2022 VALUE RESOLUTION #2

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

BACKGROUND

As digital technology continues to progress exponentially, so do the ethical quandaries regarding their development, use, and place in society. This debate, however, is nothing new. For decades the world raced to find scientific, technological, and otherwise innovative solutions, often failing to consider the cost. Improvements in weapons, healthcare, communication, transportation, and manufacturing have led to tremendous quality of life while leaving a trail of consequences behind them. This topic explores the complex ethical questions surrounding two key questions:

1. When and why should innovation be encouraged?
2. When are the risks simply too great?

The precautionary principle advocates a cautious and calculating approach to innovation whereas the competing proactionary principle suggests that innovation should be pursued despite potential danger.

CONFLICT

The Actor(s)

It ought to be noted that this resolution presents a unique structure as opposed to previous topics. Instead of asking a values question only from the perspective of one actor, it provides a context, innovation. The questions can then be applied from several points of view such as a governing authority considering restriction or an individual considering their personal responsibility. This serves both to give the topic a more holistic perspective and also allows students more options for creative ideas.

Freedom v. Control

As with many ethical questions, it is simple enough to see how the extremes fall apart. Absolute freedom, or anarchy, in the context of innovation leads to truly awful results. One need only read glimpses of 19th century research in psychology and medicine to see the need for limitation. The precautionary principle reacts to these grave errors and begs for constraint of freedom. On the other hand, similar innovations provide solutions to disease and mental illness for millions, even to this day. The proactionary sees the benefit of such research and seeks to push forward this life giving research. In another context the free and available internet provides thousands with life giving support, but also a setting for socially crippling media and unique opportunities for abuse. Leaving innovation and the people who create it free is an obviously valuable end. Just as obvious is the need for restriction. This topic explores this tension in a variety of relevant contexts. *"The Precautionary Principle is shown to have the ethical status of an amendment to liberal principle to the effect that a state only may restrict a person's actions in order to prevent unacceptable harm to others. The amendment allows for restrictions*

being justified even in cases where there is no conclusive scientific evidence for the risk of harmful effects." [1]

Utilitarianism, Intellectual Property, and Responsibility

There remains a large question about the responsibility of educated persons to contribute to society versus keeping knowledge or ability to themselves. Some individuals support giving up some of their intellectual property by sharing their innovation for the sake of utility to society. While it would be easy to think that all innovation should be shared and that this is an open and shut case, look at the plight of J.R. Oppenheimer. Was developing the atomic bomb a necessary evil or simply too big a risk? The responsibility of the innovator to society is twofold. Contribute and protect. This topic explores the often-complicated interplay. Is it better to be proactive or precautious?

"The fall of France in 1940 horrified Oppenheimer, and after the U.S. entry into the war, he felt a deep obligation to join the American war effort. For Oppenheimer, joining the war effort was not merely a matter of patriotism; he believed that stopping fascism was a matter of saving Western civilization itself. [2] *Soon after the American entry into the war, he was appointed leader of the Manhattan Project in early 1942 and began searching for the brightest nuclear physicists, chemists, and engineers in the United States."* [2] *"It was in an interview about his reaction to the Trinity test that Oppenheimer delivered one of the most memorable quotations about the war - perhaps the most famous quotation by any scientist of the 20th century. Oppenheimer immediately understood the true power of the bomb. Never before had mankind possessed destructive power that truly posed a threat to civilization. After the war, Oppenheimer was deeply concerned with the successful control of nuclear energy."*[2]

"The Proactionary Principle stands for the proactive pursuit of progress. Being proactive involves not only anticipating before acting but learning by acting. When technological progress is halted, people lose an essential freedom and the accompanying opportunities to learn through diverse experiments. We already suffer from an undeveloped capacity for rational decision making. Prohibiting technological change will only stunt that capacity further. Continuing needs to alleviate global human suffering and desires to achieve human flourishing should make obvious the folly of stifling our freedom to learn." [3]

PHILOSOPHY

Consequentialism v. Deontology

Standards of ethics is a massive issue within the context of this debate. For instance, is it allowable to pursue something that is itself ethical if the negative consequences are unethical? Does the answer change if the original innovator does not bring about these negative consequences? And on the opposing side, what if someone pursues something unethical for the sake of something that is ethical? These two questions lie at the core of this debate and clearly demonstrate another way this topic is unique. The competing proactionary and precautionary principles will each create negative and positive consequences. And proponents of both can claim to hold the high ground of fulfillment of moral duty. With neither side of the resolution holding universal claim to one or other ethical standard, the debate has the potential to be a true exploration of values.

Risk v. Reward

From a practical perspective this debate is full of risk vs reward subtext. While this may easily tangent into issues of practicality rather than value, it is worth noting that risk vs reward (or ends vs means) is also a significant ethical question. While it falls more on the applied ethics than the moral philosophy spectrum, it has a great opportunity to give students lessons they can apply to their own lives.

"When do we have sufficient scientific risk assessments about a new technological activity to warrant promoting that activity and embedding it in society?" [4]

"Protection and promotion are, of course, not incompatible, but they pull in opposite directions. If you believe that you are in the business of protecting people, then minimising risk can become an end in itself." [5]

"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." [5]

Utility v. Knowledge

Another relevant topic within this resolution is the value of knowledge. The resolution raises the questions, are knowledge and innovation inherently valuable or does the purpose derive from the personal or societal utility? A common justification for a proactionary principle is the inherent value of knowledge, something a precautionary principle would oppose. This question which is ignored by many is at the core not only of this debate but of many debates that students will likely come across in their personal lives.

"The scientist does not study nature because it is useful to do so. He studies it because he takes pleasure in it, and he takes pleasure in it because it is beautiful. If nature were not beautiful it would not be worth knowing, and life would not be worth living. I am not speaking, of course, of the beauty which strikes the senses, of the beauty of qualities and appearances. I am far from despising this, but it has nothing to do with science. What I mean is that more intimate beauty which comes from the harmonious order of its parts, and which a pure intelligence can grasp." [6]

STRENGTHS

This resolution has two major strengths. First, it offers a tremendous set of relevant issues, topics, ideas, and perspectives. This makes it a wonderful choice for the purpose of debate. Students will not be forced to debate the same one or two ideas all season. Instead, opportunities for innovative thinking and research abound. Second, the topic's variety of potential actors and specifically the inclusion of individuals as a moral actor, make the topic relevant to numerous practical life situations. The topic therefore excels from a practical education perspective.

WEAKNESSES

One potential weakness of this topic is in its relative recency. While the debate is not new per se, it is new relative to the several millennia old moral questions that are often the subject of values debate. As such, the terms have less intrinsic clarity and context leading to twofold issues. First, the vagueness of the terms could lead to confusing debates without proper

definition. Second, much of the literature on this topic is more about operationalizing policy than truly debating the core values. This could easily influence debates to be less focused on values than intended.

RESOURCES

[1] Jensen, K.K. "The Moral Foundation of the Precautionary Principle." *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics,* 15, 39–55 (2002). https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1013818230213

[2] Tim Anderson. Oppenheimer's Dilemma. Coursework submitted to Stanford University. April 19, 2016. http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2016/ph241/anderson1/

[3] Curry, Judith. Proactionary principle. Judithcurry.com. August 19, 2013. https://judithcurry.com/2013/08/19/proactionary-principle/

[4] Holbrook, J. Britt and Adam Briggle. "Knowing and acting: The precautionary and proactionary principles in relation to policy making." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (5): 15-37. April 16, 2013. https://social-epistemology.com/2013/04/16/knowing-and-acting-the-precautionary-and-proactionary-principles-in-relation-to-policy-making-j-britt-holbrook-and-adam-briggle/

[5] The Breakthrough Institute. The Proactionary Principle Between No Caution and Precaution. August 8, 2013. https://thebreakthrough.org/articles/the-proactionary-principle

[6] Henri Poincaré. Science and Method Part I, Chapter 1: "The Selection of Facts", p. 22, 1914.

SUGGESTED READING

[1] Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Precautionary Principles. https://iep.utm.edu/pre-caut/

[2] Buchak, Lara. *Risk and Rationality.* Oxford University Press. July 25, 2017.

[3] Goldstein, Bernard and Russellyn Carruth. "Implications of the Precautionary Principle: is it a threat to science?" *International Journal of Occupational Medicine and Environmental Health.* 2004;17(1):153-61. PMID: 15212219. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15212219/

[4] Tubiana M. "Conclusions. The Precautionary Principle: Its Advantages and Risks." Bulletin de l'Academie Nationale de Médecine. 2000;184(5):969-93. French. PMID: 11077719. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11077719/

[5] More, Max, and Vita-More, Natasha. "The Precautionary Principle." *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc.. March 11, 2013.