Negative Case: Moral Boundaries

By Breck Frauenholtz

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

In the early 1900s, Upton Sinclair wrote a book titled *The Jungle,* in which he revealed the dangerous and disgusting environment of American meat packing. Constitutional Rights Foundation *Upton Sinclairs The Jungle: Muckraking the Meat-Packing Industry. 2008.* [*https://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-24-1-b-upton-sinclairs-the-jungle-muckraking-the-meat-packing-industry.html*](https://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-24-1-b-upton-sinclairs-the-jungle-muckraking-the-meat-packing-industry.html)*.* “Almost as an afterthought, Sinclair included a chapter on how diseased, rotten, and contaminated meat products were processed, doctored by chemicals, and mislabeled for sale to the public. He wrote that workers would process dead, injured, and diseased animals after regular hours when no meat inspectors were around.” Sinclair’s revelations on the conditions of these factories led to necessary regulations that protect both you and me. In the same way, we often need barriers to protect the public, barriers offered by the precautionary principle. I stand in negation to the resolution 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

Ought :

Collins Dictionary, “Ought” [https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/ought *Accessed 10/4/2021*](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/ought%20Accessed%2010/4/2021)

“You use ought to to mean that it is morally right to do a particular thing or that it is morally right for a particular situation to exist, especially when giving or asking for advice or opinions.”

Resolutional Analysis

Conflict: Serious Threats

We need to ensure that we aren’t throwing out innovation, but only restricting innovation that displays a threat of serious or irreversible damage.

Value: Moral Boundaries

There are innumerable concepts on what the proper moral boundaries for a society are, so we should likely go with a simple formulation that most can agree with: protection of rights.

As British philosopher John Locke formulated.

John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government, ed. Thomas Hollis (London: A. Millar et al., 1764). 12/16/2019.* The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions… (and) when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.

The reason I tag this as moral boundaries is because I want to later emphasize that what precaution offers is the clear line that you do not cross, that of human rights.

Reason For Decision: Moral Obligation

Because the resolution asks us what me morally ought to do, we can determine a good value by its moral necessity. We can easily agree that protecting life, liberty, and property is a good thing. And you can protect these by creating regulations and laws, so moral boundaries must be upheld because of moral obligation.

Contention One: Unhindered Innovation is Dangerous

When you place the burden or moral responsibility on the company or the innovator instead of on a system of moral responsibility, then you inherently will fall into pitfalls. We can not trust a businessman or scientist to value the moral fabric of society. A great example of this the case study of Lola and Nana.

Alice Park is a staff writer at TIME*. . (2018, November 29). What happens to the crispr twins? Their lives will be forever changed. Time. https://time.com/5466967/crispr-twins-lives/.*

He Jiankui, a professor at the Southern University of Science and Technology, stunned the world when he claimed, both in a video posted by his lab and in an interview with a journalist, that he used CRISPR to disable a gene involved in helping HIV to enter healthy cells. By doing so, he gave the resulting edited embryos, including the twin girls, resistance to the virus… Sounds great, gene editing that will protect the birthed embryos from disease; however: According to experts who reviewed some of the data He presented at a conference days after his stunning announcement, they say there is evidence that both girls born with the CRISPR edits showed such signs of mosaicism when they were embryos, meaning they are now likely to have the same mishmash of CRISPR’d and unCRISPR’d cells in their bodies. That means that they may not even benefit from the resistance to HIV that He’s grand experiment was meant to provide. There’s also evidence that compromising the HIV gene may have other consequences — for example, making people more susceptible to West Nile Virus and possibly the flu.

This innovator took advantage of his freedom and violated the autonomy of these twins. When we place the moral decision in a company that desires profit it allows for possible harm.

Contention Two: Proaction Encourages Unhindered Innovation

Because proaction is about the freedom to innovate we will not restrict when there is moral danger. There is a reason why pharmaceutical companies are required to undergo rigorous testing before they get a drug approved. There is reason why food and drink companies must list their ingredients. There is a reason why studies undergo a reviewing process to determine their ethical nature. The reason, I argue, for the restrictions is because we realize that unfettered individuals create harm.

Holbrook, J. B., & Briggle, A*. (2014). Knowledge kills action – why principles should play a limited role in policy-making. Journal of Responsible Innovation, 1(1), 51–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/23299460.2014.882554*

“The proactionary principle emphasizes the role of science in the later implementation, application, and appraisal stages where the ‘flowers’ that have already been planted by policy action are ‘inspected.’ By contrast, the precautionary principle emphasizes science in the early, intelligence gathering, stages of policy making in a way that structures science more as something that precedes policy. To push the metaphor, it would have us inspect the seeds prior to sowing them.”

The procationary principle examines the seeds of innovation after they have been planted and as they are growing. After a seed has been planted, it is too late to prevent initial harm to the surrounding environment. Sure, you can pull it up after harm has developed, but the fact is that the harm developed. Inherently, the proactionary principle doesn’t monitor the actions of the innovator but rather allows the freedom to innovate. This lack of moral boundaries leads the harms we saw in the first contention.

Contention Three: Precaution Applies Boundaries

Because the moral consideration of preventing threats is contained within the definition of precaution, we can trust it to examine situations that may lead to harm in the future and create barriers that protect people. When we think back to meat packing or Lola and Nana, we realize that the precautionary principle is the one that prevents such harms.

When we slow down our desire to innovate and realize that men, often full of greed and immorality, will inevitably harm with their technology, we understand the necessity of barriers. Moral limits defined by human rights and implemented by the careful scientific consideration of the precautionary principle.