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Autonomy and Automobility

————— ◆ —————
LOREN E. LOMASKY

Years before the automobile evolved into a transportation necessity, before multilaned asphalt replaced meandering muddy ruts, intrepidly pioneering motorists took to the roads for pleasure. Today tens of millions drive for pleasure, but increasingly it is a guilty pleasure. From a multitude of quarters, motorists are indicted for the harms they leave in their wake. Drivers generate suburban sprawl, exacerbate the trade deficit while imperiling national security, foul lungs and warm the atmosphere with their noxious emissions, give up the ghosts of their vehicles to unsightly graveyards of rubber and steel, leave human roadkill behind them, trap each other in ever vaster mazes of gridlock and, adding insult to injury, commandeer a comfy subsidy from the general public. Only the presence of unconverted cigarette smokers deprives them of the title Public Nuisance Number One.¹

Barring a radical reengineering of America, we will not soon toss away our car keys. As the primary vehicles for commuting, hauling freight, and general touring, cars (and trucks) are here to stay. But as the automobile enters its second century of transporting Americans from here to there, it is increasingly dubbed a public malefactor, and momentum grows for curbing its depredations. Construction of significant additions to the interstate highway system has ground to a halt. Designated lanes on urban roads are declared off-limits to solo motorists. Federal Corporate Average Fuel Effi-

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1. Among the more comprehensive critiques are Mumford (1964), and Freund and Martin (1993). The campaign against the automobile is not confined to the United States; see "The Car Trap" (1996).

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ciency (CAFE) standards require automakers to eschew selling vehicles as capacious as motorists may wish to buy and instead to alter their mix of products to emphasize lighter, less gasoline-hungry cars. Taxes on fuel have been increased only modestly, but if critics of the hegemony of the automobile have their way, America will emulate Europe, pushing the tax up by a dollar or more per gallon. Funds thereby generated will not be designated for motorist services—such earmarking is precisely what has exacerbated the current plague of overautomobilization—but will instead be directed toward more mass transit, pollution relief, and research on alternate modes of transportation.² Some argue that employer-provided parking should be taxed as income to the employee or disallowed as a business expense to the provider. Others advocate following Amsterdam's lead, barring nearly all automobiles from entry into the center city. Moral suasion supplements policy proposals. In the name of social responsibility, individuals are urged to carpool or avail themselves of public transportation, scrap their older, fuel-intensive vehicles, and eschew unnecessary automobile trips.

Why this assault on the automobile? I have no wish to deny that it occurs at least in part because some of the critics' charges are true. Automobile carnage is indeed dreadful. The number of people killed each year on our roadways far exceeds the total who succumb to AIDS. Automobiles do pollute, all to some extent, some much worse than others. The cost of petroleum imports into this country exceeds the amount of the entire national trade deficit. And anyone who has ever been trapped in rush-hour gridlock, fuming inside at the delay while being engulfed by the fumes outside spewing from ten thousand tailpipes, knows that the simple job of getting from here to there in one's automobile can be the most stressful part of the day. Cars are not always "user-friendly."

But all these criticisms seem insufficient for explaining the intensity of opposition directed toward the automobile. Any large-scale enterprise entails costs, and so a critique that merely reminds us of the nature and extent of these costs is only half useful. Also required, of course, is a statement of the benefits derived from the enterprise, and a plausible accounting of whether the benefits exceed the costs. Identifying and measuring the costs and benefits of automobile usage pose very difficult methodological problems that I shall not consider here. I do note that the overwhelming popularity of the automobile is itself *prima facie* evidence that from the perspective of ordinary American motorists, the benefits of operating a motor vehicle exceed the concomitant costs. Just as theorists speak of people "voting with their feet," we can count those who vote with their tires. And this vote is overwhelmingly proautomobile.

2. See, for example, Hensher (1993).

Critics may contend, though, that the election has been rigged. They can maintain that the absence of public transportation and compact neighborhoods in which commerce, industry, and housing are integrated forces us so often into our cars. People might like to be able to purchase a loaf of bread without buckling their seat belts, but in many parts of the country they cannot. And even if each of us values the options and mobility that automobile transport affords, we might devalue yet more the stress, delay, and pollution imposed on us by others. Private use of automobiles so understood would approximate game theory's Prisoner's Dilemma, an interaction in which each player acts in his own rational self-interest but all parties are worse off than they would have been had someone impelled them to choose otherwise. And the critic contends that some such requirement, in the form of regulation or increased taxes or outright prohibitions, is needed to escape the tyranny of the automobile (see Hensher 1993, and Freund and Martin 1993).

The critic's case has at least this much merit: a purely behavioristic appraisal of automobile usage is insufficient for evaluating its normative status. We need also to think more intently about how to classify and understand as a distinctive human practice the action of driving a car. Opponents of the automobile argue that the most telling way to understand this is by equating the act with creating a public bad. I shall dispute that appraisal. My focus will not be on the many and varied instrumental uses to which the automobile is put (driving to work, carpooling the kids, buying groceries), though in no way do I mean to disparage these. Rather, I shall concentrate on automobility's intrinsic capacity to move a person from place to place. As such, automobility complements autonomy: the distinctively human capacity to be self-directing. An autonomous being is not simply a locus at which forces collide and which then is moved by them. Rather, to be autonomous is, minimally, to be a valuer with ends taken to be good as such and to have the capacity to direct oneself to the realization or furtherance of these ends through actions expressly chosen for that purpose. Motorists fit this description. Therefore, insofar as we have reason to regard self-directedness as a valuable human trait, we have reason to think well of driving automobiles.

I am not maintaining, of course, that all and only motorists are autonomous, that someone persuaded by the slogan "Take the bus and leave the driving to us" thereby displays some human deficiency. A liberal society is one in which people pursue a vast diversity of goods in myriad ways, and this variety accounts for a considerable share of that society's attractiveness. So even if driving a car is an intrinsically worthwhile action, it does not follow that declining to drive is suspect.

But neither am I claiming that automobiles are simply one among

thousands of other products that individuals might, and do, happen to find attractive in a cornucopia of consumer goods. The claim is stronger. Automobility is not just something for which people in their ingenuity or idiosyncrasy might happen to hanker—as they have for Nehru jackets, disco music, hula hoops, pet rocks, pink flamingo lawn ornaments, Madonna, and “How many...does it take to change a lightbulb?” jokes. Rather, automobile transport is a good for people in virtue of its intrinsic features. Automobility has value because it extends the scope and magnitude of self-direction.

Moreover, the value of automobility strongly complements other core values of our culture, such as freedom of association, pursuit of knowledge, economic advancement, privacy, and even the expression of religious commitments and affectional preference. If these contentions have even partial cogency, then opponents of the automobile must take on and surmount a stronger burden of proof than they have heretofore acknowledged. For not only must they show that instrumental costs of marginal automobile usage outweigh the corresponding benefits, but they must also establish that these costs outweigh the inherent good of the exercise of free mobility.

Wheels of Fortune: Movement, Choice and Human Potential

Concern about automobiles may be a modern phenomenon, but analysis of the distinctive nature of automobility is not. For Aristotle, being a self-mover was the crucial feature distinguishing animals from plants and, thus, higher forms of life from lower. A more basic distinction separates the organic realm from that which is lifeless. Living things have an internal animating force, *psyche*.³ The customary translation is “soul,” but in the context of Greek biology that is misleading. For us, “soul” tends to carry a theological and therefore elevated sense, but in classical Greek thought it marks the divide between inert things and those imbued with a vital principle.⁴ *Psyche* appears at three levels. The lowest is vegetative soul. Plants are more than just things insofar as they are not merely acted on but also do something. Specifically, they ingest food, metabolize, and reproduce. At the highest level is the rational soul, the intelligence exhibited among the animals only by humans. Between, and crucial to this discussion, is animal or sensitive soul. Level-2 *psyche* has the capacities of level-1 *psyche* (and level-3 *psyche* those of level-2) plus two further features. Unlike

3. Aristotle's most extended discussion of *psyche* is in *De Anima*. The secondary literature is vast. A concise and comprehensible overview of Aristotelian philosophy is Ackrill (1981).

4. See “*psyche*” entry in Edwards (1967).

plants, animals perceive and they move themselves.

Perception and movement are enumerated as two qualities but, as set out in *De Anima*, they are to be understood as strongly complementary. Because plants are stationary (or, if mobile, as are the seedpods of some species, carried where they go by external forces), they have no need to perceive. If the wheat is not going anywhere, then it cannot benefit from seeing the swarm of locusts about to descend on it. Aristotle expressed this idea in the teleological language of purpose and natural function that pervades his metaphysical awareness, but essentially the same point could be made in contemporary terms of inclusive evolutionary fitness. Plants do not perceive because (a) no purpose would be fulfilled by their perceiving or (b) evolution does not select at that biological level for perception. The locusts do perceive, however, as their survival depends on becoming aware of and directing themselves toward potential items of food. We can also state the connection in reverse order: if a being does not perceive the difference between here and there, then its having the capacity to direct itself there rather than here serves no purpose.

Plants are alive, but their “quality of life” is low (thus the comatose individual referred to as a “human vegetable” and the inert TV-watching “couch potato”). They function in the world but in complete obliviousness to it. Lacking consciousness, the cucumber has no perspective from which there is a “what it is like to be a cucumber.” Plants are, and in a restricted sense do, but in terms of nearly all that we take to be of value in life, they are nullities.

Animal life differs, and the difference lifts the organism above nullity status. To perceive is to assimilate in some measure the world to oneself. And to be a self-mover is to situate oneself in the world in accordance with one’s own desires. Perception plus mobility are prerequisites of agency. Patients are beings to whom things happen, but agents act. At some level of awareness agents distinguish between goods and bads and endeavor to direct themselves toward the former and away from the latter. For animals, this direction involves instinctive or acquired responses to pleasure and pain. For human beings action takes on additional complexity. We do not merely react to stimuli in our environment. Instead, we deliberate among available alternatives conceived of not only as pleasing or displeasing but also in terms such as “dishonorable,” “what justice demands,” “liable to make me famous,” “chic,” and so on. At this level it is proper to speak in a nonmetaphorical sense of choice. Aristotle maintains that animals or young children do no genuine choosing. In choosing, we act to give expression to our settled conceptions of how we want to direct ourselves. Our choices flow from and redound upon our virtues and vices. We do not offer moral appraisals of beings incapable of choice; unlike normal adult human beings,

neither infants nor animals can be brave or wicked or temperate.

The conception of motion has a wider scope than traveling from place to place. We retain residual traces of this broader meaning in expressions such as “a moving experience” and in the etymological history of “emotion,” but in the philosophical language of the Greeks the more inclusive sense is primary. Any transformation of a subject from a state of potentiality with regard to some quality to the actual realization of that quality is deemed motion.⁵ So going from here to there constitutes movement, but so also do an organism’s growth, someone’s coming to know something, the development of a faculty, and so on. In an Aristotelian universe, motion is ubiquitous because everything tends to progress toward the highest possible self-realization. For simple inorganic forms like a rock, this potential is correspondingly simple, involving only the capacity to fall when unsupported. In organisms the transition from potency to act is more complex. The oak, for example, moves to its actuality through the complex chain of maturation that commences from the acorn stage. For animals, such self-realization incorporates consciousness and self-propulsion. Human actualization adds deliberation and choice. Only for a completely actualized being would movement be otiose (or counterproductive). And indeed, Aristotle hypothesizes that a god dubbed the “Unmoved Mover” occupies the pinnacle of the metaphysical hierarchy because in its enduring perfection it has transcended all reason to change, whereas anything else in the universe, insofar as it realizes any of its potential, is approaching to some greater or lesser degree, consciously or unconsciously, this state of full actualization. Encountering Greek philosophical thought, Christians applied this concept of an unchanging perfection to the Book of Genesis’s Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Movement, therefore, does not simply describe getting from here to there; it has normative richness. To move is to progress—though, of course, it can also be to backslide. Only stasis is morally neutral, and ours is a dynamic universe. The greater the variety of dimensions through which an individual transforms itself and things it encounters, the greater the scope for evaluative concerns. The grounds on which human beings appraise themselves and their fellows will be much richer than, say, the standards applied to horses or bottles of wine or the performance of machines. For people, there is not only a better or worse but a chosen better or worse toward which we deliberately direct ourselves. Intelligent automobility is crucial to the elevated status of human beings vis-à-vis other beings.

5. Physics is the Aristotelian work that addresses the investigation of being qua subject to change or motion.

A Philosophical Detour

If you bump into me and cause me to lurch from my path, it is clear that my behavior is not that of a self-mover. Less clear, though, is the case in which you glower menacingly at me as you approach down the sidewalk, thereby “persuading” me to step aside. Or suppose that yesterday when you hypnotized me you implanted within me a suggestion that I always make way for you, and so today when I see you approaching I not only defer but am pleased to do so out of concern for your well-being. In the latter two instances I have, in a sense, moved myself. Not only are the muscle contractions that impel my legs the contractions of my muscles, but they are preceded by mental activities that can be characterized as my decision to move in that way. But that characterization demands qualification. The action is mine, but in its initiation it is also yours by virtue of the threat or hypnotic implantation. It is at least as much a being done to as it is a doing, and so it qualifies as agency only in a restricted sense.

The many species of such qualified action—or “action”—raise notoriously vexing problems of moral responsibility. Aristotle considers them with regard to the dichotomy voluntary-nonvoluntary and concludes, not all that helpfully, that they are “mixed,” though perhaps to be classified closer to the voluntary than the nonvoluntary.⁶ The issue is not only theoretical but also sharply practical: Do we blame (or praise) those who act under duress, extraordinary fear, rage, naïve suggestibility, exhaustion, ignorance, or similar other conditions that call into question their full authorship of an action? Lawyers and moralists wrestle with such issues. For purposes of this discussion it is not necessary to resolve these conundrums. Note however that the more qualified the action is with regard to the performer’s agency, the less it redounds as either asset or liability to the individual’s moral account.

Accountability enters crucially into human dignity. Insane or incompetent persons are not accountable for their doings, and that is symptomatic of their misfortune. We value full authorship of our own actions (or, non-circularly, authorship of the behavior of one’s body) and fear conditions—manipulation, coercion, intimidation—that impede such authorship. Those who exercise such control over their actions are said to be autonomous.

Autonomy, literally “self-legislating,” originated as a term applied to political units, distinguishing the independent ones from those governed by the laws of some other polity. In moral philosophy, autonomy acquired importance as an attribute of individuals in the writings of the eighteenth-

6. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 3.

century German philosopher Immanuel Kant.⁷ Like Aristotle, Kant inquired into the conditions required for the existence of moral responsibility, but for him the universe in which human beings act had a significantly different look than the teleologically structured world of Aristotle, which was thoroughly hospitable to normativity. Newton and the new physics had depicted a deterministic order in which each event is the inevitable consequence of the nexus between universal causal laws and the antecedent conditions to which they apply. Whatever happens does so of necessity rather than caprice or randomness. But if that necessity holds for events in general, it applies to human actions in particular. We are as subject to the physical laws governing the cosmos as are galaxies and atoms. Therefore, our doings are in principle entirely explainable and predictable (depending on whether one is viewing them retrospectively or prospectively) in terms of these laws. But if conditions that obtained five minutes—or five hours, or five years, or five millennia—ago made it inevitable that at this precise moment I would perform Action A, it would seem that I am not free with respect to performing A. It had to happen and, thus, I had to do it. This determinism may seem to deliver a crushing blow to conceptions of human agency and moral responsibility. If the doing of A was sealed long ago, if even before I was born it was inscribed in the history of the cosmos as an inevitability, then my participation in its unfolding would seem to be purely passive. I can no more be genuinely responsible for its occurrence than I can be for my eye color or an eclipse of the sun. In none of these cases can I change the course of events.

This problem of free will and determinism is one of the most vexing in philosophy. In Kant's day, it loomed very large. If the whole universe is one giant machine obeying its own internal laws, how can we be other than machine cogs ourselves? Kant's way out was drastic. He salvaged human freedom by imposing on persons a metaphysical schizophrenia. We simultaneously belong to the phenomenal universe subject to cause and effect and to a purely intelligible realm, the noumenal order, regulated not by mechanical laws of physics but by the normative laws of reason. In the former realm we are self-movers only in a relative and incomplete sense; every action has a cause that necessitated it, and that cause has a cause, and so on *ad infinitum*. As phenomenal beings we are no more than protoplasmic machines in a thoroughly mechanistic universe. But as noumenal beings we can determine ourselves in accord with self-imposed dictates of reason, thereby achieving autonomy. Insofar as we enjoy autonomy, we are free beings and possess a worth and dignity that set us

7. See his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (available in numerous editions). A useful discussion of the nature and importance of autonomy is Dworkin (1988).

apart from the realm of necessity.⁸

Ironically, although almost no contemporary moral philosophers accept Kant's complex "two worlds" metaphysics, his guiding idea that autonomy is central to our special moral status as persons informs much modern moral thinking. Its effect appears in quarters as disparate as the existentialist insistence that we are beings with no predetermined essence and thus privileged—or condemned—to define ourselves through our own free choices,⁹ John Rawls's (1971) influential conception of justice as principles that would be autonomously chosen by free and equal rational beings deliberating behind a veil of ignorance, and the doctrine of informed consent that dominates contemporary medical ethics.¹⁰ I shall not attempt to sort out these and other variants on the theme of autonomy. It is worth noting, though, that much of the contemporary concern for autonomy is continuous with and indeed has tended to replace the earlier emphasis in moral philosophy on the centrality of liberty in human affairs. The writings of John Stuart Mill provide the locus for much of this transformation.

In his classic *On Liberty*, Mill sought to provide a principled basis for opposition to the imposition of conformity via law and social custom. He trotted out a whole array of arguments to demonstrate that restrictions on liberty are inimical to scientific advance, accumulation of wealth, and other requisites of human happiness. Most of these appeals invoke instrumental considerations of the sort familiar from standard economic analysis. But in perhaps the most important section, the chapter entitled "Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-being," he presented a different sort of argument, predicated on the intrinsic worth of what I have called full authorship of one's actions, Kant called autonomy, and Mill referred to as individuality:

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision. And these qualities he requires and exercises exactly in proportion as the part of his conduct which he determines according to his own judgment and feelings is a large one. It is possible that he might be guided in some good path, and

8. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Sec. 3.

9. See, for example, Sartre ([1943] 1956).

10. An illuminating discussion is Childress (1982).

kept out of harm's way, without any of these things. But what will be his comparative worth as a human being? It really is of importance not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. (Mill [1859], 1989, 59)

One cannot reduce "what manner of men they are that do it" to statistics of net wealth per household or GDP growth from one year to the next; such achievements matter less than the character one creates in and for oneself. Retaining captancy of one's soul (if not always mastery of one's fate) is essential to authenticity and a self genuinely deserving of esteem. Conversely, to be prodded by others along paths they have cleared toward goals they have set is servile. It demeans the dignity of the individual. To live well is to live in a manner that one has made distinctively one's own.

Autonomy so understood incorporates Aristotelian self-moving but goes beyond it. A self-mover can be one participant among thousands in a lengthy parade, each following in lockstep the one who goes before, not knowing or caring where he is headed just so long as he ends up in the same place as all the others. But an autonomous individual is not content to leave the course of the march to the determinations of others (or to chance). He has a conception of a good-for-him that he may not have created *ex nihilo* but which he actively endorses. And in its service he prioritizes, deliberates, and selects means judged appropriate to ends. He acknowledges personal responsibility for those ends and means. If he succeeds, the outcome is in a full sense his success rather than the vagaries of fate playing kindly with him; and if he fails, that outcome is also lodged at his doorstep rather than that of the parents who toilet-trained him, the teachers who instructed him, the community that socialized him, the politicians who competed for his allegiance, or the preachers who offered him slide shows of heaven. Any or all of these persons may have provided elements of value that he has incorporated into his projects, but the compound he concocts from them is his.

It would be overly contentious to maintain, as some exponents do, that without autonomy one fails to lead a fully human life. Countervailing virtues grace traditional modes of life. Individuals do not so much craft these virtues for themselves as they receive and don them as hand-me-downs from others. The monk's life of humility and abasement and the traditionally female roles of nurturance and support within the family display their own quiet dignity. Still, no mode of nonautonomous living fully expresses individuated human agency or so firmly opposes servile conformism. To cite Mill again:

In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, every one lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only

themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves—what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition? or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstances superior to mine?... It does not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke. ([1859] 1989, 61)

Autonomous people “Just Say No” to the yoke.

Commuting and Community

The automobile, definitionally, promotes automobility. The complementarity of autonomy and automobility is only slightly less evident. In the latter part of the twentieth century, being a self-mover entails, to a significant extent, being a motorist. Because we have cars we can, more than any other people in history, choose where we will live and where we will work, and separate these two choices from each other. We can more easily avail ourselves of near and distant pleasures, at a schedule tailored to individual preference. In our choice of friends and associates, we are less constrained by accidents of geographical proximity. In our comings and goings, we depend less on the concurrence of others. We have more capacity to gain observational experience of an extended immediate environment. And for all of the preceding options, access is far more open and democratic than it was in preautomobile eras. Arguably, only the printing press (and perhaps within a few more years the microchip) rivals the automobile as an autonomy-enhancing contrivance of technology.

No one who has been caught in rush-hour gridlock will maintain that commuting to and from work is an unalloyed joy. Competing with tens of thousands of other motorists for scarce expanses of asphalt reminds one of the Hobbesian war of all against all. For critics of the automobile this complaint is not a negligible point. But neither are its implications entirely clear-cut. Just as worthy of notice as the unpleasantness of stop-and-go commuting is how many people voluntarily subject themselves to it. Have they not realized how much time they are wasting in overly close proximity to their steering wheels? Such inadvertence is not plausible. Evidently, people who, individually and collectively, could have devised for themselves residential and occupational patterns not incorporating lengthy commutes chose to do otherwise. In their judgment, the costs of commuting are compensated by the benefits thereby derived. The more the critics emphasize the

magnitude of the costs, the more these critics underscore, often unwittingly, the extent of the benefits.

Commentators from the Greek philosophers to Adam Smith to Karl Marx have noted that the nature of the work one does largely shapes the quality of life one enjoys. For nearly all of us, to do work suited to oneself in a satisfactory environment is a great good, whereas to perform alienating labor under unfriendly and unhealthy conditions is a correspondingly great evil. Similarly, to reside in a comfortable and functional dwelling situated in a neighborhood one finds hospitable is also a considerable good. For most people throughout human history, neither occupation nor place of residence has afforded more than a negligible range of choice. One did the work one's father or mother did, or to which one had been apprenticed, or the kind of work available in that place. And one lived near the workplace.

The increased affluence and openness of liberal capitalist society vastly expanded the range of choice. But the coming of the automobile essentially separated the choices. Previously one lived either near one's work or else on a commuter rail line. But the geography of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford tracks did not bind motorists. Depending on how much time they cared to invest in transit, they could live at a considerable distance from their workplaces, yet emancipated from the rigidities of mass transit. Cultured despisers of the idiocy of suburban existence can and do decry this circumstance, but millions of Americans (and, increasingly, the rest of the world) disagree. Even if one believes for aesthetic or other reasons that row upon row of bungalows or ersatz Tudor houses miles distant from the city or industrial area to which they are connected by roadways represent unattractive neighborhoods, one cannot deny that they are genuine objects of choice for those who live there. People, we might say, have a right to banality. To respect the autonomy of persons is to acknowledge that expanding their options for combining work and place of residence is as such a plus.

Nineteenth-century socialist reformers decried the enhanced ability of industrial capitalism's factory system to exploit workers. Human labor, they charged, had become no more than an appendage of mill or machine. Although one could reasonably respond (as Friedrich Hayek [1954] famously did in *Capitalism and the Historians*) that workers who voluntarily abandoned their rural domiciles for the factory town did so only because they themselves regarded the move as a net improvement, one must nonetheless concede that their situation was not enviable. They may have enjoyed a higher standard of living than that available to them on the farm, but their work was grueling and their opportunities for self-directed choice minimal. Against the perceived oppression of industrial society, the reformers contrived various nostrums, one family of which, now mercifully defunct, oppressed millions of unfortunate souls throughout most of this century.

No syndicalist scheme or string of workers' cooperatives remotely approaches the automobile as an emancipatory instrument. Insofar as it extended the feasible range of commuting between residence and labor, the coming of the motorcar augmented the bargaining power enjoyed by workers. A company town offers little scope for alternate employment opportunities. Changing jobs very likely requires changing place of residence, and exit costs of both pecuniary and nonpecuniary sorts may render that prohibitive. However, widespread automobile ownership dramatically extended the geographical radius of possible employment venues. Hence, the market for labor came more closely to approximate the economists' model of many sellers and many buyers. In theory, under a legal regime of free contract, workers always enjoyed the right to terminate their employment when they wished to do so, but in practice the exercise of this liberty often proved discouragingly costly. Automobility significantly lowered those costs. The country music song "Take This Job and Shove It" became something of an anthem for the disaffected at a time when car ownership had become almost universal. Musical aesthetics aside, those who value choice not only formalistically but as the existence of genuine live options must appreciate this alternative. Detroit has done more for the liberation and dignity of labor than all the Socialist Internationals combined.

One can also observe liberation by viewing the employment-residence nexus from the other direction. The ability to choose where one will live makes a considerable difference in the exercise of self-determination. Life in the suburbs is not inherently better than life in the central city, but it is different. To the extent that one possesses a real opportunity to choose between them, one can give effect to significant values that shape the contours of a life. A city may offer ready access to arts and education, a succession of ethnically diverse neighborhoods, a feeling of drive and vitality, an ambience that "swings." But cities are often dirty, expensive, and dangerous. Exurban life may provide peaceful neighborliness, gardens and green spots, family-oriented activities that take place in the home or the mall. But exurbs are often antiseptic, provincial, and stultifying. To choose the one is to relinquish (some of) what the other affords. So which is the better alternative? People must answer for themselves based on their own conceptions of what matters most. To the extent that one has geographical mobility, the question is answered by an act of positive choice rather than through inertia or extraneous constraints such as the location of one's place of employment.

Choice of residence serves as a major avenue for Americans to exercise their right to free association. Choosing a neighborhood is the macrolevel correlate to choosing one's friends. One thereby decides with whom one will live. And perhaps even more important, one decides with whom one will not live. In contemporary society, "leaving home" signifies a full coming of age

and the concomitant entitlement to direct one's own projects as an adult. But then comes the necessity of finding and making a home in a neighborhood to which one has a tie at least in part because one has freely chosen to live there rather than somewhere else. This choice too signifies and gives effect to one's values. Some people prize a high degree of homogeneity of race or religion or age or economic class among those with whom they will most frequently associate. Others prefer a heterogeneous diversity of different ages, skin tones, and backgrounds from which casual acquaintances and intimate friendships will emerge. Considering whether one of these preferences deserves more admiration than the other carries us away from the theme of this essay, but even if one regrets that some people choose to segregate themselves from those who somehow differ—or conversely, that some defect from tightly knit ethnic communities—an ethic that endorses autonomy must acknowledge that, the content of individual choices aside, it is good that people can make up their own minds and then act on their decision about where to live.

More flexibly and more frequently than anything else, cars get us from one place to another. If we can conveniently drive to a place consistent with work and other commitments, then it passes the first test of eligibility as a possible place of domicile. (Thanks to that other great choice-enhancing device, the microchip, this situation may change as more and more individuals telecommute.) Although critics of the automobile also frequently criticize what they take to be a dreary suburban sameness, within reasonable commuting distance of virtually every urban center in this country are dozens of towns and neighborhoods that differ significantly one from another—perhaps not in factors these critics take to be momentous but certainly along dimensions that the men and women behind the steering wheels consider important. From the perspective of autonomy, their criteria deserve respect.

Mobility and Knowledge

For much the same reasons that automobility and autonomy are good things, so too is knowledge. Like self-moving, knowing affords us a firmer grip on our world. Indeed, choice and knowledge complement one another. A simple example will help illustrate their relationship.

Consider a shopper in a supermarket deciding whether to buy the can on the left or the can on the right. Neither can has a label, so it is anyone's guess whether one of the cans holds tuna fish or shoe polish or bamboo shoots. How much would a shopper value the freedom to choose between them? The obvious answer is "not much." The minimal ability to distinguish them as "left can" and "right can" does not afford enough information for

individuals to judge which is more likely to serve their ends. The “choice” is otiose.

Now suppose that the label is restored to one of the cans. The shopper now knows it to contain mushrooms. The value of choosing has gone up. The magnitude of the increase depends on how this added bit of knowledge relates to the shopper’s preferences. If he either strongly likes or dislikes mushrooms, then he has a basis for picking between the cans, but not as good a reason as he would have if the other can were labeled, too. And further knowledge concerning particulars of taste, nutrition, quantity, and so on renders the choice one in which the shopper can give effect to his own distinctive values. Choice without knowledge is blind; knowledge without choice is impotent.

Automobiles enhance mobility, and mobility enhances knowledge. Recall the discussion of the relationship between self-moving and perception in Aristotle’s biological theory. As the area in which people can direct their self-aware movements increases, so too does the range of their knowledge-gathering capacities. The knowledge in question is, in the first instance, local knowledge. By traveling through, around, and within a place, one comes to know it in its particularity. This kind of knowledge has no very close substitute. I may have read a score of books about Paris, but if I have never visited the City of Lights, if I have never traversed its streets and bridges and marketplaces, then I could not truly claim, “I know Paris.” One can no more reduce knowledge of a place to possessing many facts about that place than one can reduce knowing another person to having read a very detailed resume. Philosophers often distinguish between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. To acquire the latter, one often needs mobility.

Of course automobiles are not the only form of transportation that serves to increase local knowledge, and for some types of local knowledge they may serve poorly. One such case is that described in the preceding paragraph: for acquiring up-close knowledge of a city like Paris, shoes serve better than tires. All forms of transportation—from walking to bicycling to trains, buses, ships, and airplanes—enhance knowledge. But with the possible exception of the motorcycle, another means of transportation assailed by no shortage of critics, none combines local maneuverability with extended range to the degree that the automobile does. The train can move me from one city to another at intermediate distance and afford me the opportunity of viewing the terrain in between. But it allows only a limited number of stops along the way, the speed may be slower or faster than one would wish for optimal information gathering, and the route will be exactly the same on the thousandth trip as on the first. Airplanes excel for speed, but everything between points of departure and destination is indistinct. Walking is a won-

derful way to observe a neighborhood, but inadequate to take in even the opposite end of a village, let alone a state or country. For genuine exploration at long or intermediate range, the car dominates all alternatives.

How much weight should one give this sort of knowledge? The question deserves an answer. Few of the automobile's critics have a word to say about the knowledge-enhancing aspects of automobility, either because they have never considered the automobile from the perspective of information gathering or because they implicitly suppose that what one learns while behind a steering wheel is trivial. But these critics do not represent the population at large. They are intellectuals and information processors of one stripe or another, most comfortable with information that can be synthesized in books or graphs or computerized databases. They tend to depreciate information that can't be measured, quantified, and represented symbolically. But the information to be gained from reading a history book or running a regression is not the only sort that individuals can use effectively in their pursuits. Knowledge need not be grand or profound to have value in itself and to complement choice. By driving north along the lake to see how the autumn leaves have turned and whether the Canadian geese are still milling or have flown, I may gain an inherently worthwhile experience. Driving through the various neighborhoods of a city reveals where the bakeries, hairdressers, and Thai restaurants are located; who is having a garage sale this week; and which parts of town are becoming distinctly seedier. Teenagers cruising the "main drag" are conducting an epistemological mission motivated by the hope of sniffing out the whereabouts of others of a desirable age and gender. And even the stereotypically boorish Bermuda-shorts-clad tourists with their vans, videocams, and surly children in tow may actually be uplifted by the sights of the Civil War battlefield or seaside to which they have driven.

When the range within which one moves about becomes extended, so too does the range of one's potential knowledge. The automobile is the quintessential range extender, not only by lengthening the trips one can take but also by multiplying the number of available routes. Knowledge by acquaintance has been emphasized in the preceding discussion, but automobility also extends one's ability to acquire other kinds of knowledge. Cars go not only to malls and theme parks but to libraries, universities, and museums. Cars provide regular access to urban centers of learning to those who live many miles distant. The traditional derogatory image of the unlettered "country bumpkin" has been rendered increasingly obsolete by new technologies—telephone, television, computer and, not least, the automobile.

The Wheels of Privacy

Privacy complements autonomy. Someone who is private has a life of his own. That is, he is not entirely defined and constrained by a public persona. The capacity to be self-determining requires some quantum of privacy, whereas being an adjunct to a greater whole or an organic part of an organism does not. Individuals are private only to the extent that some part of their personas belongs primarily to them and not to the world at large. Being inappropriately viewed during a moment of intimacy or vulnerability constitutes one of the most basic encroachments on privacy. In an extended sense, privacy incorporates limitations not only on perceptual access but also on the knowledge or control others may have over oneself.

What constitutes an invasion of privacy is not fixed by our nature as human beings but is relative both to more or less arbitrary convention and to the far-from-arbitrary conditions that govern the possibility of forging an identity that is distinctively one's own. "A man's home is his castle" expresses one early manifestation of this impulse. The king is powerful and the king reigns, but in one little corner of the realm the commoner, not the king, enjoys (quasi) regal prerogatives. A right not to be subject to search and seizure without due process of law and a right not to be obliged to incriminate oneself are further manifestations. They express the conviction that personal dignity imposes limits on mandatory subjection to the scrutiny of others.

Some ancient conceptions of privacy endorsed a radical withdrawal from one's fellows. We should view the hermit or anchorite not as essentially a misanthrope but rather as someone who by separating himself from other human beings thereby draws closer to his God. (For Christians, Jesus in the wilderness provides the paradigmatic instance; there are many others.) Monasticism constitutes a slightly less radical version: voluntary sequestration with a few like-minded others away from the main crossroads of urban life. From Qumran by the Dead Sea to David Koresh at Waco, sectarians have acted on the belief that they could achieve a greater inner and external freedom by isolating themselves from the majority culture. When that majority culture nonetheless forcibly impinges on them, results typically are tragic.

Previously I have focused on the value to individuals of the capacity to approach and enjoy particular goods. The concern for privacy underscores the concomitant importance of the capacity to distance oneself from threats. If too many eyes are on me where I am, then I shall enhance my privacy by moving out of the spotlight of public scrutiny. For most of us the relevant degree of privacy rarely involves isolation from all others but usually does require the ability to exercise a significant degree of discretionary control over who will have access to one's body and mind. Adolescents who go out to "do nothing" thereby claim a measure of privacy vis-à-vis their parents; a

fishing trip may have less to do with baiting fishhooks than with taking oneself off invasive social hooks.

For twentieth-century American society, the automobile serves as the quintessential bastion of privacy. For many of us the Honda, not the home, is the castle. Ironically or not, those minutes between home and office on a freeway clogged past capacity with multitudes of other cars may be one's most private time of the day. (I do not mean to slight the benefits of the other great solitude-enhancing device of our culture, the bathroom.) Even those who love their spouse and children, delight in the company of friends, and work compatibly alongside colleagues may nonetheless relish a short time each day to be alone. Such interludes do not indicate an antisocial impulse. Intermediate periods of solitude can fuel bouts of gregariousness and sociality just as an astringent serves to clean the palate between sumptuous courses.

Social planners are wont to gnash their teeth at the number of motorists who could arrange to commute by car pool but instead "inefficiently" take up roadway space with solitary-occupant cars. Diamond lanes and other inducements have only a limited effect on the average occupancy. This outcome may be viewed as a failure of policy, but it can also be seen as a reasonable and in some ways estimable response to the valid human desire for privacy. "It is not good for the man to be alone," says Scripture, but for those who live among a surfeit of others, it is sometimes very good indeed to be alone. The closing of the car door can provide a welcome shutting out of the rest of the world, allowing a recapture of the self by the self—as opposed to its usual embeddedness in an array of intersecting public spaces. Car pools are not necessarily a bad thing; in demonstrable respects, we might be better off if more people doubled and tripled up before taking to the roads. Privacy in virtually all its forms, including that afforded by the automobile has significant costs. (Think of the private room versus the hospital ward.) I shall not inquire here whether the costs of automotive privacy exceed the benefits; my point is simply that driving solo has genuine benefits that go beyond merely instrumental facility in getting from here to there. Any unbiased cost-benefit analysis must acknowledge that privacy has a positive value and proceed from there.

Being alone is one aspect of privacy but not, I believe, the most central. More salient to privacy than the distancing of oneself from others is a (re)gaining of control over one's immediate environment. I may be surrounded by other people, but if I can determine to a significant degree what they shall be allowed to perceive of me and know about me and impose on me, then to that extent I have retained a private self. Surely one reason for people's fondness for their cars and for automobility in general is the control afforded over one's immediate environment. Drivers make choices by turn-

ing the wheel clockwise and counterclockwise, determining the external environment to which they will move themselves; by other manipulations they arrange the internal environment to their liking. Pushing one button turns on the radio. Pushing others changes the station, lowers the volume, turns off the radio and switches to the tape player. Individuals choose for themselves whether to listen to news reports, Beethoven, the Beatles, or nothing at all. Next to the switches for the stereo are those for climate control, windshield washing, blinking one's lights, and perhaps a cellular phone. (Because the last item supplies incoming as well as outgoing calls, an assessment of whether it extends or diminishes privacy is double edged.) The vehicle's make, model, style, color, and options are more permanent objects of one-time choice. Automobile reviewers write about "responsiveness." This has a limited meaning in the context of evaluating how a vehicle performs, but automobiles, unique among all forms of personal transportation, have a larger responsiveness. Individuals exercise control over the internal environment of their cars in a manner not possible with any alternate mode of getting around.

Contrast the privacy-enhancing features of the automobile with a typical (typical, that is, based on the author's recent experience) commute by public transportation. As one walks down the stairs to the subway, one's nostrils are greeted by a subtle aroma of urine and garbage. If it is rush hour many milling people clog the platform, and so one tries to be careful neither to knock nor be knocked into. When traveling will actually commence is not in one's own hands; it depends on whether the train is on time or delayed. Being able to sit is a matter of luck. So, too, is the company one will keep. A man of indeterminate years holding a hat in his hand treks through the train car by car. He begs the attention of the passengers, tells them that he has no job, no place to sleep, no money. Dope, he announces, has scrambled his brain. That confession probably is true; he twitches, smells bad, looks unhealthy. Some people drop a quarter into the hat, most don't. A few minutes later three kids come through, break into song for a mercifully brief period, smile, wait to get paid. The singing displays few aesthetic gifts, but the boys' smiles are rather sharklike. Maybe another quarter is dropped in another hat, maybe not. Between the bumpings of the car and the performances of these itinerants one may manage to read a few New York Times column inches. Eventually one arrives at one's destination.

Again, I am not arguing against mass transportation. In some urban settings it is the only realistic way to move a large number of people through small spaces in a reasonable amount of time. My point rather is that public transportation necessarily encroaches on privacy. On a New York City subway the encroachment tends to be great; with other modalities it may be considerably smaller. However great or small, though, it belongs on the

debit side if one counts privacy as a credit. Working out the magnitudes is the tricky part, an exercise that will vary according to differences in individual temperament and preferences. But once we focus attentively on privacy, it will no longer appear obvious to us that rush-hour gridlock on highways is an unacceptably high price to pay for the opportunity to be one's own man or woman behind the wheel of one's own car. Appealing to popular practice is not decisive in these matters, if only because some extraneous force may perversely shape such practice, but it does adduce evidence. That millions of people who bear no obvious marks of incompetence elect to drive when they might otherwise at equal or lower financial cost to themselves employ some means of public transportation indicates that for them automobility is a positive good rather than a necessary evil.

The Road from Serfdom

I have argued that the automobile does not merit the opprobrium its critics have showered on it. My reflections have considered some very general features of automobile usage, which obtain across nearly the whole range of interactions between motorists and their machine. I could have discussed more specialized enjoyments of automobiles: exhilarating in the speed of a high-powered sports vehicle taken flat out, the enthusiast's loving application of wax to a cherished collector car, the teenage boy half buried under the hood of the beat-up Ford whose engine he is tweaking for one last little bit of extra performance. These are automobile dividends, too, but because they appeal to special tastes, I judged that their inclusion might distract from the primary normative significance of automobility. Even with regard to only general considerations, however, one has ample reason to maintain that the ethical status of automobility stands quite high.

Why, then, has motoring fallen under such a cloud? Why does ostensibly enlightened opinion regard it as a bane and a nuisance? Three possible reasons suggest themselves. First, although the critics acknowledge the range of goods afforded by automobility, they have identified accompanying evils that drastically outweigh the goods. Second, the critics may have been oblivious to the various autonomy-enhancing features of automobility. Third, they may have recognized these features but regarded them as having a much lesser status than I have claimed on their behalf or, indeed, even as negatively valued.

Critics have driven home the case against the automobile with lengthy recitations of the social ills it fosters. I listed several of them in the opening section of this essay: polluting the air and littering the landscape with rusting steel cadavers, dependence on foreign oil suppliers, gridlock, the multitude of bodies mangled each year in road accidents, and so on. Let us

grant that each is an evil. Still, they are not intrinsic to automobility as such but undesirable side effects. In a proper accounting, one will balance them against the various goods for whose attainment the automobile is instrumental. The overwhelming popularity of automobility among ordinary shoppers, commuters, suburbanites schlepping around the kids, and Sunday drivers out for a spin offers presumptive evidence that people value these goods highly. Precise measures can be left to the econometricians and their professional kin. I shall confine myself to making two different points.

First, the cited ills do not support a general indictment of the automobile and attempts to roll back its use. Rather, the indicated remedy is to adopt policies that reduce spillover costs. Legislators should aim taxes and regulatory controls at the vehicles that pollute excessively or present more than normal dangers to others; differential pricing for peak and off-peak access to highways lies well within the capabilities of currently available technology; and so on.¹¹ Well-aimed attentiveness to particular avoidable costs is commendable; wholesale denunciations of automobility are not.

Second, the balance sheet of instrumental values and disvalues ignores the intrinsic goodness of automobility in promoting autonomy and complements of autonomy—such as free association and privacy. Even if purely instrumental calculations did not unambiguously display a positive balance in favor of automobility, its autonomy-enhancing aspects are so pronounced both qualitatively and quantitatively that any plausibly adequate normative evaluation of the status of automobile usage must give them primary attention.

Could the automobile's critics have failed to observe that cars support autonomy? If these effects were slight and subtle, that supposition might be reasonable. But when compared with alternate means of transportation the automobile stands out as the vehicle of self-directedness par excellence. To overlook this fact would be like visiting the mammal area at the zoo and failing to notice that the elephants are larger than the zebras, camels, and warthogs.

I am convinced that the automobile's most strident critics appreciate that automobility promotes autonomy—and that is precisely why they are so wary of it. Public policymakers have a professional predisposition to consider people as so many knights, rooks, and pawns to be moved around on the social chessboard in the service of one's grand strategy. Not all analysts succumb to this temptation, but many do. Their patron saint is the philosopher Plato, the utopian architect of the ideal Republic, who embraces

11. See, for example, Adler (1993), Cameron (1995), Calvert (1993), Harrington and others (1994).

propaganda campaigns (“Noble Lie”), eugenic breeding, radical property redistribution schemes and—most tellingly—rule exercised by people just like himself, the philosopher-kings. If one sincerely believes that one knows what is best, and if one benevolently desires to gift one’s fellows with this treasure, their obdurate insistence on continuing to do things in their own preferred way can be maddening. “I’ll give you what’s good for you,” the policy specialist vows, first in the soft tones of a promise and then, after experiencing rejection, in the clipped cadences of a threat.

People who drive automobiles upset the patterns spun from the policy intellectual’s brain. The precise urban design that he has concocted loses out to suburban sprawl; neat integration of work, residence, and shopping within compact, multipurpose developments gives way to bedroom communities here, industrial parks there, and malls everywhere in between. If people rode buses and trains whenever they could, less oil would be burned and fewer acres of countryside would be paved over. Perhaps the races and classes would mix more. Perhaps communities of an old-fashioned sort, where everyone knew his neighbor, would return. Perhaps the central city would come alive again in the evenings. Perhaps...but why go on? These lovely visions give way before the free choices of men and women who resist all blandishments to leave their cars in the garage. They wish to drive, and by doing so they powerfully express their autonomy, but their exercises of choice also have the effect of rendering the planners’ conceptions moot. So the intellectuals sulk in their tents and grumpily call to mind utopias that might have been.

Although this essay was stimulated in the first instance by a conviction that the critics of the automobile had, at best, offered distinctly one-sided appraisals, my aim here has been to develop the positive case for the value of automobility, not to respond point by point to the items in the brief against the automobile. (And, of course, I staunchly agree with some of these points.) Many of the argumentative missiles launched at the automobile become more fully intelligible if one understands them as motivated at least as much by a disinclination to tolerate individual autonomy as by any particular facet of automobile technology.

Consider an example. If the critics love anything less than cars, it is the roads they are driven on. If existing highways are too congested to support the quantity of traffic that squeezes along them, would it not be desirable to build more roads to relieve that gridlock? No! respond the critics. They oppose the construction of more highways on the grounds that as soon as a spanking new road opens to divert some of the flow from overused arteries, it too becomes engorged with traffic. The ultimate consequence is yet another venue for tedious stop-and-go automotive crawling. Better, then, not to waste any more dollars on futile freeway building. And at this point the

subject usually turns to mass-transportation subsidies and new imposts on automobiles.

Most readers, I am sure, have heard the argument. But consider how odd it would sound in another context. I am in the business of teaching philosophy classes. Suppose that my class in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant were very popular, with every seat filled and a waiting list for admission. (Alas, the supposition is counterfactual.) And suppose further that when the philosophy department opens a new section of the class, it too becomes quickly oversubscribed. And the same for a third and then a fourth section. Should we conclude that continuing to pump resources into Kant pedagogy is futile, that instead we ought to use the money for a Nautilus machine in the football training room? That conclusion would be preposterous. Instead, my colleagues and I would rejoice in a renaissance of philosophy in northwestern Ohio.

No renaissance of Kant instruction is occurring, at least not yet. But for other items, one can observe such overflowing demand. McDonald's enjoys success at selling hamburgers. The company has thousands of establishments, many of them filled at rush hour with lines of people in pursuit of Big Macs and Chicken McNuggets. When McDonald's opens a new franchise, it too soon becomes congested with consumers waiting in lines to place their orders. Should we conclude that investing resources in more Golden Arches is futile?

No matter how many millions of instructions per second microprocessors perform, people keep demanding more and faster CPUs. Intel gives them the new generation top-of-the-line chip, and almost immediately people start impatiently clamoring for its successor. Should we conclude from this observed insatiability that investing in computing power wastes resources?

Big Macs and Pentium processors improve people's lives. Similarly, millions of people demand the use of highways because driving enhances their well-being. The striking feature of the critique of highway-building programs is that what should be taken as a sign of great, indeed overwhelming, success is presented as a mark of failure. But the only failure has been the critics' attempt to talk people out of their cars and out of the neighborhoods and workplaces their cars have rendered accessible. If my argument is sound, it shows that the critics' persuasive appeals deserved to fail. Automobile motoring is a good because people wish to engage in it, and they wish to engage in it because it is inherently good.

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