

Automobility, Liberalism, and the Ethics of Driving

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Automobility, or the myriad institutions that foster car culture, has rarely if ever been put under the lens of liberal political theory, even though driving is one of the most common and widely accepted features of daily life in modern societies. When its implied promise of guaranteeing both freedom and equality is examined more closely, however, it appears that the ethical implications of driving may be darker than initially supposed. Automobility may indeed be in violation of both the Kantian categorical imperative and Gewirth's principle of generic consistency, even though there has thus far been remarkably little ethical analysis to reveal these possibilities. It is conceivable that liberal political theory has turned a blind eye to automobility precisely because the latter has naturalized us into accepting what Roberto Unger has called a routine of "false necessity," so that driving is now virtually imperceptible as a social fact worthy of critical analysis.

In the West, by and large, we are all liberals now. Instead of ignoring or affecting to deplore this, we should be recognizing and reaffirming it. Or else, you never know, it might one day no longer be true.

—THE ECONOMIST¹

INTRODUCTION

My overall goal in this short paper is to interest political theorists in engaging in a broad-ranging discussion on the ethics of driving. I contend that the car and the entire gamut of practices that support it are mistakenly outside the earnest consideration of political theory. I seek therefore to demonstrate that the car and its institutions are significant, not only for environmentalists and policy makers, but also, more generally, for those who seek to resolve philosophical and institutional questions relating to the "I" and the "we." There are three specific lines of reasoning that I briefly pursue here toward meeting this goal. First, I describe the grand scope of the automobile, its uses and impacts on the individual, society, and the environment. Second, I examine some standard approaches that serve to address the ethical concerns associated with driving and argue against Gewirth's apparently unqualified rights-based defense of driving. Third, I try to explore rather tentatively why this important area of public affairs has

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¹ "The Perils of Complacency," *The Economist*, 21 December 1996 (emphasis added).

received such scant attention within liberal political philosophy. Perhaps somewhat rashly, I propose that this blind spot with regard to the car may be significant in identifying certain aporias within liberalism itself. While unable to provide adequate evidence for this last claim within the latitude of the present discussion, I try to express it in broad terms in the hope that it would at least provoke a response from colleagues who are otherwise silent on the subject.

As a note on terminology, I mostly employ a narrow definition of *liberalism* in this paper, referring primarily to a foundational rights-based political philosophy that emphasizes negative liberties and “market” liberty over institutional context, and upholds a vigilant distinction between the public and private spheres of human activity. I largely ignore libertarianism as well as political liberalism, and focus on variants of liberalism that treat individual autonomy as underpinning freedom. At the same time, I do not agree with the seemingly ecumenical view expressed in the citation above from *The Economist* (and couched in a warning) that even the larger liberal sensibility is something “we all” share in the West. There are, after all, numerous tendencies in environmentalism, feminism, and other social movements that remain suspicious of different facets of the liberal paradigm, in part because of its failure to disentangle many important ethical concerns, but primarily because of the apparent reluctance of its practitioners to do so. To some extent, then, my own reasoning in this paper is oriented toward a “post-” in liberal ethics that could adequately address the current philosophical impasse involving automobility and the environment.

AUTOMOBILITY IN QUESTION

Driving is one of those ubiquitous practices that adults in large parts of the developed world take for granted. Along with sleeping, wearing clothes, eating and having sex, the activity of driving—with its quiet pleasures of the open road, speed, power, and personal control as well as more functional aspects such as covering distance and managing time—has become a mundane part of daily life that seems to require neither explanation nor justification. The personal car itself has become a human endowment like clothing, and in cases where alternatives do not exist, a prosthetic whose deficiency could cause serious impairment to the individual. In turning ordinary as well necessary, the car also receives implicit consideration as an important instrument of autonomy because it offers a unique form of individual control over time and space. Indeed, in one reading, the car and the open city adequately fulfill the modern ideal of autonomy, by democratizing the rewards of personal independence through the greater choice they provide over housing location and the freedom to take pleasure in a high-speed individual travel mode with the convenience of door-to-door transportation. On the face of it, the institutions of driving

appear to have the built-in mechanisms to satisfy contemporary liberal society's promise of delivering *both* freedom and equality. From a different perspective, however, one might well ask: is this sense of freedom real, is it significant, and if so, can it provide sufficient justification for driving? It may also be incorrect to think of driving as serving to provide greater equality, as I discuss below, especially when one considers its global dimensions, but also within the confines of developed countries.

To begin with, we should note a crucial difference between driving and other everyday activities. As much as the typical driver would want to consider steering a car on the open road as a solitary action that places him or her fully in control of his or her destiny, the truth is that it is entirely, if not fundamentally, dependent on the careful coordination of a great many players and institutional arrangements. A person could potentially engage in most other "ordinary" activities with the minimum service of others, but the simple deed of moving a vehicle on the road presupposes a great deal of technology, infrastructure and learning (primarily from others). The more complex tasks of getting to places on demand, negotiating safely with others on the road, finding one's way through unknown places, and getting refueled to continue on journeys entail even more elaborate engineering and planning processes and institutional arrangements that are far beyond the individual's own capacity to manage or perhaps even comprehend. The driver him or herself need not only learn the minimum skills of driving, but also the rules of the road in order to become accredited as a full-fledged player among many on the road.

The far-reaching institutions joined to the car are so common as to be hardly ever identified by anybody except astute urban geographers and the rare historian who delves into automobile studies. In fact, however, the twentieth century could well be named the century of *automobility*, a term that denotes the myriad institutional forms that sustain driving, including everything from the manufacturing and marketing enterprise to the world's gargantuan highway and gasoline delivery infrastructure, traffic rules, parking structures, licensing procedures, and sundry regulatory authorities. The United States is perhaps the clearest manifestation of automobility, with its hundreds of thousands of miles of lightly traveled motorways and increasingly expansive metropolitan regions, subsidized parking and highway use, and tax policies to promote low-density living.² In the past four decades alone, these support systems for driving caused the U.S. to lose over a million acres of farmland every year to strip malls, highways, roads, parking lots, resorts, service stations, single-family homes, and the like.³ Meanwhile, the average vehicle miles

² James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).

³ Ralph E. Heimlich and William D. Anderson, *Development at the Urban Fringe and Beyond: Impacts on Agriculture and Rural Land*, Agricultural Economic Report No. AER803 (Washington, D.C.: USDA Economic Research Service, 2001).

traveled per American increased by nearly half and the number of cars in use grew nearly five times so that, by now, the average household has more private cars than persons licensed to drive them.⁴ “Support” implies costs, so it should not be too surprising that billions of dollars are expended each year on cars, advertising, fuels, parking, highways, and related physical assets. In fact, the true social costs of cars are almost imponderable, given the vast and destructive impacts of automobility on the local and global environment, global security, personal safety, and access (for children, the elderly, the poor and the disabled), spatial aesthetics, and social cohesion.⁵

The enormous negative social effects of automobility have certainly produced a debate primarily inspired by environmentalists, but also by others, on ways forward to limit use of the car and to promote public transportation, reduce sprawl, and so on.⁶ There has, in turn, been a largely libertarian response to these writings (e.g., Loren Lomasky⁷ and James Dunn⁸), emphasizing primarily the autonomy afforded by the car and arguing that the critics tend to overstate their case. Dunn is in many ways among the more persuasive of these counter-critics, arguing that instead of discouraging people from using cars, the task should be to improve the technology of the automobile. Indeed, that has been the approach of the state of California for nearly a half century of regulating automobile emissions, ever since Governor Knight announced in 1954 that “smog is a scientific and engineering problem and not a political or legal one.”⁹

The problem with this view is that despite the Herculean efforts of the state to set some of the world’s strictest emission control standards, the proliferation in cars and in the miles traveled per driver have hitherto only barely managed to keep air pollution concentrations in the atmosphere in check.¹⁰ It appears

⁴ Stacey C. Davis and Susan W. Diegel, *Transportation Energy Data Book: Edition 23* (Oak Ridge, Tenn: Oak Ridge National Laboratory, 2003).

⁵ Mark Delucchi, *The Annualized Social Cost of Motor Vehicle Use in the U.S., 1990–1991: Summary of Theory, Data, Methods, and Results* (Davis, Calif: ITS, University of California, Davis, 1997). John Pucher, “Transportation Paradise: Realm of the Nearly Perfect Automobile? A Review of ‘Driving Forces,’” *Transportation Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (1999): 115–20.

⁶ Kenneth R. Schneider, *Autokind vs. Mankind; An Analysis of Tyranny, a Proposal for Rebellion, a Plan for Reconstruction* (New York: Norton, 1971). Reid H. Ewing, “Characteristics, Causes, and Effects of Sprawl: a Literature Review,” *Environment and Resource Issues* 21, no. 2 (1994): 1–15. Jane Holt Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How The Automobile Took Over America, And How We Can Take it Back* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1997).

⁷ Loren Lomasky, “Autonomy and Automobility,” *The Independent Review* 2, no. 1 (1997): 5–28.

⁸ James A. Dunn, Jr., *The Automobile, Its Enemies, and the Politics of Mobility* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

⁹ James E. Krier and Edmund Ursin, *Pollution and Policy: A Case Essay on California and Federal Experience with Motor Vehicle Air Pollution, 1940–1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

¹⁰ Sudhir C. Rajan, “A Fine Balance: Automobile Pollution Control Strategies in California,” in Melanie Dupuis, *Smoke and Mirrors: The Politics and Culture of Air Pollution* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

that the social and environmental concerns associated with automobility are too overwhelming for technological optimism alone—including optimism about hydrogen cars or hybrids—to be sufficiently persuasive. Indeed, with respect to environmental concerns at least, it seems quite clear that technology alone may have reached the end of its tether and that some form of social transformation resulting in long-term changes in land use and behavior may be essential especially in the United States to meet emissions reduction requirements to mitigate climate change.¹¹

At the same time, what makes automobility require special ethical attention compared to other technologies that pervade human existence is precisely its specific and problematic association with the notion of autonomy. Beyond simply regulating social behavior, as many modern technologies do, the car and its accoutrements have, in the course of a century or so, produced the unprecedented identity of a “driver-citizen.” The automobile-wielding citizen promotes him or herself as someone who is “free,” but his or her very freedom and power are contingent on his or her willingness to follow a form of life that is thrust upon him or her by the spatial economy of his or her automobilized landscape; that is to say, he or she is compelled to conform to myriad rules of behavior that are generated and deployed through a series of internal and external pressures to make him or her fit for modern society.¹² Indeed, automobility is not the product of unmediated desire for autonomy but a composite outcome of political economy, the reordering of urban space, the persuasive power of advertising, and practices of self-domestication to adhere to normalized forms of behavior.¹³

NORMATIVE VIEWS ON DRIVING

My argument up to this point is that driving, along with its support system, is a colossal endeavor in rich nations that appears to provide benefits to most people but implies substantial costs to society, not to mention disturbing types of socialization and conformity as a result of its fundamental transformation of the life world. These issues by themselves should explain why multilayered normative analyses are needed to examine automobility. Even more significantly, automobility also imposes harm on non-drivers, both within and outside countries that have a culture of driving.

For instance, when persons who cannot drive happen to live in “automobilized” cities where pedestrian access is extremely limited, they are subject to a double

¹¹ Sudhir C. Rajan, “Climate Change Dilemma: Technology, Social Change or Both? An Examination of Long-term Transport Policy Choices in the United States,” *Energy Policy* 34, no. 6 (2006): 664–79.

¹² William E. Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

¹³ Sudhir C. Rajan, *The Enigma of Automobility: Democratic Politics and Pollution Control* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996).

burden: the built environment itself imposes restrictions on their movement and they have to endure air pollution that is not of their own making. The carless individual's experience in an automobilized world of "edge cities," where access without a car is nearly impossible, is itself only one expression of the ways in which automobility can actually constrain human autonomy. There are others: being required to drive and subject oneself to the dangerous actions of others on highways; suffering the environmental consequences of driving, including global warming, which affects present and future generations as well as people in parts of the world where there are virtually no cars; and experiencing the misery of wars being fought to support the interests of gasoline-guzzling nations.

In particular, global warming is an important instance of a cost to all of humanity although, in fact, much of current research on the subject suggests that developing countries and small island states will bear the brunt of the damage.¹⁴ Personal cars in wealthy countries generate about one-tenth of all global greenhouse gases, whereas private, non-commercial vehicles in the rest of the world account for a far smaller proportion of these emissions.¹⁵ A third instance of negative impacts seeping over to non-drivers is the series of conflicts that have taken place in the Persian Gulf region for the better part of the past century or so, all having to do with control over oil resources.¹⁶

The most straightforward normative approach to address automobility is perhaps the utilitarian one of taking stock of the welfare benefits of driving and comparing them against costs. DeLucchi's mammoth seventeen volume report,¹⁷ which attempts to catalog all monetary and non-monetary social costs of motor vehicle use in the U.S., concludes that these add up to about \$1.7 to 3.3 trillion (in 1991 terms) per year, roughly half of which is monetary. This is equivalent to about \$6,000 to 12,000 per capita, which only covers costs borne by Americans and excludes global warming impacts on other countries.¹⁸ DeLucchi does not compute benefits, and it is likely that doing so would call into question a completely new set of assumptions about valuation. Nevertheless, one could presumably expand this type of analysis to monetize costs to

¹⁴ James J. McCarthy, *Climate Change 2001: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability: Contribution of Working Group II to the Third Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Global warming, of course, is the result of a combination of fossil-fuel burning activities, transportation being one of them. Including all such activities, the average resident in the U.S. generates about three times the greenhouse gas emissions of the average human, or eleven times the emissions of the average resident in the developing world. See <http://earthtrends.wri.org>.

¹⁶ Robert Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude: An Essay on American Exceptionalism, Hierarchy, and Hegemony in the Gulf," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 2 (1988): 185–213.

¹⁷ DeLucchi, *The Annualized Social Cost*.

¹⁸ Other significant costs not included in the analysis are the costs of "sprawl" and the non-monetary costs of the highway infrastructure generally, and the "security" costs (e.g., the Persian Gulf wars) of maintaining automobility in the U.S. on people elsewhere.

people who do not actually receive any of the benefits of driving and estimate the levels of compensation to be given to them.

There are generally a number of liberal objections to the utilitarian line of reasoning, and one might restate some of them simply as DeLucchi himself does: “. . . social cost analysis cannot tell us precisely what we should do to improve our transportation system. . . . society cares at least as much about equity, opportunity, and justice as it does about economic efficiency. At the end of the day, a total social-cost analysis contributes only modestly to but one of several societal objectives for transportation.”¹⁹ In other words, while monetary measures of welfare (or in this case “malfare”) are necessary for scoping out the nature of the impacts of automobility, they are not sufficient for assessing them against goods such as freedom and opportunity that are valued by all humans. My aim in this paper, moreover, is to examine rights-based formulations of the driving problem, which is what I focus on in the rest of this paper.

Rights-based liberals might be more concerned in debating these concerns from the position famously formulated by John Stuart Mill in his essay *On Liberty*, which provides justification for interfering with human liberty to prevent harm to others:

Acts of whatever kind, which, without justifiable cause, do harm to others, may be, and in the more important cases absolutely require to be, controlled by the unfavorable sentiments, and, when needful, by the active interference of mankind. The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people. But if he refrains from molesting others in what concerns them, and merely acts according to his own inclination and judgment in things which concern himself, the same reasons which show that opinion should be free, prove also that he should be allowed, without molestation, to carry his opinions into practice at his own cost.²⁰

This position presents a particular predicament for driving, which is, after all, not a solo activity. As we have seen, a massive public enterprise promotes and sustains it, often at great cost and benefit to drivers and (largely) costs to others. What here is a “justifiable cause” and what should be the scope and adequacy of “active interference”? Indeed it is unlikely that Mill, who is apprehensive of the “tyranny of the majority,” would take even driving at face value, simply because it is an ordinary activity.

In my own admittedly limited survey of ethical formulations on this question, the only significant reference to a rights-based perspective on the problem that I have come across is a casual reference to driving in Alan Gewirth’s essay

¹⁹ Delucchi, *The Annualized Social Cost*, p. 27.

²⁰ John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty,” in Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 114.

on cost-benefit analysis.²¹ Gewirth uses a rights-centered framework in which moral right rather than money constitutes the privileged unit of inquiry. His analysis on driving needs to be understood within the context of his overall moral theory, which he calls the “principle of generic consistency.” Gewirth proposes that the agent who is committed to acting rationally will be purposive and voluntary in his or her action, that is to say, will attach value to his or her action’s purpose:

Action has “normative structure,” in that evaluative and deontic judgments on the part of agents are logically implicit in all action; and when these judgments are subjected to certain rational requirements, a certain normative moral principle logically follows from them.²²

Freedom, the “procedural necessary condition of action,” and well-being, its substantive counterpart, are the necessary conditions of agency and every agent should have a claim right to these goods. Freedom “consists in controlling one’s behavior by one’s unforced choice while having knowledge of relevant circumstances. Well-being . . . consists in having the general abilities and conditions needed for achieving ones’ purposes.”²³ Well-being can be assessed in three levels that are progressively less needed for action: *basic* well-being consists in having essential prerequisites for action and includes life, physical integrity, and so on; *non-subtractive* well-being includes general abilities and conditions needed for maintaining undiminished one’s general level of purpose fulfillment and one’s capabilities for particular actions (e.g., not being lied to or threatened); *additive* well-being consists in having abilities and conditions for enhancing purpose fulfillment and capabilities for particular actions (e.g., education, opportunities for income generation). Thus, basic well-being is normatively prior to the others; similarly, some kinds of freedom are subordinate to it.

In order to be consistent, the agent will have to generalize freedom and well-being to others, that is to say, accept “on pain of inconsistency” that all purposive agents have a claim-right to freedom and well-being. Unlike Rawls’ argument in *A Theory of Justice* based on inductive justification, where an egalitarian position is justified as the rational choice of a hypothetical agent with no prior conception of the good, Gewirth’s theory begins with agents who are mindful of their values and then work their way through dialectical reasoning to the conclusion that all agents must have claim rights to freedom and well-being.

Since freedom and well-being are derived from the needs of human agency, they determine how we address moral rights that may conflict with each other.

²¹ Alan Gewirth, “Two Types of Cost-Benefit Analysis,” in Donald Scherer, *Upstream/Downstream: Issues in Environmental Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press: 1990).

²² Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 26..

²³ Gewirth, “Two Types of Cost-Benefit Analysis,” p. 217.

Gewirth's moral cost-benefit analysis (CBA) uses the hierarchy of moral rights of persons as determined by prevailing substantive conditions (i.e., well-being) to determine what actions should take precedence over others. For instance, the cost of being lied to or robbed is lower than the cost of being killed, insofar as the former actions are necessary ones to guard against the latter. Yet, Gewirth objects to the notion that his system amounts to a "utilitarianism of rights" on the grounds that his hierarchical ordering and the resulting wide disparities in degrees of importance needed for considering a moral cost-benefit analysis mean that not every situation could be resolved frivolously through some sort of moral calculus. Indeed, some rights could be so important as to be held inviolate.

Using the example of driving, Gewirth argues that although the automobile industry provides many jobs, and cars offer the convenience of mobility, they also carry risks of auto accidents resulting in death. "Hence, by the moral CBA so far interpreted, no automobiles should ever be built, since the cost in deaths outweighs the benefits of employment and convenience. But such a drastic conclusion is surely *implausible*."²⁴ Gewirth argues that freedom in the "risk of death" plays a significant role here, since the driver "mainly controls whether and to what extent his or her life will be endangered" and can take certain actions to control his or her behavior to reduce the risk of mortal accidents. In other words, although the risk of death from accidents indicates that the costs outweigh objective benefits and therefore implies that no automobiles should be built, it is the freedom of human agency to take risks that should give weight to the primary right to life. Thus, the right to life "includes the right to control the circumstances that impinge on one's continuing to live," so that the "driver's control over his or her driving serves to protect rather than threaten the right to life."²⁵

Rather astonishingly, Gewirth does not consider safety risks to others in this analysis; nor does he consider environmental risks and any of the other social burdens discussed earlier in this paper. In other words, he does not ask the critical question: to what extent does the right to (controlling one's own) life impinge on others' rights over controlling their destinies, and how is each affected by automobility? It is only because the driver controls how he or she could lower risk by driving carefully, that the "hierarchic priority of the right to life over the right to drive is not refuted by the lethal possibilities of the latter right."²⁶ Since it is statistically borne out that drivers of large vehicles (e.g., SUVs and pickup trucks) are more likely to cause accidents injuring or even killing passengers in smaller cars,²⁷ the additive well-being associated with

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221 (emphasis added).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Edmond Toy and James K. Hammitt, "Safety Impacts of SUVs, Vans, and Pickup Trucks in Two-Vehicle Crashes," *Risk Analysis* 23, no. 4 (2003): 641–50.

driving a large car must be considerably weaker than the basic right to life. Even more starkly, since the non-driver cannot control the driver's actions, it would follow that his or her basic well-being is normatively prior to the latter's right to drive. In the case of non-drivers who live in impoverished countries, the situation is still worse. If global warming could further imperil their survival, then surely the wealthy's freedom to drive must have a lower priority than the well-being of the poor, especially when such driving is for relatively frivolous activities as leisure trips and "cruising." Similarly, it is unacceptable (within a rights-based framework) to argue that the poor emit commensurate levels of greenhouse gases, given that the rich are responsible for "luxury emissions," while the poor generate comparably small levels of "survival emissions."²⁸

Gewirth's is a neo-Kantian position, and it is possible to relate his principle of generic consistency with Kant's categorical imperative (CI), even though the two are derived from quite distinct starting points and forms of reasoning.²⁹ In its universal law formulation, the categorical imperative says: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law for all rational beings." This formulation could be quite problematic for automobility in the following way. There are roughly 200 million cars operating in the U.S. today, compared with a total population of around 290 million people. A global vehicle population corresponding to this ratio would mean having roughly 4.5 billion private vehicles compared with about one-fifth as many today. That number would involve that the risk of abrupt climate change would be increased several-fold and that global oil reserves would dry up in less than a decade, both leading to numerous other adverse social and political consequences. It is inconceivable that any individual driver would rationally wish to cause such (self) detriment. So is driving per se in violation of the categorical imperative? Here, as with the Gewirthian position, I am not confident that this question can be answered simply, in either the affirmative or negative, within the framework of deontological theories. Undoubtedly, there are a number of issues to be sorted out in terms of claim-rights and prioritization in ways that are more satisfying than Gewirth's argument. On the other hand, there are certainly pragmatic approaches to dealing with automobility that focus on the adequacy of policy responses to automobility, but in which the more sanguine accounts of "freedom" and "autonomy" are, at least temporarily, set aside.

Further complications arise when one considers the socialization of drivers themselves. To what extent is the solitary driver in a dignified convoy of individual cars expressing his or her freedom in the act of propelling his or her vehicle

²⁸ Anil Agarwal et al., *Green Politics* (New Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1999).

²⁹ Deryck Beyleveld, "Gewirth and Kant on Justifying the Supreme Principle of Morality," in Michael Boylan, *Gewirth: Critical Essays On Action, Rationality, and Community* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

forward, and how much of this behavior is mandatory, that is to say, imposed on him or her by the nature of the built environment and his or her social and economic context? When does freedom of this particular sort become compulsory and how could the individual ever break free from the pack?³⁰ When, indeed, does automobility itself become a constraint and interfere with the cultivation of individuality? To quote Mill again:

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it, and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation.³¹

Automobility may indeed be an instance of a set of socializing practices that end up causing the perversion of the liberal ideal of *individuality*, with *individualism* then taking center stage.³² As John Meyer describes the latter: “the individual . . . achieves ‘freedom’ . . . only under the condition that he become isomorphic, or similar in form, to all other individuals in the society . . . [Individualism] is a public, not a private, view of the person, which others are bound to respect and to which a person is obliged to conform.”³³ The ethics of habit formation, conditioning, and perhaps coercion (or even entrapment), not to mention the enormous investment of the advertising industry to promote the over-consumption of vehicles are all rich areas of inquiry that these brief notes can only point toward, and they need further elaboration elsewhere. In the rest of this paper, I try to give shape to a speculative claim relating to the reasons for the deafening silence of liberal philosophers on automobility.

LIBERAL APORIAS?

While surprisingly few liberals seem interested enough to comment on it, to first order, automobility is not only well attuned with the demands of late modernity, it is also perhaps the single most important modern development that could fulfill liberal ideals relating to negative and positive liberties associated with

³⁰ These questions are not unlike ethical issues relating to addiction that emerge in the case of smoking, although in the latter instance, “necessity” becomes more ambiguous given the levels of public support available for withdrawing oneself from the activity. See, for instance, Robert E. Goodin, “The Ethics of Smoking,” *Ethics* 99, no. 3 (1989): 574–624. Nevertheless, such organizational resources are hardly even conceived of for automobility; in fact, funding for alternatives such as transit appear to be on the decline.

³¹ Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 127.

³² George Kateb, “The Resources of American Liberalism Democratic Individuality and the Claims of Politics,” *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (1984): 331–60.

³³ John W. Meyer, “Myths of Socialization and Personality,” in Thomas Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery, *Reconstructing Individualism* (Stanford, Calif.: University of Stanford Press, 1986).

personal space and the capacity to engage with external space autonomously. Liberal political theory rests (in large part) on the ideal of a free person whose actions are his or her own. Automobility has become the (literally) concrete articulation of liberal society's promise to its citizens that they could freely exercise certain everyday choices: where they wanted to live and toil, when they wished to travel and how far they wanted to go. As mentioned earlier, the car itself is arguably also a social equalizer because it would provide any of its users generous amounts of personal space by fostering that "calm and considered feeling" while expanding opportunities for negotiating external space. Car ownership is so common that nearly every "free" adult has this uniquely constructed form of control over time and space. Without the car's freedom to roam and live where one wants to, liberals might well want to claim, social hierarchy would perhaps become more significant, and the travails of daily life would be worse in some ways than it was at the turn of the twentieth century, given the greater resource and population pressures in today's world. In fact, anyone incapable of owning or driving a car in most parts of North America and many areas elsewhere has to be seen as lacking all the capacities and capabilities of citizenship. One's very identity is handicapped without wheels; marginalized from the rest of society, one does not experience the sense of independence and freedom of movement enjoyed by other sovereign subjects.

Automobile use, however, as I have discussed above, turns out to be a very socially demanding *private* activity, even based simply on the requirements it places on drivers (licensing, registration, insurance, attention to the road and their private behavior, risks of accidents, pollution and so on) and non-drivers (location, access to jobs and mobility, risks of accidents, pollution, climate change). While the state's patronage of automobility might be seen as facilitating the universal exercise of individual liberty, the massive public expenditures and extraordinary support for auto and oil corporations could also be regarded as a way of extending state power and monopoly capital.

Why then is there such a dearth of active liberal commentary on the car and its institutions? Might we imagine that the everyday experience of cars and the associated reordering of physical and social space have become so deeply entrenched that Western theorists find it difficult to treat automobility as a subject with serious ethical content? In other words, is it conceivable that the very ordinariness of driving works against its conceptualization as a unique theoretical subject in any other terms than historically or sociologically? The liberal philosopher may argue that automobility is merely one outcome of a particular type of capitalist enterprise and technological development that happens to be fostered by liberal governments and hence calls for no fresh theoretical analysis into its features. The primary goals of political theory, she might say, are to grapple with analytical problems relating to enhancing liberties, and not so much with the social and cultural conditions of everyday existence. Worrying about automobility may be no more significant than being unduly concerned about advertising's special relevance to political theory. In

both cases, as long as there are no non-trivial constraints to the freedom of human agency arising from these activities, their presence has no bearing on politics. We have seen earlier how this argument may not hold true. Moreover, liberal ethical commentary is characteristically made on all types of routine social behavior that result in harm to selves and to others, including smoking, sexual harassment and over-eating. In the case of driving, the rights issued related to drinking and driving have been rather narrowly explored,³⁴ but not driving by itself.

I conjecture that there is something significant in Gewirth's assertion that the first-order outcome one might expect in his analysis of driving is "surely implausible." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an "implausible" statement is one "not having the appearance of truth, probability, or acceptability," which is an especially forceful way to characterize the notion that driving itself might be morally wrong. What could provoke such a severe rejection of the possibility that a boring practice in everyday life might actually violate the right to life, and why does Gewirth provide such an obviously incomplete analysis of the rights actually threatened by driving? Why too are others coy about analyzing automobility?

My speculation is that the car's very banality and the predictability of its institutions somehow serve as "training wheels" to condition most of us to accept its importance without question. Automobility requires and trains the individual to become a responsible member of a material and "spatial" society. To a very large extent, it constitutes the physical fabric of modernity and helps sustain liberalism's capacity to reproduce itself as an affirmative set of beliefs in the face of criticisms from various post and anti-liberal positions. The "we in the West" phrase expressed in the citation from *The Economist* essay at the beginning of this paper, therefore, refers at least implicitly to respectable members of an imagined community of solitary drivers (or others having similar characteristics—capabilities, private interests, and wary respect for each other), and it is this group identification that works against any critical impulse to analyze the activity carefully. Freedom per se, at least as the right not to be interfered with, has become less of a primary demand in part because of a judgment that it has *largely been achieved* in the late modern West, with automobility being one of the most concrete instances of it.

The mutual empathy for similarly situated individuals arises in what Roberto Unger terms a "formative context," whose "basic institutional arrangements and imaginative preconceptions that circumscribe our routine practical or discursive activities . . . and resist their destabilizing effects."³⁵ The

³⁴ Bonnie Steinbock, "Drunk Driving," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 278–95. D.N. Husak, "Is Drunk Driving a Serious Offense?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 23, no. 1 (1994): 52–73.

³⁵ Roberto M. Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

automobilized world we inhabit thus spawns an entire set of dominant beliefs and codes about the nature of social relations and individual desires. But, as Unger writes,

Until we make the underlying institutional and imaginative structure of a society explicit we are almost certain to mistake the regularities and routines that persist . . . for general laws of social organization.³⁶

Automobility could naturalize us (e.g., through our bodily dispositions) into such a routine of “false necessity” as to itself become nearly *imperceptible* as a socially produced (i.e., contingent) and politically significant condition. Even when social theorists detect automobility, few new normative claims seem to arise from their debates, because the activity itself has become “normal.”³⁷ Moreover, automobility’s ordinariness could also provide validation regarding the universalizability of liberal practice; yet, being a disembodied and socially abstracted system of beliefs, liberal political theory itself may feel no compulsion to analyze it as such.

If automobility has in fact become one of the principal “technologies” of contemporary liberalism, not only do the institutions of driving have the ability to draw sustenance from liberal position, but liberalism itself has become “locked in” by an enterprise that helps to institute a powerful and far-reaching normalizing ethic through the reproduction of its specific corporeal practices. One could then identify an “automobility-liberalism combine,” which appears to be important beyond the boundaries of the cultural and the economic relations between cars and lifestyles; the fusion exerts an influence on vast arenas of political and cultural ideology.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷ Social theorists have lately come to analyze automobility in recent years (e.g., Mike Featherstone, Nigel Thrift and John Urry, *Automobilities* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2005), but their analyses have by and large focused on the phenomenon as a network effect, rather than its political dimensions.