonstrates that Scientific Advancement, not restraint, promotes Utility, if Sternberg had decided that the risk was too great, and refused to take the chance, millions of more could have died.

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.

This case hinges on the ethical theory of utilitarianism, thus, I think the best way to respond to the case is by debunking the theory itself. There are a variety of different critiques on the philosophy, and I would highly encourage anyone to additional reading and research, but I think the simplest and strongest one is the Absurd Implications Critique,

From Louis P. Pojman, “How Should We Live? An Introduction to Ethics. Copyright 2005. Reprinted by permission of Wadsworth as a part of Cengage Learning, Inc. Date Accessed 12/13/2021 (Louis Pojman received a bachelors in theology from New Brunswick theological Seminary, he later attended Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University where he received his Ph.D. in Ethics. He has authored dozens of books and served as an ordained minister.)

“If we accept it [Utilitarianism], we would have to accept an absurd implication. Consider two acts, A and B, that will both result in 100 hedons (units of pleasure of utility). The only difference is that A involves telling a lie and B involves telling the truth. The utilitarian must maintain that the two acts are of equal value. But this seems implausible; truth seems to be an intrinsically good thing.”

This is potentially a huge red flag, simply put as the affirmative to disprove Utilitarianism you simply need to show that the action itself matters. For example, demonstrating that it is never acceptable to murder, torture etc, and more closely related to the resolution it is never acceptable to experiment without consent, harm patients, etc. An affirmative case that uses natural law, principlism, or deontology has excellent grounds for clash if they can prove that moral “Good” is not found in the consequences.

In response to the first contention, one can point out that while the Yellow Fever experiments worked out well, there were several problems with them. First, it's doubtful whether patients fully understood the risk of the trial and weren’t simply doing it for the money offered; the affirmative can point out that even though no significant harm was caused the violation of the test subject rights is immoral. Second, while the trial worked out in this instance it easily could have gone the other way, and if most of the test subjects had died or the trial was unsuccessful we would look at it very differently: this experiment is an outlier not the norm.