

Online Appendix to accompany:

Euthanizing the Value of a Statistical Life*

by

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This Appendix contains an itemized and categorized sample of specific quotes from ordinary people concerning the idea of the Value of a Statistical Life. The URLs for the sources for these quotes are documented more fully at

http://www.uoregon.edu/~cameron/WTPM/VSL_confusion.pdf.

1. *Outrage/indignation/incredulity: No statistician/politician/bureaucrat can put a value on MY life:*

“First of all no one and no government organization can decide what a life is truly worth. ...”

“There is no monetary value on life and anyone who believes or uses it to decide what becomes policy and [what] doesn't is just plain stupid.”

“Where in our Constitution does it give our government the ‘right’ to put a dollar value on our lives! That is despicable!”

“I don't care what number a politician attaches to it, a human life is priceless. End of discussion.”

“I can't believe that there is even a study that tries to put a value to human life....”

“And by the way—and this has nothing to do w/ any side politically—I have to say that this whole formula, anyhow, is DISGUSTING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! This whole idea of a cost per life, w/ life-making decisions being made on a cost, makes me sick!”

“The value of life is what your love[d] ones, friends and associates think of you, not some statistic from the EPA. ...”

“The ultimate capitalist perversion. Putting a monetary value on a human life. We have truly crossed over into hell on earth when we can seriously discuss how much money a life is worth. ...”

“In 2002, the EPA decided the value of elderly people was 38 percent less than that of people under 70. After the move became public, the agency reversed itself”. This is truly sick...Who are these people and who [gave] them this right???”

“ ‘According to the EPA, people shouldn’t think of the number as a price tag on a life.’ Absolutely people shouldn’t. It’s the price tag the GOVERNMENT puts on a life! Big difference!”

“are you serious??? (not you, the article) this is such bull****! how dare anyone put a value on life, that is so F***** up!!!! OMG this makes me so angry!!!!!”

“...I can't believ[e] our government is paying for this kind of activity, much less using the data to draft policy.”

“Well, *excuuuuuuuusssse* me!!! For living at all, the graveyard"s full. But the value of *my* life is determined by *me!!!* A life is the private property of the owner. Not the government.”

2. *Moral repugnance, as with slavery, child prostitution, Nazis, Stalin and assassination:*

“Hmmm. I remember something I learned once about the last time we put prices on the worth of people, but that was like 175 years ago. You know when slaves were the big commodity.”

“Now we're all slaves in a sense.”

“YOU Should Be Concerned... ...How much for the women? The little girl, how much? ...We want to buy your women!”

“This is the kind of inhuman ‘cost/benefit’ calculation the Nazi bureaucracy used to do when trying to figure out whether to keep their slave labourers (Jews and Russian POW’s) alive. The President of the United States should immediately FIRE ANYONE associated with this monstrous calculus. The fact that Bush won’t (and neither would a Democrat) tells you how your elite rulers really view you.”

“Every death is a tragedy. A Million deaths is a Statistic. –Stalin”

“...The notion that a cost can be placed on the value of preserving a human life is repugnant from the outset, although appropriate to a system in which every human attribute and activity is reduced to quantitative, dollars-and-cents terms.”

“What's the going rate for an assassin hit these days? I think it's well below \$6.9 million. ...Be happy your government values you as much as they do.”

3. *One's value as a human being is not determined by the money they make/have:*

“Life isn't measured by the amount of money one does or does not have. This article is absurd. Money is materialistic. You can't take it with you to the grave....”

“In America the value of your life is now simply determined by how much money you have. And no one even pretends it isn't anymore. We have become simple, good old fashioned evil.”

4. *That's not what it says in the Bible:*

“...My life is mine, God gave it to me and it is my right and responsibility to live it. No part of it *whatsoever* belongs to the government or anyone else, and for the government to dare to assign a monetary value to an individual's life is way out of line. ...”

“And they said, 'It is the price of blood.' “ – Bible

“Life is worth far more than any study can put a value on it. Who cares what the EPA thinks! We are endowed by our creator with life. I wish the government would spend more time thinking about how to serve the people and less about what we are worth or how they can raise our taxes! We are Americans and there is a reason so many people want in[to] this country. It is because we are worth a lot.”

“This is just another example of fascist/corporatist/utilitarian propaganda masquerading as statistics. Government has no business being in the business of metaphysical or moral absolutes, and clumsily intruding into matters better left to religion, philosophy, psychology and the humanities. Corporatists, however, would like to see Americans demoralized and convinced that their lives are valued ultimately, if not exclusively, in monetary terms.”

“...Money is the root of all evil. And I'm not being religious. I'm just pointing out that every single decision made by the government, every dishonesty in business, and almost every single betrayal in this world is in some way connected to money....”

“...NO, NO, NO. It is the LOVE of money that is the root of all evil. NOT money itself.”

“Wow, we actually value human life in \$\$ terms! ...Such hypocrisy is reprehensible! And we call ourselves a GOD fearing people.”

“No they don't need "numbers" to make decisions! You do what is right morally and ethically!! If this is a Christian nation (In God We Trust), then you follow the

commandments and the golden rule. This nation is God fearing, but the government isn't....”

“And who died an[d] made the EPA God? I don't know about anyone else but I think we are Priceless you can't put a price on something that is Created not hatched.”

5. *Sadness, dejection (and sarcasm):*

“Only in modern America could a human life have a monetary sum attached to it.”

“I feel so.....worthless.”

“My eyes weren't quite working when I first read the title of this post; I saw ‘EPA To America: *Your Life Is Worthless.*’ Sadly, my only thought was ‘well, yeah, sounds about right from *them.*’”

“This has to be one of the most cynical, depressing articles I've read in a long time. Could you imagine if parents made their decisions about how to invest in their children like that? Let's even go a step further, after all, more than 50% of the population is female, and aren't women only worth about 70% of men?”

6. *Anger at the EPA, at bureaucracy:*

“The value of the EPA... Zero.”

“I wish I was so naive to believe any country or government doesn't put a price per head. The best business in the world is government, no work, guaranteed pay and plenty of market to exploit.”

“What worthless bureaucrat is sitting somewhere making probably a six figure salary doing this kind of thing? These people are not needed if that's all they have to do all day. I think we should dump the whole bunch of them and start from scratch. I'm thinking all of them are worthless, with this poll as one of the most worthless. I wonder if God sits and looks down and calculates the value one of His creations. I wonder what Abraham Lincoln was thinking when he quoted that all men are created equal. To even have a list like this is the worst kind of bull**** that I have ever seen or heard of. I wonder what worth this person or persons that create this kind of poll puts on themselves?”

“This is one more example of the government trying to put one over on the public. It is impossible that the EPA could have been unaware of the consequences of the reassessment. They believed that nobody would notice it. This administration has stooped to duplicity so often that it is business as usual for them. Once again lives are valued below profits. Washington now serves K Street, not the public.”

“I find it ludicrous that the government is even in this business. The answer is to eliminate the EPA and all other such non-Constitutionally mandated agencies. Then there will be no cost associated with regulations.”

7. *Why EPA office buildings have metal detectors:*

“EPA Says Americans Worth \$900,000 Less Than They Were 5 Years Ago - - - -
YEAH? The fruggin EPA is WORTHLESS, and they should have been abolished
YEARS ago! Thanks, Preznut Nixon, for giving such a wonderful, worthless, federal
krapp whole agency!”

“In theory, if someone (not me) were to gun down ALL the pols who make these life and death decisions based on cost and the dollar value of the lives lost. Would the value of my life go up or down? I’d be alive and they’d be dead though Correct? Still sounds like a better plan.... If one’s life or loved one’s life was destroyed by some penny pinching plan of government, is revenge ever justified? Would that be up to a jury?”

8. *Confusion about the process used to arrive at estimates of WTP for risk reductions:*

“The whole system needs to be scrapped. It is based on a series of false premises. The most obvious of course is that it reduces the value of human life to a financial estimate, ...a meaningless hodgepodge whose only value is that it satisfies some dimwit bean counter’s desire for NUMBERS”.

“Simply fiddling with meaningless numbers.”

“Not only that, but the new, lower figure is based, in part, on what employers are willing to pay to make their employees safer. What a ridiculous way to measure human life!”

“So, how do they figure this, anyway? Do they take the net value of the US as a whole and divide by the population?”

“The \$6.9 million is not a real figure. You cannot replace a person with this value of money or any other. So the calculation is arbitrary. The EPA can choose which studies it wants to include in its calculation. ...”

“The discussion of an arbitrary (ok not entirely arbitrary, there's loose calcs based on avg annual income, life span, etc but seriously... pretty much arbitrary) value being placed on a life is really not even worth discussing, who cares?...”

“So, how does one calculate the ‘statistical value of a (human) [just thought I’d throw the word human into that bureaucratic expression to provide a little perspective] life’? ... It wouldn’t work for researchers to survey Americans at gunpoint and ask how much they would pay not to die. Instead, an unlikely academic field has grown up to extrapolate life’s value from the everyday decisions of average Americans.”

“...no ‘consumer’ willingly ‘prefers’ the possibility of being made ill by a negligent company...”

“ ‘It appears that they’re cooking the books in regards to the value of life,’ said S. William Becker. The administration has cooked the books on everything else, so why not the value of human life? The Bush administration is evil and corruption personified. May it and all concerned rot in hel*. ...”

“Congress should ‘cook’ the books of these freaks and send them into the next disaster area to serve before the disaster hits. ...”

“Why in the world would we generate a cost process based on disconnected self worth assessments? ...”

“There is no price (money) high enough to purchase my life, however I will gladly ‘give’ it up to save someone else if the need arose. You cannot truly put a value on life, Book-keepers can manipulate the math to seemingly evaluate a Citizens worth but this is an imperfect method. In the end, a life is worth no more and no less than the owner says it is.”

“...Perhaps these number crunchers should rework their calculations and come up with a graduated table based on age, sex, health condition, occupation, etc. Our tax dollars paid for this nonsense, but it could be worse. These morons could be working on the "final solution" by drafting new regulations that would require all humans to leave the planet by 2050!...”

“No I am not arguing for placing no monetary value on life. I'm just pointing out that the values arrived at are based on arbitrary, perceived values. If I value a life at 5 million and you set it at 6 million what makes your value any more accurate than mine? What makes your formula for setting the value anymore correct? The answer is nothing....”

““I think the value ought to be set by folks like actuaries, etc, rather than an EPA official with an agenda....”

9. *VSL is somehow linked to controversial issues such as abortion, stem cell research, or immigration reform:*

“No surprise there, we have been killing 4000 per day for years. There is no value on human life in this country. Abortion is the leading cause of death in America.”

“What about the unborn, society says they're worthless.”

“As population increases so will the value of life decrease. Get used to it people, we are on a downhill slide. Pro-lifers and religious anti-birth-control nuts must cease and desist.”

“A frozen embryo- priceless, An American worker- dime a dozen.”

“Well the EPA doesn’t care about human life, obviously the Bush/McCain administration are ‘not’ pro-life!”

“Sounds like the citizens ‘Human Life Value’ is being negatively affected by the 12 million illegals in the US who need to be shipped home at their own country’s expense. They are sucking up citizens tax dollars in welfare, healthcare and incarceration.”

10. Anger about the state of the economy and how this might be related to VSLs:

“This is good information to know. Next time I try and sell Americans, I’ll be sure to do it in Euros.”

“It almost seems vulgar, certainly uncomfortable, to put a price tag on [your] life, but the fact that we’re worth less now isn’t only an indication of the total shit state of our economy.”

“American ‘life’ is worth \$7 an hour. Unless you’re lucky and get to work at Starbucks or Walmart, then it’s eight. Corporations have won.”

“The smaller they make this number, the more life is really worth. ...I have a six-figure job and pay a boatload in taxes every year, and between raising a family, food, gas, tuition, etc., what’s left over to fund any kind of "lifestyle"? Nada. I’ll have to work until I drop. What is the point? Stop regulating and stop taxing people to death. ...wouldn't life be worth more if the government wasn't so busy spending money saving these multi-million dollar 'people'?”

11. Connection to military service, policy concerning the war in Iraq, plight of veterans:

“What a completely disconnected way to evaluate the costs to do the right thing. Whatever happened to doing the right thing regardless of cost? Many have fought and died for our freedom and many of us have lost a loved one for those causes.”

“...Of course, depending on who you are, the US government may be placing a different value on your life. As the Houston Chronicle reports, the US Secret Service has budgeted \$110 million this year to provide protection to presidential candidates. By contrast, in Iraq, families of those accidentally killed by US troops in combat sometimes receive a condolence payment. That figure is capped at \$2,500.”

“Veterans mistreated by the V.A. or the Pentagon would be astonished to learn that they are worth that MUCH!”

“Let’s see, at 6.9 mill per head, our manpower losses in Iraq come to just under \$30 billion. ... The troops are just a number on a tally sheet to this administration, cannon fodder with a firm price tag.”

“They looked at the Dept of Transportation and different EPA branches but did not look at the Dept of Defense and the value of an American soldier.”

12. Population growth and the idea that price is determined by supply and demand:

“Law of supply and demand, 2007 was a banner year for births thus the value of one person is less.”

13. Shouldn't this have something to do with life insurance or wrongful death lawsuits?

“Why not decide it's worth, say, \$250,000 for starters? That amount is also more similar to what a life insurance policy is. I for one don't know ANYONE who has a \$7M life insurance policy.”

“Many [people] have absolutely NO idea how studies like this effect their very lives. Insurance companies, law firms, and the courts are all governed by these statistics...and the next time someone loses a family member or files a complaint or lawsuit relating to illness and any number of other problems...they'll see exactly how the results and settlements are changed.”

“...I know it sounds ludicrous to put a number figure besides a life, but that is how insurance companies and retirement plans make their calculations.”

14. It's all the fault of conservatives, liberals, Marxists, fascists, etc.:

“Of course life is worth less after nearly eight years of Republican rule. Conservatives think that the little people only exist to be exploited and robbed. ...”

“The number is lower because they included Liberals and Progressives in the report statistics this time around.”

“Pure Coffee Shop Marxist twaddle.”

“How are we not living in a fascist state?”

15. The idea that there is one true number for the Value of a Statistical Life, or conversely, that everyone should have a different number:

“...Also, the Bush administration has changed these types of numbers in the past (lowering the value of elderly people), and when this change was made public, the Bush admin. changed it back to its original, statistically correct number....”

“...There is one problem with it, though. It's not the value I place on my life. It's their estimate of the average value that the average American places on his life. Coming up with a single number is a gross collective judgment about how much risk and how much

safety each of us should have. It's incredibly dehumanizing to be lumped together with everyone else this way...."

16. *The whole idea of the Value of a Statistical Life is some kind of lame joke (or a plot by conservatives to weaken regulations):*

"What a ridiculous article. It must be a slow news day."

"This is hilariously morbid."

"So the EPA now does financial work? That is news to me."

"Since my life is worth less now, do you think I can take a deduction for the loss on my next income tax return? "

"If the [']statistical people['] had done the research and read the fine print then perhaps their lives would be worth more today..."

"So if I can raise \$6.9 million will they sell me Bush or Cheney, delivered to my cellar?"

"Does this mean a \$6.9 million dollar donation to the government allows me to shoot the politician of my choice? I'm gearing up for a bake sale. That's one hell of a bargain!"

"I saw it and laughed and moved onto the next story lol. It's not worth my time to read - bunch of bologna. ...- calm down honey - the people in that office have nothing to look forward too and nothing going in their lives and think the rest of America is the same. Seriously, it's nonsense. ...don't take it to heart and think how miserable them people must be to ponder such foolishness."

Comedian/commentator Stephen Colbert even got some mileage out of the controversy: "The Word – Priceless: ...By devaluing life, they've made it less likely to regulate water and air quality...and the worse the water and air quality get, the less life is worth living...which further devalues life, which makes it less likely to regulate water and air quality. It's like the circle of life (minus the life). ...While they may have lowered the value of a person, the EPA has given us something worth a lot more. Because a human life is worth \$6.9 million dollars (and dropping). Gaming the system to protect industry from safety regulations? Priceless."¹

¹ Video clip at <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/176175/july-14-2008/the-word---priceless> (04:06) Posted on 7/14/2008; 49,852 views to 10/21/09.

Vaccinating the “Value of a Risk Reduction”?

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Abstract

The public will continue to be a tough audience for any substitute terminology selected to convey quantitative measures of people’s “willingness to give up other goods and services to obtain reductions in risks to life and health.” I continue to be concerned about any use of the word “value” in this context. A great effort will need to be made to launch any “value”-laden replacement term in a way that makes its meaning crystal clear to the general public.

This inventory consists of a categorized summary of readers’ responses to Binyamin Appelbaum (2011) “As U.S. Agencies Put More Value on a Life, Businesses Fret” *New York Times*, February 16. This is a distillation of relevant excerpts from a set of 199 comments. Weekday circulation of the *New York Times* is about 877,000. The online version reportedly receives on the order of 30 million unique visitors per month. Appelbaum’s article received these 199 comments by February 18, 2011. Thus nearly 200 readers were sufficiently motivated to type up their reactions and submit them within the first two days. It is impossible to know how many other readers of the print or online versions of this article had similar reactions, so we cannot know how prevalent these adverse impressions are, but the main patterns among these “stakeholders” seem fairly consistent. Many categories listed here are recurrent themes, similar to those enumerated in the Supplementary Materials that accompany Cameron (*REEP*, 2010) “Euthanizing the Value of a Statistical Life.”

It is important to remain aware that an advisory group consisting solely of Ph.D. economists (or the equivalent) may not be the best-equipped to judge how ordinary citizens will interpret discussions of the valuation of mortality risk reductions.

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1. This is awful, insane, nonsense, etc.

Oh, God. This is so awful. This practice compares apples and oranges (money and people) at an extremely perverse level. Do what you like, but you cannot put a price tag on MY life. Do people actually get college degrees to figure out such nonsense?

This type of stuff is insane...Do we really pay taxes to fund such insane studies??? Our US Government has lost touch with reality... Such activities, while interesting in a morbid sense, cost money... This sort of thing has to change... Voters, please, please wake up... When a political organ[ization] calls or mails you for money...Just SAY NO... (ellipses in original).

Nonsense, sheer nonsense! If a human life were worth anywhere near eight million dollars the government should spend more than a few thousand dollars per pupil on public education! These inflated values only serve to create government jobs in regulatory agencies. This is hypocrisy gone wild!

This begs for sarcasm, but, unfortunately, it's just another indication that we have lost our collective minds and the price for that will be very high, indeed.

Absolute bull!! This is patently absurd...and typical of the wasted efforts of bureaucrats whose only contribution is to reduce to value of everyone's life. ...

What is your life worth to you, your family, your community? Add it up. Are you/they happy with the return? Yes? Good job. Ignore silly studies. They are published to provoke. Thus sell copy.

The debate seems in some ways silly and certainly unsolvable. To the individual his/her life is priceless (as is true for loved ones).

Putting a price on a life is evidence that one doesn't understand the value of a life. However, putting a price on a life is a logical consequence of capitalism.

...Whatever the answer may be to all this, it seems to me that while cost/benefit analyses are certainly justified and necessary, a simplistic per life calculation is of very little value.

How does this discussion even arise in a civilized, free society? The next time anyone claims that the plot elements of "Atlas Shrugged" are far-fetched, just let them read a few headlines from The New York Times.

... Money cannot be compared with life. Life is worth more than money. Using cost/benefit analysis to put life in terms of money is an utter failure to perceive the value of life. ... Pricing life in money elevates money and degrades life, inevitably. ...

The disturbing thing about this is not that such numbers have been set. Monetary value of a thing is the simplest least-common-denominator way of assessing and comparing the value of things

for financial exercises. ...The disturbing thing is that we as a society have come to accept this as the sole, or primary, measure of the worth of a life.

...The whole idea of attaching a dollar amount to a human life is disgusting.

I agree that this is all nonsense. Religious beliefs aside, the human life is priceless. ... It is disgusting that in order to decide whether to make regulations that would result in, not just healthier people, but a healthier planet, policy makers must assign an imaginary monetary value. As a human being I believe that all lives are equally valuable. The value of a life is impossible to measure, especially with numbers that are truly meaningless and imaginary.

.... Now we just need to figure out how to value our lives apart from material gain!

2. Outright cynicism

Thanks corporate leaders: Now I get it! The more worthless our lives are, the better your economy is!

My life isn't worth a plugged nickel if a rich guy thinks he can make money on it.

Obviously this is because of the inflation caused by Obama. Life was a lot cheaper under Bush.

... The following adage demystifies the present smoke screen: "figures lie, and liars figure!"

There is just so much wrong with this article that I'm at loss for a starting point.... So, whatever the story, the bottom line is that the boys in Wall Street, DC are up to no good again. They have stolen our jobs, our homes, our retirement, our children's education, our life savings, our health. There's nothing left to steal so, now, they have reinvent the wheel and make money out of the only thing we've got left: our lives.

3. Religion, faith, moral values, impossibility of monetizing life

Life is Sacred. End of Story. Or don't regulate me to YOUR religious moral values.

How did we as a nation/world arrive at something as horrific as placing a monetary value on life? As living, breathing humans, our complete lack of understanding as to how and why we are alive and here on earth in the first place is questionable. ... no one has that right except our creator. And, the last I heard we live, we die, and only those above that should come close to placing a price tag on another. Let's get a grip people!

... It is the physical body that returns to dust that capitalism attempts to place a price tag on. A box of dust worth \$6.1 M, I highly doubt it. But a human soul, absolutely priceless and immortal. Maybe our perspective on the value of human life needs to change. Maybe we should be valuing our soul life more than our physical life that's ever so fleeting....

The ultimate, sacred and irreplaceable value is life, itself. The lowest, meanest and most unstable value is money. Reducing life to a dollar value makes bankers gods.

... What indeed is the value of one life, of one human life? Ask a mother the value of her child's life? Ask a boy the value of his dead puppy's life? And is anyone's life ours to value at all? By what stretch of our infinitely displaced arrogance do we dare set monetary value on Life itself? Only through the depths of Ignorance!

Business seems to value my life only in terms of what they can profit from it. ...Jesus valued me so much that he taught me the most valuable lessons of life and died for me.

Placing a dollar value on life flies in the face of my religious beliefs. We are compelled to save a life if we can do so. I don't believe that these bureaucrats really know the life-saving value of any regulation. If we really valued life in the millions of dollars, we'd enforce bans on cell phone use in cars, ban motorcycles, put murderers in jail instead of on the street, ban assault weapons like the one used in Arizona, and not send young people to their death in Afghanistan. This is all bogus.

Americans know the cost of everything, and the value of nothing. ... Gold no longer backs the currency for a reason. Let's stop trying to create an imaginary value for living things and the planet. So many creative and positive ways exist to inspire and motivate life sustaining behaviors and enterprises. Money is the least of these.

4. This has to be a joke

This is great, the U.S. is the wealthiest nation in the world. We have the most expensive people on earth. Our combined people worth is in excess of 3 million trillion dollars. We could sell some of those people to nations that need extra citizens. \$9 million per U.S. citizen....

I'm trying to figure out whether or not this is a joke of some sort. First of all, the discussion is clearly biased toward an American "human life." If you use the same equations on say, an illegal immigrant, life, as they say, is cheap. Second, that ole Judeo/Christian obsession of "saving" lives is bumping up against the legislated liberty and right of any idiot to smoke, drink and/or eat (to mention a few) him or herself to death. For example, what has been the cost of mandating seatbelts just so the few, the proud and the stupid can decline to use them because they are "uncomfortable?" Sigh... only the human race can engage is the contradiction that life is philosophically sacred and at the same time, operationally cheap. A way to lower the cost in question would be to offer a tax credit to people who are obviously dedicated to living a healthy, sane lifestyle. The rest could "opt out" by living fast, dying young and leaving a morbidly obese corpse.

Ain't capitalism grand. :-) So tell me, if I wanted to torture you to death just for my own amusement, how much would you want me to pay your estate for the privilege? I actually want to ask a large number of people so I can find the lowest bidder. Supply and demand, after all.

5. Am I (are we) really worth that much?

If I'm worth somewhere between \$5 million and \$8 million, do you think I could somehow borrow off myself so that I can go to graduate school or pay my rent? Is there a bank that will figure out how to profit off of my self-hood? What happens if I go into default? ...

I suffer from depression. Put me down for \$3.48.

\$5 million would do fine for me. Just send me the cash, I'll take my own chances from there.

At these prices, we could sell all the New Yorkers and pay off the national debt. Such a deal! Any takers?

Wasn't it the late John D. Rockefeller who supposedly said that if one places a monetary value on one's life then one's life isn't worth much? ... Back in the 1970s, a bionic leg and a bionic arm attached to a human was valued at \$6 million. Factoring in inflation from then, an average American's \$6 million life value today is a steal.

6. Different values for different people?

That blanket figure is completely unrealistic. Not every person is worth the same amount. Great humans who contribute to bettering our species are worth vastly more than the common rank and file and even more than criminals and homeless bums. ...I would even argue the bums that habituate the NYC subway system are worth negative value as they live lives without reason or purpose, spending all their time doing nothing but continuing to exist and their presence on the subway negatively affects the ride of everyone around them.

Well right now our government is in the process of making sure that, whatever number the various sources come up with on the 'value' of a human life...that the 'quality' of that life for all except the elite and powerful few is going to go distinctly downhill. I value far more the life of the budding pianist or scientist, than the self-serving, over-indulgent and corrupt life of the Wall Street 'mongul'. So should we all.

The value of life for statistical cost analysis purposes is an interesting exercise. But begs the question...what is the life of a non-working individual worth? How about artists, musicians, arm chair philosophers, the retired, the disabled, politicians, the idle rich and other social parasites? Should they be required to pay for the privilege of being allowed to exist?

I imagine that those who lived an artistic life that did not become a Steven Soundheim or Norman Rockwell if you will, are worth nothing, that of course would be absurd and would deprive the world of many great writers, artists, and dancers.

Whose life? The life of a Goldman-Sachs banker is worth several million/billion. The life of a school teacher in Wisconsin is worth a couple hundred thousand, the life of home-care worker is worth 50,000.

The US is now putting value on human life? When did this trend start? And, I hope that means that the value of an Iraqi, Mexican, Palestinian life is the same as that of an American or an Israeli....

I'm 73 and I know I'm worth more every year! I get smarter and smarter and wiser, as well. The less I earn, the more I deserve. I am not sure those who think old people are negligible deserve a dime.

Generally speaking, the older your life gets the less it's worth. Otherwise why would there be a donut hole in Medicare coverage?

I suppose this kind of calculation has been going on for years, but it did make me wonder. Could we make cheap cars for old people because their lives aren't worth much?

If my life is worth \$9.1 million I should be able to depreciate it on my tax return as I age. It is, after all, my prime income-producing asset. Or could one argue that the increased experience and knowledge acquired through ageing adds rather than subtracts value?

Shouldn't there be a way to make it at least somewhat age-related. A group of 70 yr old people isn't the same as a group of college kids.

[Follow-up:] I have to agree that today's college kids aren't worth much.

If a higher dollar figure attached to the value of an individual is the only politically viable approach to ensuring safer products, cleaner air and water, and greater access to innovative medicines, why have any limit at all. As far I'm concerned, my children are priceless.

And what about non-human lives? Somebody's pooch may be worth more than all of their in-laws put together as far as he's concerned. I don't even want to think about the value of Goldman Sach's bankers. This needs to be reasoned out a bit more thoroughly.

INTERESTING exercise. I assume these are American lives, not Vietnamese, Cambodian, Panamanian, Chilean, Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian.....

7. Shouldn't the number be negative for some people?

One important aspect to all this has been missing and that is the COST of maintaining and protecting each human life. Not to sound anti religious but each (precious) life that is saved has a negative impact (cost) on the planet. There are too many humans on the earth now and we are slowly destroying it. Each life should be given a negative number, not mine of course.

Something's wrong with this. It makes no attempt to gauge the value of each particular individual life. Some lives would be worth several times more than the average in terms of what they contribute to society, and other lives might even have a negative value.

8. Slavery, pro-life, abortion etc.

Putting a "\$" in front of a number and calling it the value of a human life is an idea that is quintessentially American. I can't help recoiling from the whole notion, which conjures up images of human beings in chains on the auction block and the feverish trafficking that follows.

Let me see, if you are pro-life and pro-business, how can government raising the value of life be a bad thing? Something to do with the god of money perhaps?

The primary value of a human life in the US is the political mileage that can be generated from the priceless unborn fetus. After that it's market value, and business costs place the lowest value possible on it.

Funny that Republicans resist raising the value of a life on the grounds that it makes stuff too expensive, and yet apparently assign unlimited value to a fetus, on the grounds that they value life. So what's it going to be? Perhaps it's time to drop the "we're the party that values life" rhetoric.

The REAL criterion of the "value of a human life" is how much Planned Parenthood charges to end one.

If our government is concerned about the value of life, then why not place a value on the life of an unborn child? Think of the millions of future workers who are never born. ...

I find it fascinating that the article doesn't even mention the most valuable lives of all—those with their whole life and entire potential ahead of them—the million killed in our country each year before they have even had opportunity to be born. What about them and the value of their lives? Put in monetary terms alone, we are only now beginning to understand what we have already lost from a generation now reaching adulthood—what these lives might have contributed in benefit to the world and to our economy.

... We value life in economic terms only, but devalue it otherwise. So in the American, pro-abortion model, if I have economic value, I have worth. But if I simply contribute to the good of society by the intangible benefits I give, such as love and joy and comfort, I am a burden? Watch out, world. This sounds like the Orwellian world I was warned about back in 7th grade....

9. Military deaths, war deaths, terrorism deaths

Unfortunately the article does not address the value the administration places on the lives of our military. They seem to place a much lower value on the lives of those putting their lives on the line to defend all the other very expensive citizens. Sad.

My National Service Life Insurance policy from WWII would have paid out \$10,000 if I had been killed in the war. The current going price per dead soldier is \$100,000 paid to the next of kin. Here is another way of putting a dollar value on a life.

This would make wars pretty expensive in terms of civilian deaths. How much do we owe Iraq for all of the women and children who have died unnecessarily, or the wedding guests our drones have killed in Afghanistan?

If value of life is indeed about \$9 million in the reckoning of government, why is the compensation for combat death only about \$0.5 million (in 2005) for US soldiers? How does government justify such a huge variance in its estimates?

Instead, let's have a true Reality Check: Look at the death benefit to family for our armed forces killed in action (KIA) in Iraq/Afghanistan, wherever....\$100,000. \$100,000. Prime of life, family left behind, guardians of our country, the legacy of true Americans that built/fought for this country. Not 8.7M, not \$4.50. \$100,000. If anyone should get \$8.7M (and I don't agree that anyone should), it's the armed forces survivor benefits. Most of the rest of us should be valued between \$4.50 to \$100,000.

I have seen many innocent and very poor Afghanis killed by the US Government in their asinine pursuits there. My question to all these federal agencies and every American Citizen who is vicariously responsible for these deaths is: What is the value of life of an Afghani peasant? Can we please DIRECTLY (and not through some intermediary) give a \$6 million compensation to the family of each and every innocent person that an American soldier has killed or will kill. Thank you.

The US government has already set the price: the payment for the death of a soldier/sailor - \$250,000. When I was in the service it was \$10,000.

Great! With enough shift in the cost-benefit ratio—resulting from this increase in the value of an individual human life—perhaps even right-wing conservatives will see the obvious "value" in getting out of our ongoing wars of choice.

Oh, this far understates the value. Just look at how much money the military has spent since Sept 11. If you just use the original WTC numbers, its gotta be billions per person by now. Way to go 'W'.

10. How much the government has spent on disasters, doctors

The price of life depends on where you live. In Haiti for example the price of life depends on getting on time a meal ration valued on \$1 or \$2 dollars or medicines to fight cholera costing less than \$10 dollars. LIFE IS PRICELESS NO MATTER WHERE YOU LIVE....

This article bothers me in so many ways that I really don't know how to comment. I do wonder though, how these experts would gauge the dollar worth of our "leaders" in Washington as compared to a homeless individual who has been made that way because of our government's mishandling of Katrina or the foreclosure of his home because of our banking industry's "mistakes" or the outsourcing of his job to any number of countries because of his company's CEO's greed?

We've got people sleeping in the streets and eating out of garbage cans in this country. We've got tens of millions unemployed, many of whom will never get a decent job again. Everything I see suggests that the average life is worth a fraction of the numbers presented in this article...

Brilliant! The value of human life depends on the wealth of the country you happen to be a citizen of. Is that why the multitude of deaths due to poverty and hunger in the developing world outside the US barely raise an eyebrow here!

Anyone else find it ironic that the government is interested in raising the value of a human life to over 6 million, but doesn't want to pay squat to doctors for trying to preserve life or increase its quality?

11. *Death panels, living wills, end-of-life decision-making, etc.*

Death panels, here we come!

The end-of-life cost is catastrophic and the decision to terminate life support is a BIG problem for everyone concerned. Fortunately, 41% of the US population were smart enough to have Living Wills as of 2007. These folks save everyone the burden of making that decision. The reality, however, is that the medical response team can never find that document....

This is more about hospital and long term care costs than anything else. How far is it going to go? We are not immortal--sometimes it's better that we die! I am a democrat but I think this is a waste of money, perhaps particularly when some of us haven't even enough food and shelter. Our priorities are skewed.

I fear that such number-crunching is already being taught in our medical schools. In the last six months our family has had to argue and defend my 91-year-old mother's advance directives with hospital physicians,... The death panels are already here.

...By the way, the absence of a rational protocol for making the decision of when some procedure or treatment is too expensive is the fundamental problem that is causing the explosion of health care expenditures. To limit anything, you have to be able to say "NO" at some point, and in the federal policy arena, you'd better have a rational protocol for doing just that. At some point the answer has to be no, and *it has nothing to do with the value of human life, whatever that is.* [Italics added]

What you're saying makes logical sense, but caring for a loved one isn't logical. Let's see how fast you are ready to let a family member die if they are seriously ill. This is a pointless discussion because until the day a pill is invented to suppress our emotions, we will not be ready to face death with pragmatism and cost-benefit analysis.

12. *How the government currently determines the value of a life?*

... These calculations are made in an office imagining some artificial death-free utopia. We have to live in the real world, with real consequences....

I've never posted online before, but this article/gov't 'methodology' is so over the top.....it's encouraging to see these many comments that indicate many fellow Americans seem to have significantly more intelligence not evident/valued in our narcissistic gov't representatives of the imperial roman senate equivalent...

When I was a young doc the chemical 'value' of human life, bodywise, was, I recall, \$0.77. Currently, primarily due to the value of skin, it's about \$4.50. However, Prof. Viscusi's benchmark 'research/methodology' that the gov't uses to throw out various 'values' somehow places an average American human life value currently at 8.7M, plus or minus a few million by other agencies in their somehow and independently 'informed' judgments.

This basically means there will be more burdensome safety regulations that might at some point save one life every 10-20 years but in the meantime will destroy millions of dollar in value as well as jobs. ... I suppose increasing the statistical value of a life is an easy way to get around "unfavorable" cost-benefit ratios.

All the article's estimates on the value of a life are wildly high. I expect that one reason is that businesses jerk around the government bureaucrats when it's time to change a label. Corporate cost accountants tweak the numbers until changing a label costs millions. So the cost accountants on the government side play the same game, and the few lives statistically saved are suddenly worth \$8 million each.

I guess I have a few questions. First, what do GOP folks say a life is worth, what do the Donkeys say? Is a GOP life worth more, less, or the same... et cetera. ...

I wish we would just leave it to the poets and the philosophers. If nothing else it would be more consistent. Bureaucrats do not figure this based on some mathematical formula. They figure it based on the ideological whim of the moment. In this case it is the Democrats who are using this as a club. Want bigger government without having anyone vote it? Pass a regulation requiring a certain action based on a certain threshold, then screw with the threshold. Instant government. The accusation of the Republicans did it, while not without merit, is hardly ennobling. Us Democrats were supposed to be better than them, right. Hope and change indeed.

... When you have an entity, the government, that does not have to worry about being put out of business because they have no competition of services then they do not have to worry about customer satisfaction, quality of service or cost so the administrators have to come up with justifications for the increased authority, personnel expansion and higher budget through shady means such as this article describes.

Everyone knows that a rich Republican's life is worth the most. Poor people, not so much. That's current thinking in the House of Representatives, anyway.

...The administration is anti-abuse as noted in its desire to regulate the banks and against the pricing of human life as noted by its struggle to distance itself from the economic formulas which are used to determine the pricing....

...The bottom line is that the RICH ... get to decide not only what your life is WORTH, but what your air, water, mountains, oceans, time—in short your very quality of life—is worth. And the answer, unless you're lucky enough to be part of the super-rich elect, is: not much.

We used to be a nation of risk-takers who gambled our lives to go to the moon and push the boundaries of human achievement. Now we are a nation of wusses who let our destinies be governed by actuaries and government bureaucrats. How pathetic.

These values appear to be an average. Obviously, the super rich are massively skewing the scale, as I'd be happy to be worth 1/10th that value. This shows how much we could all be making in a theoretically perfect communist society.

This is kind of like all those figures telling us how much it costs to raise a child. Never mind that most of us never had anywhere near that much to spend on them.

But if a human life is worth one of these numbers, let's say \$6M, the total spend under ALL of these efforts should be around that much, not for just one effort. If we spend \$6M on three different efforts that affect an overlapping set of people we are spending much more than that one person...\$18M, never mind 50 efforts. These are some of the hidden costs that make everything here more expensive.

The article reminds me of the accountant's answer to "how much is 2 + 2?" His answer: "what number would you like?" The issue addressed in the article is not putting a statistical value on life, which will happen implicitly if not explicitly when these decisions are made, but about the variation in the estimates that seems to be driven by whatever number it takes to get a result desired for other reasons than the value of a life.

Let's try to keep things in perspective. This rising valuation could just be a front for raising the fees of trial lawyers, and will no doubt end up making your health insurance more expensive.

"... the value of preventing deaths from terrorism might be 100 percent higher than other deaths." What a self-serving statement by Homeland Security, and a ridiculous one. Anything to justify the millions wasted on the TSA.

13. Malign intent on the part of government agencies

If the EPA values life at \$9.1 million. Then would not the EPA, which helped bring about the world wide Ban on DDT (even though their own science found it harmless), owe Africa \$45,500,000,000,000,000,000,000 for the 50 million Africans that have died needlessly of malaria because of their politically motivated decision. The damage that EPA will do to our economy and the world food supply, as they try and regulate CO2 (a harmless trace gas need for all life) will make that death toll seem small.

...And EPA introducing “the idea that people may place a higher value on the common good than on their own survival” – are you kidding me?! How convenient! A government agency gets to assume that people would be willing to sacrifice their lives for “the common good”, and the definition of what constitutes this “common good” rests with the government agency. We have already seen this – millions of people were killed “for the common good” in countries like Soviet Union, China, North Korea and others. Government their also simply assumed that people are willing to die for the cause the government defined as ‘the common good’. No government agency should ever have a right to decide that a life should be sacrificed for some ephemeral “common good”. This can only be decided by the person whose life it is, and nobody else!

14. *Proposals for how to measure the value of a human being*

The AVERAGE American is = gross domestic product divided into the most recent census count multiplied by an average earnings multiplier (use the S & P average). Simply plug in the numbers and voila, your average capitalized value.

Maybe it would be more comforting to express the value of a life in terms of troy ounces of gold, or in units of a foreign currency that's likely to rise against the dollar if we don't get our economy back on track.

Why not pass a law that sets the value of a life uniformly for all agencies. That will us how pro life the pro-lifers really are.

... Any attempt to use somebody's guess as to the "value of human life" for regulatory decisions is nonsense. The only thing you can learn from such calculations is the relative merit of various proposals. For that purpose, it doesn't matter what value you use, so long as everyone uses the same number. That gives you a uniform measure of the relative benefit or value of whatever you're considering....

...If the administration was so confident about their analysis, why don't they present a bill to Congress and let our representatives vote up/down? Instead, unelected bureaucrats are running this country from behind closed doors. What happened to transparency? BTW, I wonder if the trial lawyers had a hand in this as well?

... I agree with the poster who commented that Obama should send it to Congress, not allow unelected bureaucrats to levy what effectively are huge tax increases which will raise the cost of everything.

...You can tell a lot about a person or industry by looking at the number of dollars they put on a human life. There is no science here. Imagine the potential consequences if we tried to make a science out of this.... The idea that science will help with valuing human life is about as evil as it gets. ...Everybody in America ought to consider this question and think it through. Politicians ought to have to answer the question, "How much, Congressman X... How much is a human being worth?"

When we talk about the value of a human we estimate present value of the expected earnings during one's working life. It is obvious that (1) the age of the individual, (2) skills, (3) the probability of being unemployed or non-productive, (4) education or skills, and (5) conditions of health just before death affect the present value of an expected stream of future income. As people get more skillful or educated, the present value of their future stream of income becomes larger and larger.

US per capita GDP = 47,500\$; US life expectancy = 80; $47,500 \times 80 = 3.8$ Million.

Because I am a complete nerd, I actually calculated how much I have earned in my life adjusted for inflation (and including the broadest range of things which could be considered earnings, like scholarships etc.) and extrapolated those earnings to age 65. I came up with a total lifetime earnings of 3.7 Million.

Since when is the value placed on a life determined on GDP output over a lifetime? Aside from the physical stuff we make each year there is also the intangible value we provide to our spouses, children, loved ones. How do you quantify that loss? There is a value to love and affection which can't be easily determined. To strictly use GDP is woefully undervaluing what we are worth to each other.

Absurd! Assume the average person makes \$50,000 a year, and that they work for 40 years. That comes to the market valuing that person at \$2 million. \$5 million? It may be politically correct, but it is absurd! This sort of arithmetic can bankrupt a country's government and make employing people in that country a fiscal impossibility.

That number is absurd. If the minimum wage is \$7.50 and someone works 44 years (21-65) at 2080 years, they will earn just under \$700,000. That is what they can earn. The fact that the gov't will spend more than that in the last few weeks of life is a political decision, not a question of worth. Politicians have a negative life value. They cost a lot more than they are worth.

I think people are missing the point of doing this type of valuation. The point is NOT that the dollar has a value which is fixed in stone and that we can measure a human life against it. The point IS that the HUMAN LIFE is the value which is fixed in stone, and that dollars, which are essentially tokens of exchange of certain amounts of a human being's labor time, have a value because of that. ... It's the US dollar which gets its value from the human life, not the other way around. And I still think the correct number should be ~4 million., i.e. either the per capita GDP x life expectancy or the life-time earnings of the average American, both of which give roughly similar numbers.

When dividing approximate estimated life worth by approximate life expectancy and then translating that value to dollars per hour yields a value approximately equal to the current minimum wage -- about \$7/hr. Why not simplify and use minimum wage as the standard for a life's worth, and then apply transformations on that standard, as appropriate, given gender, race, etc. normed differences; & normed quality and quantity of work production differences by occupational category? And charitably, one might add a disability dispensation constant as a function of government's ability to provide entitlement to those unable or unwilling to work.

... I should be able to start taking depreciation now that I have passed my prime years.

I would suggest dividing by the number of siblings. Only child? Full value! ... Not quite the same as China's one child policy, but in the right direction towards our over populated planet! BTW, I'm one of 5 kids. So, only a fifth for me. ...

If we let business people or accountants put a value on a person's life then we will quickly end up valuing people like a piece of equipment—just like a cog in the a Modern Times machine—and be recycled when repair costs exceed replacement costs--just like Soylent Green.

15. *Observations on how people seem to value their own lives*

From the way people treat their bodies, from smoking to eating habits to substance abuse, I find it highly suspect that many people value their own life that highly.

This is interesting. It makes me wonder, with the government and some businesses valuing life so highly, and some of us as individuals valuing ourselves so little, what the middle ground would be. Some of us spend \$5 to \$10 a day paying the cigarette companies to kill us slowly, while others pay that much extra to eat organic foods, hoping for "extra" value. ...

16. *Supply and demand?*

Not to be crass, but wouldn't the laws of supply and demand dictate the value of life goes down as the number of people goes up in the country?

Given a world badly overpopulated and inexorable human breeding it seems life is actually pretty cheap. I must be missing something.

There are 7 or 8 billion people on the planet. Life is cheap. This article makes us all cheaper.

17. *Relationship to insurance*

It also makes most life insurance payouts pretty paltry. What would happen to automobile liability insurance rates if these values were taken seriously.

Everyone essentially establishes the value of their own life by having (or not having) life insurance. It's always amazing when someone who carries \$100,000 in life insurance is worth \$2 million after they've been killed in a situation where someone else is liable. Let them fall asleep at the wheel and crash and they're worth \$100,000. Let someone else fall asleep at the wheel and hit kill them and all of a sudden they're worth \$2 million.

Why not look to the value people place on their own lives? How many US citizens carry \$9.1 MILLION of life insurance? I've been out of the business for about 40 years, but I would still bet

that finding many people, even in up-scale neighbors, who carry \$500,000 or more would take an extended effort and in most cities you could count them on your fingers and toes.

Now, that would be refreshing! Oh, and before I go, I have to mention that the bankers and the rest of the CorporaFascist cabal have been putting value on the lives of their wage slaves for some time now vis-a-vis the secret "dead peasant" insurance policies secretly secured against the serfs with a nod of approval from the US government so that they can profit even from our deaths. ... Dead Peasant Insurance is sometimes used as a shorthand reference for life insurance policies that insure a company's rank-and-file employees and name the company as the beneficiary....

No surprise here that business wants a low value assigned to their drone workers. Heck if it was up to them, as it used to be, they would pay out a ½ day's wage to a widow along with a ham or turkey if the worker dropped dead before noon. Those at the top have made most of their money by undervaluing the labor and lives of those that do the work!

18. *Human life as a tradable commodity*

Why do I smell some sort of stock market type scheme/opportunity for Wall St and such to make a lot of money betting on what the monetary value of life is posted by various governmental agencies?

Life value seems like another bubble in the making.

I find this very disturbing. I mean, what if we're currently riding a value-of-life bubble? I don't want to think about what happens when the bubble bursts.

Capitalism at its finest. Calculating the value of a life in terms of dollars, i.e. dead metals and paper. What does that tell you about our society and where we are headed? Putting dollar values on life means they have no value at all. I'm sure there are companies out there who would happily bundle lives up and sell them as AAA securities to make a profit. Once their value falls below a certain amount, it's cheaper to kill them. That's what this article means....