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# The Ethics of Driving

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# The Ethics of Driving

AMY MARGA

It's madness for a hundred-and-ten-pound woman to get into a four-thousand-pound piece of machinery and drive two blocks to get a thirteen-ounce loaf of bread. Now there's something in those figures that simply does not synch, you know.

—Harry Crews<sup>1</sup>

**A**long with plastic-wrapped cheese slices and the twenty-four-hour news cycle, driving a car to get from point A to point B has become a self-evident—and necessary—part of American life. It is difficult to imagine the daily routine without it. Yet long before the invention of the car, individuals built productive and successful lives (Martin Luther never drove a car). Societies flourished. The automobile—a child of the twentieth century—has transformed civilization and the individual person with it.

But is driving a car a moral issue? Today, we are faced with the urgent need to reshape our lives in order to come to grips with the global ecological crisis that has been produced in part by driving cars. Therefore, a reflection upon the mass use of cars concerns not only our behavior behind the wheel, but also the fundamental question of whether, in principle, the car as a form of human mobility helps or hin-

<sup>1</sup>Harry Crews, *Getting Naked with Harry Crews: Interviews*, ed. Erik Bledsoe (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999) 197.

*The concept of “neighbor” takes on entirely new meanings in our mobile society. Who becomes my neighbor when I am behind the wheel? What is the consequence of my driving to my neighbors around the globe? What about the impact on our nonhuman “neighbors”? The ethics of driving has many dimensions for the Christian person of goodwill.*

ders creaturely flourishing. This article will use the scriptural and Christian vision of the “neighbor” and one’s “neighborhood” to encourage honest reflection on the ethics of driving our cars.

#### MORALITY AND THE CAR: A BRIEF HISTORY

Since its invention and appearance in the mass market, the car has presented people with moral dilemmas. In its early decades, the car was already being blamed for the breakdown of small-town communities and the deterioration of upstanding personal behaviors. Car ownership brought with it a new privacy from one’s immediate community, a new freedom from the watchful eye of neighbors and family that guarded the established mores and morals of the collective group.

In 1929, two social anthropologists did a study of a small town in Indiana to see how American culture had changed over the course of three decades beginning in 1900. Within those same three decades, Henry Ford started selling Model T’s for \$950 each to the American masses. According to these researchers, the automobile changed personal morals in profound ways, almost “overnight.”<sup>2</sup> This new technology (along with the radio and movies) allowed families to spend less of their energy at “constructive ingenuity” and dedicate more time to activities of “passive enjoyment”<sup>3</sup> such as taking drives. The automobile allowed families to take vacations far from home and move into parts of the country that were previously out of reach.

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*“The new technology of the car allowed families to stretch their horizons and display the new feathers in their social caps. It tempted them to neglect the necessities.”*

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The new technology of the car allowed families to stretch their horizons and display the new feathers in their social caps. It tempted them to neglect the necessities. Owning a car brought so much prestige among small-town inhabitants that some people even chose to forego buying food and clothing so that they could keep up with their car payments.<sup>4</sup> It led them to make morally questionable decisions, even prompting one local preacher to call the car a “house of prostitution on wheels.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the invention of the car presented the average American with a new set of decisions about personal morality.

As drivers today, we are faced with a different kind of moral dilemma. The issue is no longer merely the fraying of the social fabric or personal behavior; now it is the fraying of the entire natural fabric that keeps life on earth alive. After all, the

<sup>2</sup>Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929, 1956) 251.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 271.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 255–256.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 114.

car as we know it would be completely useless were it not for its energy source: gasoline. We in the industrialized world are faced with the disturbing consequences of carbon emissions, such as childhood asthma, acid rain (yes, this problem of the 1980s has not gone away), and a changing climate. The construction of ever longer roads and highways literally dissect ecosystems, cutting off wildlife from mating and feeding grounds. Thinkers across disciplines are asking whether the human activity of driving gas-powered vehicles on a mass scale is curtailing—or even jeopardizing—the flourishing of both human and nonhuman life.

Since the ancient days of the Greek fathers, ethical inquiry has concerned itself with human flourishing. For Aristotle, human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) was not merely a happy state of mind or a carefree life. Human flourishing was an end in itself, an end to which all human beings strive despite their personal fortunes or the resources at their disposal.<sup>6</sup> Human flourishing was an ultimate goal, personal circumstances notwithstanding. Today, key documents of Western civilization such as the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights assert that all human beings, regardless of race or religion, ethnicity or sexuality, illness or health, poverty or wealth have a fundamental right to pursue such personal flourishing. Industrialized nations struggle with the reality that securing the flourishing of its own members requires working towards the well-being and peace of other nations and communities. The question of human flourishing must look beyond the private pursuit of one's own happiness, or the "happiness" of a particular nation.

The scriptural witness binds Christians to the question of human flourishing. Jesus Christ's life and ministry paints a clear picture of God as the One who is committed to creaturely flourishing. God's directive for flourishing is divinely simple: Do unto others as you would have done to you. Loving one's neighbor as one's self guarantees a certain level of collective flourishing, for it requires that when individuals set out to pursue happiness for themselves, they must also bring their neighbor with them.

## THE CAR AND THE NEIGHBOR

In the following reflection I will explore three dimensions of the concept of the neighbor and the large territory that can rightly be called our "neighborhood," given the increased mobility made possible by the automobile. The first dimension is determined by time, that is, by the particular interval of time that we share with all those around us on the road at any given moment. The second dimension of the neighbor is determined by space, namely, by that space which we share with all other fellow human beings. They may live a continent away, but their lives are affected by our car-driving activities. The third dimension consists of the relationship that can be characterized as the "great chain of being" that connects human beings to all other nonhuman creatures that live on the earth. In some concluding

<sup>6</sup>See Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) Book I, iv–viii, 66–72; Book X, iv, 318–320.

thoughts, I will turn to the moral imperative that rests upon human individuals to imagine—specifically, to imagine a future where the question of creaturely flourishing governs how we construct our means of individual mobilization and the systems that support it.

*Neighbors by chance*

When we get behind the wheel, we do not merely physically venture into new neighborhoods, but we enter into a sphere of new neighbors. Who are the people in the neighborhood of my daily route to work, to the grocery store, to the gym? We too must ask, as the lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Who is my company in the misery of a rush-hour traffic jam? The myriad of bumper stickers on American vehicles indicates the urge we have to communicate with our neighbors on the road. The range of messages that bumper stickers deliver illustrates that driving a car brings out the best and the worst of us.

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***“your eyes may be on the road, but it is the Old Adam  
whose hands are on the wheel”***

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The minute we get behind the wheel, we take on a certain amount of moral responsibility for the well-being of those with whom we share the road at any given moment. Out of pure arbitrary timing, they become my neighbor, however temporarily. The drivers behind me, in front of me, and to my sides—even the pedestrian on the sidewalk—all become my neighbor in the randomness and spontaneity that governs human interaction on our nation’s roads and highways. On the road, we come into contact with the neighbor on a grand scale. And yet, it is an intimate and risky encounter. This intimacy is most keenly felt when someone is pushing into our highway lane going at seventy miles per hour. Only seconds, a steady hand, and a little luck keep us, and those around us, out of harm’s way. The National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration reports that in 2005 in the United States alone there were 43,443 deaths and over 2.6 million injuries by motor vehicles.<sup>7</sup> Driving a car can be an intimate and life-changing experience.

The intimacy and risk of driving a car require a vast amount of self-control. Reactions to stress while driving—such as the white-knuckled, clenched-jaw aggression at the driver ahead of you, making obscene gestures, tailgating, harassing, and road rage—are living colors of a snapshot that captures the human struggle for self-control while barreling down an open road. As the Pontifical Council’s 2007 document “Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of the Road” points out, every moment behind the wheel the driver is faced with one’s own persistent will-to-power and urge to dominate: “The free availability of speed, being able to accelerate at will, setting out to conquer time and space, overtaking, and almost ‘subjugating’

<sup>7</sup>“Traffic Safety Facts: 2005 Data, Overview,” online at <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/810623.pdf> (accessed 14 May 2008).

other drivers turn into sources of satisfactions that derive from domination.”<sup>8</sup> This is the well-known tune of Nietzsche’s will-to-power. The will-to-power, the pleasure we humans take in domination, is an undeniable part of our fallen condition. Your eyes may be on the road, but it is the Old Adam whose hands are on the wheel. The state of mind of a good many drivers is captured in the words of the apostle Paul: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me” (Rom 7:19–20). Those who gave in to the need to dominate by speeding and reckless driving alone took over thirteen thousand American lives in 2005.<sup>9</sup> Personal self-control behind the wheel is not simply a way to keep one’s conscience clear and free, but a way to keep one’s neighbor alive.

*Neighbors beyond the backyard fence*

But what about those people and populations who are not sharing the road with me at a particular moment? Our neighbors are determined not only by the particular time I am in their presence, but are also determined by space. What obligation do I as an individual have to others who are not in my immediate vicinity? Leading thinkers in the field of ethics today say, “A lot.” Whether we can easily accept it or not, our neighbor is no longer the person down the street or the sweet elderly lady who sits next to us at church. The boundaries of the village have been stretched to include those living on the opposite side of the world from us. And we are forced to reckon with the fact that those whom we will never meet face to face, or with whom we will never share a backyard fence, are also seeking to flourish in their own towns and regions. The geographic and natural boundaries such as rivers, mountains, and oceans that once allowed populations and communities to carry on their existences as if others “over there” barely existed no longer draw the limits of our neighborhoods. People living across the globe “are linked in ways previously unimaginable.”<sup>10</sup>

Seemingly insignificant events in one region of the globe may have massive, even devastating, consequences in another region of the globe. This awareness makes it morally irresponsible to restrict the definition of “neighbor” to those individuals who are in one’s immediate surrounding. As Peter Singer notes, “When people in rich nations switch to vehicles that use more fuel than the cars they used to drive, they contribute to changes in the climate of Mozambique or Bangladesh—changes that may cause crops to fail, sea levels to rise, and tropical diseases to spread.”<sup>11</sup> All human beings share one interconnected system of air, water, atmospheric gases, and land. The direct connection, however impersonal, between

<sup>8</sup>“Part One: The Pastoral Care of Road Users,” online at [www.212.77.1.245/news\\_services/bulletin/news/20451.php?index+20451](http://www.212.77.1.245/news_services/bulletin/news/20451.php?index+20451) (accessed 14 May 2008).

<sup>9</sup>“Traffic Safety Facts: 2005 Data, Speeding,” online at <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/810629.pdf> (accessed 14 May 2008).

<sup>10</sup>Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 9–10.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

ourselves and so many other human beings who are trying to flourish just as we are turns the stranger living in a far-flung region into a neighbor, into one whose welfare we are obligated to consider when we think about the activity—and consequences—of driving a car.

*Neighbors in tooth and claw*

The third dimension of the neighbor connects us through space and time to our fellow creature within the great chain of being, who is also struggling to survive within the closed natural system of Planet Earth. Neighborhoods are not just populated by humans. In fact, neighborhoods depend upon animals and plants for their own flourishing. Can nonhuman creatures be my neighbor in such a way that I carry them with me in my pursuit of happiness and well-being? This question raises a whole host of ethical and theological issues.

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*“from a Christian point of view, all creaturely life has value in and of itself in the eyes of a Creator who is the origin of our own human existence as well”*

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Traditionally, plants and animals have been seen as having moral value—or a value as “good”—only in relation to how they can serve humanity. Animals, especially, have been seen to only have a functional or instrumental good in that they serve as food and fur for the masses and as living, breathing laboratories for the pursuit of modern science. The typical view of the worth of an animal (except perhaps house pets) is that they have worth only if they can be used to obtain some other kind of good for humans. But with the growing consensus about climate change, the perception of the value of wild animals has begun to change. Animals are coming to be seen as having an intrinsic good, that is, as having a value in and of themselves, regardless of their relationship to humans (or lack thereof).

While intrinsic and instrumental values need not be mutually exclusive, theories of ethics tend to remain abstract on this point. They fail to establish a clear connection between human individuals and their animal neighbors. Why, really, ought I worry about the Amazon tree frog when my car will get me to and from work so that I can build a life and support my family?

The answer to this question perhaps comes more easily to theologians than to ethicists. After all, ethical theory, the task of which is to reflect upon competing notions of the Good and the Right, is limited in how it speaks of the intrinsic value of the nonhuman species in the created order: the needs of the random small mammal or bird cannot be pitted against a starving child. Ethical theory simply does not have language for such a move. What is needed is a more comprehensive vision of the world, a vision that allows the human being to see itself on a proportionally appropriate, one-to-one scale model.

The Christian tradition, especially its key confession that God is Creator of all

that is, whether on Planet Earth or within the cosmos, gives us language to speak of the human as creature like any other creature. This confession that Creator and creature are not identical makes the essential claim that the reference point of the earth is *not* the human being or the human mind. The reference point of all the earth is the Creator. Martin Luther points out that “none of us has life...from ourselves.” All creatures, “however small and unimportant” a thing might be, are “comprehended in the word ‘Creator.’”<sup>12</sup> The confession that the Creator is the being and reality that exists both inside and beyond the creaturely, finite realm provides an external point of reference that then allows human individuals to think in proportionally appropriate terms about themselves within the scheme of the whole of creaturely life. It may be very difficult to imagine weighing the competing needs of owls and humans, but it is less difficult to understand that, from a Christian point of view, all creaturely life has value in and of itself in the eyes of a Creator who is the origin of our own human existence as well. When considered on a global scale, if we do not improve the way we humans are mobile (and humans do have the unique ability among creatures of the earth to improve our lot) we are doing nothing less than shaking our fists at the One who has made and provides for us and all creatures.

God’s conversation with Job illustrates this point well. God asks Job, “Do you give the horse its might? Do you clothe its neck with mane?...Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south?...Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you” (Job 39:19, 26; 40:15). God the Creator has a relationship with other living creatures to which humans are not privy. God has relationships with all God’s creatures in ways that are independent of the instrumental good that animals present to humanity. God’s nonhuman creatures, both plant and animal, have intrinsic value, not by virtue of merely “being there,” although this ought to be enough, but because God has bestowed value on them as the work of God’s own hand.

The move from thinking theologically about creation to thinking about the ethical implications of driving a car is facilitated by the simple, but not obvious, reality that the rest of the living world is not the product of the human hand. The human species is not the designer of ecosystems or the sustainer of wild and wondrous creatures that flourish in the coldest depths of the seas and the hottest savannas of the earth. Indeed, we have yet to discover the existence of some of these creatures and their worlds on Planet Earth. Surely, human hands did not create these ecosystems whose feeding or mating grounds we whiz through in our cars. The miles and miles of asphalt, highways, on-ramps, off-ramps, traffic circles, “spaghetti junctions,” and jug-handle u-turns leave only small patches of faded land for migrating birds, geese, foxes, and other small animals. Who has not witnessed a goose family nesting in the small patch of grass surrounded by on-ramps

<sup>12</sup>Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 433.



and off-ramps? What would that land look like, and who would be dwelling in it to the glory to the Creator, if it were not altered in such a jagged way to accommodate the needs of our vehicles?<sup>13</sup>

### MOBILITY AND THE IMPERATIVE TO DREAM

The car was one of the greatest inventions of the twentieth century; its use has improved the economic well-being of millions of families. This “horseless carriage” is truly a feat of the human imagination that helps us flourish. But to what extent are we obligated to imagine a flourishing life not only for ourselves and our immediate futures, but for those around us, both human and nonhuman? Humans are in the unique position to construct technologies that improve life on this earth. It seems, then, that we are also in the unique position to put our efforts into technology—in this case, transportation and human mobility—that sustains God’s creation and honors the God-creature relationship. This is not a fantasy or wish. Scientists today have identified numerous ways in which humans can transform their means of transportation.

There are all kinds of existing new technologies for better fuel economy, such as variable valve actuation to increase engine performance, the use of cleaner diesel engines, supercharging engines for increased combustion efficiency, and continuously variable transmissions that allow the engine to run at its most fuel-efficient speed while driving at any speed. These are only some of the technologies that have already been tested and shown to make human mobility by car less intrusive to the environment. Second, though more complicated, alternative fuels like ethanol or natural gas are promising, even though they will require new engine designs, and even though a fuel like ethanol cannot be allowed fully to control how corn is used. Third, new vehicles such as electric cars have been shown to be as effective as gas-powered cars for human transportation, and they have the possibility of even greater efficiency through the use of on-board energy flow and alternating currents.<sup>14</sup> Downsized vehicles are especially promising for urban mobility. They would be as convenient to step in and out of, and they could carry as large a load as our present cars.<sup>15</sup> Such downsized vehicles are already part of the transportation scenery in countries such as Japan (the Kei-car) and various European countries (the Smartcar).

The point of naming the abundance of alternative technologies to the common gasoline-fueled car is to demonstrate that the human imagination is capable

<sup>13</sup>For an intriguing view of land, animals, and ecology without roads, see Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007).

<sup>14</sup>There is a common fear that the emissions from electric cars will only be transferred to the sources that produce the electricity, such as nuclear plants and the burning of coal. Studies of this issue have shown, however, that emissions from these plants are still lower than the emissions of gasoline-powered cars. See Robert Q. Riley, *Alternative Cars in the 21st Century: A New Personal Transportation Paradigm* (Warrendale, PA: Society of Automotive Engineers, Inc., 1994) 209.

<sup>15</sup>See Riley, *Alternative Cars*, for more detailed studies and discussions about the promising and varied new technologies that already exist for replacing the car as we know it today.

of ushering in a new era of mobility, one that can take into fresh account the needs of neighbors, near and far, great and small. In the case of human mobility, the principle of the Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant that “ought implies can” is instructive. The phrase “ought implies can” is based on the logical relationship between the words “ought” and “can.” We can only say that an individual *ought* to follow a certain moral rule if we presuppose that he or she *can* follow the rule. Individuals who do not have the intellectual, mental, or physical ability to follow certain moral principles are deemed insane or incapable, and therefore released from the *ought* because they simply *can't*.

In the case of the ethics of driving, the reverse is true, but on different grounds. Humans *can* see and *do* realize that driving as we know it today has a highly destructive side. What is stopping us from breaking out of our complacency and moving headlong into some new moral principles about how we are mobile? Human beings *can* imagine a different future for human mobility. And human beings are moral agents. Therefore, it is possible for all kinds of new “oughts” about mobility to come into being, based on the human ability to imagine and be creative. Just as the discovery of a new medicine that would help save lives morally commits doctors and scientists in an almost self-evident way to develop such things and bring them to the masses, the research on alternative modes of transportation places an ethical mandate on individuals, communities, and companies to make every effort to improve the mode of automobile transportation as we know it today. The ethics of driving cars becomes, therefore, the ethic of the “can.” We *can* change. What stops us from finding the courage and political will to make this a moral priority?

It is not simply my better or worse behavior while driving that constitutes the morality of driving. Today it must be asked whether the *form of the car* as the primary source of American mobility contributes to human and nonhuman flourishing in the broad sense. As we spend our time behind the wheel, we are related to our neighbors at a very particular moment, both those sharing the road with us, and those who are connected to us from afar. Our activities behind the wheel have an impact upon those creatures that are related to God in ways that are not ours to tamper with. While the car is a mere instrument, we must ask ourselves how this instrument has shaped the way we define ourselves as people. The question of the ethics of driving needs to translate into the moral imperative to imagine a future where the neighbor is not overrun by roads or vehicles that destroy their chances to flourish on this earth as well. ⊕

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