

February 2, 1971

Dr. Carl O. Muehlhause  
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Washington D.C. 20234

Dear Dr. Muehlhause

Thank you for your letter of January 25th. I would indeed be interested in more details about the value distribution studies mentioned in your letter and in particular the work by Professor Lave on automotive safety. My interest in the latter dates back to 1955 when I joined a group in the state of Wisconsin to implement obligatory seat belts (this was after a graduate student who I had predicted would have a brilliant career, was partially decerebrated in an accident in which several other occupants of the car were left unscratched).

I would concur in the importance in developing value distributions but not without some crepitations about potential errors and abuses. These adverse possibilities are shared by most system studies that depend on necessarily oversimplified models of the real world, and I am sure I need not dwell upon them. Let me stress, however, that the present "market" for safety is very far from rational as already illustrated by the dispersion of life values mentioned in your letter. The main purpose of such value distribution studies should be to point out glaring inconsistencies in our approaches to policy. For this purpose relative evaluations are almost as useful as absolute ones; the latter are in grave danger of being abused, i.e., when conclusions drawn from safety analysis are uncritically assimilated into other aspects of economic policy.

On the other hand, we waste much energy in social division and squander many resources by failing to recognize where cost-effectiveness lies in our pursuit of safety. (And, of course, one must say much of the same for health and for many other values.)

So, I would be very much in favor of extending social research along these lines, but I would also emphasize these cautions. When consumers are more often than not quite unable to make rational choices we should not use their behavior as a justification for the existing price system. (You will recognize in this remark the thread of my criticism of Chauncy Starr's efforts. I would, in fact, be much interested if you know of the other critical studies of his work.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

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P.S. Somewhere in this study we have to include a place for the paradoxical value affirmatively placed on risk - you might say the death instinct that many people exhibit! I do not think one should necessarily equate the value of the thrill function with a negative valuation on human life although this would be a logical consequence of a simple analysis.

JL/rr