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risk

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To be at risk: To be subject to harm from some process or activity. The degree of risk is a function of the probability and severity of that harm. Given the multitude of ways in which people can be harmed, most people are at risk to some degree most of the time. In addition, since things other than people can be harmed – for example, property, animals, the natural environment – these things can also be described as being at risk from certain processes or activities.

Safety is defined in terms of risk. It is sometimes said that something is safe if it is free from risk, but nothing can be absolutely risk free. Both risk and safety, therefore, come in degrees and involve decision problems as to whether something is too risky or safe enough. So a thing is thought to be safe only if its risks are judged to be acceptable, quite often by a person or group empowered to make that decision for a larger society.

In making a decision about safety, two necessary and distinct activities come into play: measuring risk and judging the acceptability of that risk. The measurement of risk involves an objective scientific assessment of the probabilities and consequences of events. A risk estimate can predict the likelihood that some event will happen, but is unable to pinpoint the occurrence of any specific harmful event.

Unlike the empirical activity of measuring risk, judging safety or the acceptability of risk is a normative activity. This brings up the ques-

tion: Who makes the judgment that a certain risk is acceptable, and by what criteria? And since risk implies the probability of harm to persons, to say that a risk is acceptable implies that the justification for undertaking the risk, or not avoiding it, overrides the moral rule "do no harm." Thus, judgments about acceptable risk for persons are necessarily moral judgments, at least in part.

The remainder of this entry will concentrate on acceptable-risk decision criteria, and will sometimes use environmental risk for the purposes of illustration, although in the field of business ethics, product and workplace safety are equally important areas of risk assessment.

Two essential components of any plan to deal with risk problems are clarity about the goals the decision is intended to achieve and the means proposed to achieve them. But before this can be done by a corporation, for example, risk problems, such as those about pollution or hazardous waste, are other difficulties that need to be addressed.

The first difficulty is problem definition. If there is uncertainty about how to define the problem, there will be uncertainty about the goals and what would constitute solving the problem. It has been claimed that plant species are diminishing because of business activities such as logging and large-scale farming. Is this a risk problem, and if so, what kind of risk? What would count as a solution to the problem?

The second difficulty is disagreement about which facts are relevant to the problem. Is the loss of plant species a problem because of their possible use in healing, because such loss affects the ozone layer, or because the loss of plant variety is a bad thing in itself? How the risk problem is defined will have a major influence on which facts are taken to be relevant, and vice versa.

Finally, there often is a conflict of values, or even confusion about what values we hold or ought to hold. Many claim that the environment is intrinsically valuable. Others argue that it has value only because it serves human ends. Difficulty over values affects how we define the risk problem and how we identify relevant facts.

There are certain characteristics that any acceptable solution to a risk problem must possess – characteristics that are also helpful

with problem definition, identification of facts, clarification of values, determination of goals and the means to those goals. The following criteria have been suggested for any acceptable judgment about a risk problem. Unacceptable decisions fail to meet one or more of the criteria. A proposed solution to an environmental risk problem is acceptable only if it is:

- 1 *Politically implementable*: proposed solutions that do not take account of the political situation are not realistic.
- 2 *Economically feasible*: if the plan places unreasonable burdens on corporate productivity and profitability, it will destroy the base from which successful action is possible.
- 3 *Legally defensible*: there is a fundamental obligation to obey the law, except in extreme situations; law is necessary for social order and constructive action.
- 4 *Technically plausible*: if the technical means to accomplish the solution are not available or if they are excessively problematic, then any proposed solution becomes pure speculation.
- 5 *Environmentally manageable*: the proposed solution should be one that does not result in catastrophic or irreversible harm to the environment.
- 6 *Ethically responsible*: a decision to a risk problem is ethically responsible only if:

(a) It poses no unreasonable threat to human life or health. People should not be exposed to foolish risks – those with goals that are unworthy of the potential harm. To act negligently is to act so as to cause harm by taking unreasonable risk.

(b) It fairly distributes benefits and burdens. No solution is ethically acceptable, for example, if it allocates all benefits to some, and all burdens to others, or if it treats people unequally.

(c) It neither unjustifiably violates moral rights nor unjustifiably forces a dereliction of moral duties. A moral right can justifiably be set aside only by other, more stringent moral rights.

(d) It gives due consideration to the values and interests of all those affected. It will often be necessary to act against the values and interests of some, but only after serious consideration is given to every possible way to accommodate them.

(e) It provides compensation in the event of unexpected or excessive harm. Victims must not be expected to bear such harm with no prospect of reparation.

(f) It is voluntarily accepted, to the extent possible, by those affected, or, at least, those affected are given a fair opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. The only exceptions are where people voluntarily give up the opportunity to participate.

(g) It treats persons not merely as means to some goal, but as ends in themselves. All human beings must be treated with dignity and respect and not as simply tools for others to use.

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roles and role morality

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Roles are positions in business or the professions to which different social functions attach; role morality is the assumption of different norma-