

Rethinking Rationality

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In this issue:

Recent research on the scope and limits of rationality triggers worries about the wisdom of our public policies governing risk p. 1

Does the scientific basis for human genetic engineering justify faith that it will not create more problems than it can solve? p. 6

Does nuclear deterrence work? For an answer we need to take a closer look at the nature of deterrence itself p. 9

How good a person do I have to be? (How good a person do I *want* to be?) p. 12

The first volume in a new book series is announced p. 15

Just when you were getting used to the idea that alfalfa sprouts cause cancer and exercise causes infertility comes word about the possible threat posed by radon in your home. Every night of late local news stations in Washington, D.C., advertise their evening report by a teaser promising more information on the threat posed by this invisible form of indoor air pollution. The estimated chance of death by radon, even on the most pessimistic accounts, is far smaller than the chance of dying in a car accident; yet few news broadcasts try to attract viewers by headlines promising defensive driving tips. Everyone is afraid of getting AIDS; far fewer dread diabetes, a much more prolific killer. One survey shows that over 90 percent of us think we are better than average drivers.

It is well known that people's worries about various risks correlate poorly with the actual dangers they pose. Our judgments are seriously flawed, and it seems that, at the very least, our attitudes about risk are often inconsistent, if not perverse.

Of course, those charged with inconsistency in such matters are free to respond, “So I’m inconsistent. Big deal!” Many would join with Emerson in holding that “consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” or with William Allen White, that “consistency is a paste jewel that only cheap men cherish.” We may have our own reasons to pick and choose our own fears, whether or not our choices line up with somebody else’s dispassionate assessment of what is truly fearsome.

Yet consistency in some form defines what it is to be rational, and we are less complacent about the charge