

Editorial | *How Much Is Too Much to Save a Life?*

Every summer for the last several years, I have had the opportunity to lead a reading discussion with the interns in our Emerging Leaders program at the Acton Institute on Paul Heyne’s essay “Are Economists Basically Immoral?” Each time, I begin by asking them the question, “How much is too much to save a life?” Then I wait and enjoy the awkward silence before the first brave soul takes a crack at it. Every answer can rightly be rebuffed by either noble or practical objections. If no one else objects, I do. I try to reassure them by telling them that while there are wrong answers, there are no bad answers, at least in the context of a discussion meant to advance our knowledge of the truth.

The question is Heyne’s:

What do you think of the following statement?: “One in every seven health-care dollars spent each year in the US is on the last six months of someone’s life; this is not an efficient way to allocate resources.” You will have lots of company if you think that it is immoral to discuss the efficiency of spending money to save lives. But economists not only discuss such questions; they try to get other people to take their discussions seriously. How much is too much to save a life? Is that an immoral question?¹

It is, at least, an uncomfortable question. How can something so unquantifiable, the value of a human life, be quantified? Yet in the last two years it has not been hard to find contemporary, real-world applications of this problem due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However noble our vision of the human person—that each life is invaluable, and human dignity, inviolable—nevertheless we do not now

dwell in the limitless abodes of eternity but in a world of scarce resources, not to mention corruption, pestilence, and sin: “the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4).

However uncomfortable we may be with the question, however immoral we may think the askers, in this life, sooner or later, everyone must answer. Unfortunately, in public policy there are not only wrong answers but bad ones as well. Mostly, there has been a lot of confusion, accompanied by declining trust in the institutions of our societies as well as in our neighbors. Some governments initially discouraged the use of masks to deter the spread of COVID-19, issuing stay-at-home orders instead. Coincidentally, at just about the time it became clear economies could not remain shut down indefinitely, lockdowns were lightened and lifted in favor of mask-wearing and more moderate social distancing. Meanwhile, at least in the United States, at-home testing devices were held back from production for a year by federal regulators while multiple vaccines were fast-tracked to approval. As vaccination rates increased, mask mandates and other restrictions were lifted, only to be reinstated as new strains of the virus spread through the population once again. Many of our children returned to school, but only under heavy restrictions. Respirators, once so desperately—and sometimes questionably²—rationed, have been surpassed by antiviral medications. Now, after all these various answers to Heyne’s question, with adequate vaccination and at-home testing, optional mask-wearing and social distancing, and most important of all, more effective treatments, our lives and thus our economies are limping back on track. Deeply marked by trauma and loss, we have returned to a simulacrum of the “normal” we once knew. We move forward into the future, often firmly convinced about what—and who—went bad and wrong, though what—and who—might have been better and righter in many cases remains shrouded in darkness. We have asked and answered Heyne’s question over and over again, *ad nauseum*. Not asking and not answering have been impossible. Lives have been on the line and lost, not just in terms of mortality rates, but years of life, quality of life, soundness of mind, and aspirations for the future.

It takes not only talent and intelligence but also courage and hope in order to face Heyne’s question, itself a matter of prudence, again. “Economists acquire their reputations for immorality,” said Heyne, due to their willingness to ask hard questions and offer uncomfortable solutions, “but,” he concludes, “I think it is our vocation to make such statements and I think I would be faithless to my vocation and therefore immoral if I said anything else.”³ Thus, we may add that wrestling with the perennial question, “How much is too much to save a life?” is not only a matter of virtue but a calling as well.

While one article in this our fiftieth issue, and an entire Symposium feature, organized by Dr. Chris Armstrong of the Kern Family Foundation, are dedicated directly to addressing the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic, each contribution in its own way touches upon the twofold reality of scarce resources that must be counted and rationed, on the one hand, and the immeasurable worth of every human person, on the other. As this fundamental duality is a matter of natural law and not merely unique to any one religious tradition, this issue features a second Symposium, guest edited by Dr. Abdullah Ali of Zaytuna College and funded through a grant by the John Templeton Foundation, exploring the complexities of, and compatibilities between, Islam and liberal societies. My thanks to Dr. Armstrong, Dr. Ali, Kern, Templeton, and all the contributors to this issue as they, in their scholarship, exercise the courage to ask such hard and deeply moral questions, renewing our hope that the light to see which answers are better and righter may yet illumine the shadows of our lives together this side of paradise.

—Dylan Pahman, Executive Editor

Notes

1. Paul Heyne, “Are Economists Basically Immoral?” in idem, *Are Economists Basically Immoral? and Other Essays on Economics, Ethics, and Religion* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), 2.
2. See Manfred Spieker, “Misguided Triage Ethics: Chances of Survival and Risks of Dying in the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 24, no. 1 (2021): 7–22.
3. Heyne, “Are Economists Basically Immoral?” 9.