A Modest Proposal

One is tempted here to present a new "modest proposal," on how best to use a given amount of the public's resources for lifesaving purposes. First we determine to use those resources to save the greatest number of lives, ignoring the difference of "feel" between saving the lives of identified persons perhaps under our gaze and saving "statistical" lives. So if ten people are clinging to a semi-submerged oil rig, and we have seen their plight on the evening news, we will, before sending the helicopters, ask ourselves: "Could we save more lives, possibly less visible lives, some other way?" Almost always the answer will be yes: an inoculation program to save children from some disease will save more lives for the same expenditure. So let those clinging to the oil rig drown. We have more efficient uses for our money.

The next move is to consider whether we should spend on the inoculation program or invest to spend more effectively later. Medical technology can be expected to advance, so we will save more children from an untimely death by investing our funds in research than by inoculating them now. But since medical research has progressed nicely without great subsidy from public funds, perhaps our best bet for eventually saving more lives is to invest elsewhere, wherever the economic returns look best—say, in oil rigs or atomic plants. That way we will have more funds to use eventually on putting to use the then-latest medical knowledge to save lives.

Once this decision is taken, we will have to have a view on what safety measures to install in our oil rigs and atomic plants. To protect our investment and so eventually save more lives, we will perhaps sacrifice a few workers' lives to keep profits high. We have more efficient ways to save lives than to waste potential lifesaving earnings in measures to save workers' lives.

Periodically, we will face the decision of whether to reinvest or spend our earnings on actual lifesaving. So long as there are still more lives at risk than we can save with our increased funds and profits are still high, we will of course reinvest whenever we face this choice. We still have better things to do with our lifesaving resources than to save lives.

With luck, our very investments and the hazard they produce may kill off enough people so that a time will come when it will no longer make good economic sense to go on investing our lifesaving funds. We will then disburse our funds to save whoever is left at risk, perhaps the entire now-much-reduced population. We will then congratulate ourselves on our rational use of our opportunities. From a position where, had we spent, we would have saved only a fraction of those whose lives were at risk, we have, by our clear-headed, efficient investment policy, made it possible for us eventually to save all the lives remaining at risk. What more rational course of action for the public good could possibly be dreamed up?

—Annette Baier

into some grand risk-cost-benefit analysis that aims at maximizing the intrinsic reward of our lives, in the broadest sense?

MacLean is skeptical that any formal system of analysis could ever capture all our values and concerns with the requisite sensitivity, since these depend so much on details of the concrete contexts in which they arise. Moreover, it is not clear what the yardstick for measurement is to be. If all our values are to be compared and assessed on one single scale, what is that scale? Most risk analysts have taken the common currency to be money, the amount we as individuals or as a society are willing to pay to satisfy our preferences and promote our values. But Gibbard rejects this standard, since, given the vast differentials in income, different amounts of money mean different things to people differently situated. His measure is the far broader notion of the intrinsic reward of a person's life. But is this too vague to be of any practical application?

MacLean argues that we might be better off giving up the search for a sensitive, yet workable, metric, consigning risk analysis to a more limited and less inclusive role, and "focusing our attention on directly examining our values more closely, without presupposing that we can ever find a method that will make them orderly and systematic." He asks: "Why should we think we would be better off allowing our judgments and intuitions to be corrected by some general analytic method?"

Conclusion

What should we conclude from this about how systematic and coherent our government agencies should be in tackling risk to life and health?

Annette Baier, professor of philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh, gives one reason why it may make for more systematic and coherent policy not to aim at a standard across-the-board policy for preserving life. She suggests that our traditional approach has its own rationale that may make more sense and achieve better results than the alternative presented by risk analysis.