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The Costs of Clean Air: How Much Should They Count?

To make its research easily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected philosophical work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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In recent polls, Americans have backed tough controls on air pollution, regardless of cost. Philosophers and economists take sides on this refusal to weigh health and safety against the costs of cleaner air p. 1

International declarations of human rights proclaim that all societies should be politically democratic. But are the poorest and least developed Third World countries ready for democracy? p. 6

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The enormously popular Clean Air Act of 1970 is up for revision, and in the process our national commitment to reduce air pollution is undergoing reassessment. The Act, as amended and implemented, has set standards for seven widespread harmful pollutants. These standards establish maximum allowable levels of air pollutants, which, “allowing an adequate margin of safety,” are required to “protect the public health,” including vulnerable segments of the population, such as the young, the infirm, and the elderly. The current law does not permit pollution control to be balanced against the costs of enforcement and compliance—public health is not to be compromised to achieve economic goals.

A proposed amendment to the Clean Air Act would require pollution-imposed health risks to be assessed in the context of the—often very high—costs of reducing those risks. The public health would be protected from “significant risk” of adverse effects, where risks are measured against a broader economic background. Standards would no longer be set to protect the entire population—however vulnerable—against any risk—however small or expensive to correct.

Public opinion, as canvassed in a recent Harris poll, strongly resists proposed changes in the Clean Air Act that are perceived to relax existing federal standards on air pollution. Harris asked his sample this question: “The Clean Air Act does not permit the consideration of costs when setting standards for the protection of human health. The Reagan Administration is considering asking Congress to require that pollution standards designed to protect human health be relaxed if the costs are too high. Do you favor or oppose relaxing