

RETHINKING THE ETHICS OF DRIVING: A UTILITARIAN APPROACH

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Clevis Headley, Department of Philosophy, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Department of Philosophy and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in Philosophy Designation.

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## ABSTRACT

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There is a dominant driving culture embedded in American society. This culture renders driving both expected and necessary. Unfortunately, there is a haunting death toll underlying this driving culture which results from the industrial processes needed to create a car, to the driving of the vehicle, and the resulting environmental pollution.

This thesis argues that the crisis partly results from the current driving culture due, although not exclusively, to a strict distinction between the private and public spheres as well as the separation of humanity from nature. I believe that utilitarianism can address these issues. Furthermore, it is my assertion that when combined with virtue ethics, utilitarianism can assist people in how they approach this crisis in their personal life. First, I will explain the crisis resulting from the current driving culture. Next, I will describe classical utilitarianism and discuss its application to the ethics of driving. Lastly, I will explore a way to critically grapple with and potentially resolve the problems of driving culture through green virtues.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1893, the first American-manufactured car was driven across U.S. roads. Despite the introduction of cars, horses remained the primary means of transportation. It was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that cars became popular. By the 1910s, there were more automobiles than horses transporting citizens.<sup>1</sup> Presently, driving is incredibly commonplace in America, and most cities in America are car dependent. For example, 6.8% of U.S. residents live in a walkable town, while a staggering 94.5% Americans aged 16 and older reported to occasionally drive in 2022.<sup>2</sup> In America, driving is both necessary and expected; this can be understood as America's driving culture.

The reason for this culture exists at two levels: the governmental level and the societal level. At the governmental level, most U.S. cities lack the necessary infrastructure to be walkable. Cities are designed with the expectation that cars will dominate roads, not pedestrians. Communities do not have adequate sidewalks that enable pedestrians to walk safely to their destination, and intersections are busy and dangerous. Faced with this situation, residents ultimately conclude that it is too risky to walk in the streets. Even more alarming, grocery stores, hospitals, and schools are not located within safe walking distances for the average citizen. Choosing to adapt to their surroundings, many Americans decide to drive rather than walk. In many areas, public transportation is not encouraged nor is it reliable enough to use consistently to get to work or school. As a result, cars are viewed as a necessity because for many people, they are. As public transportation remains extremely unreliable and paid forms of transportation remain too expensive,

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<sup>1</sup> Md Meraj, *When was the First Car Made in the United States: A Historic Milestone*, (The Daily Automotive 2026)

<sup>2</sup> R Steinbach & B.C. Tefft, *American Driving Survey: 2022*, (Washington D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety)

if someone wants to have and keep a job, they must own a car or have access to a car to drive to their place of work. For others, if they desire to further their education but are a commuter student, they, too, need a car as a reliable means of transportation. These structures implicitly force residents to drive regularly to survive.

The other factor that contributes to mass driving is societal. Sometimes, convenience propels driving rather than necessity. A store may be a safe five-minute walk, but it is more convenient and relaxing to drive. Not to mention walking diverges from societal expectations. Besides structural barriers, there is comfort and privacy in driving. Walking can be viewed as strenuous and carpooling as unnecessary and inconvenient. There are also societal expectations that persuade individuals to drive. These pressures become unbearable as people watch their peers drive or when friends and family ask, ‘When are you going to get your license?’ The pressure to drive can begin as young as 4 years old, when a child is gifted a toy car for playing.

With its normalization, it is easy to ignore this driving culture, but in this ever-globalized world, its impacts are felt around the globe. In particular, the process of manufacturing cars is not restricted to national boundaries. Various components are manufactured in several countries before the final assembly in a particular country. Driving culture, with its benefits and harms, raises questions concerning the responsibilities of government as well as what individuals have a duty to do. What exactly are the impacts of driving culture, and should they be of any governmental or personal concern, and if so, why?

This thesis mainly draws on two lines of thought. The first is *Utilitarianism* by John Stuart Mill and the second is *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life- Re-envisioning Planetary Happiness* by Bart Schultz. *Utilitarianism* is a defense and explanation of utilitarianism by John Mill.

*Utilitarianism as a Way of Life* explains the history of utilitarianism and its relationship with colonization and environmental reform. It also offers a new way to understand and implement utilitarianism in order to address the environmental crisis.

From these readings, I argue that the crisis resulting from the current driving culture exists partly due to 1) a strict distinction between the private and public spheres and 2) the alienation of humanity from nature. I believe that utilitarianism can address these issues. In addition, I also contend that when combined with virtue ethics, it can assist people in their personal approach to this crisis. First, I will explain the crisis resulting from the current driving culture. Then I will explain classical utilitarianism and discuss its application to driving. Lastly, I will explore a way to critically grapple with and potentially resolve the problems of driving culture through green virtues.

In Chapter One, I discuss the dangers in the production of cars. I approach this topic from a human perspective as well as an environmental perspective. I also discuss the negative impacts of driving cars on our busy and congested highways. Finally, I touch upon the current difficulties involved in addressing this crisis and suggest a way to address these difficulties.

In Chapter Two, I begin with classical utilitarianism and explain the principle of utility. I discuss how utilitarianism acknowledges the reality of collective action and that our actions have consequences for others. I endorse the utilitarian insight that morally speaking everyone's interests count and counts equally. Put differently, we should take into consideration other people's pain regardless of their physical distance from us. Next, I address the utilitarian understanding of the relationship between human beings and the natural world. I apply this re-envisioned relationship to our relationship to driving.

Lastly, in Chapter Three, I introduce the idea of virtuous utilitarianism, as well as discuss Jamieson's green virtues. This new framework is meant to provide a way for people to interact with the environment in a meaningful way. As such, I assert that green virtues can be utilized by people to change their relationship with driving and help alleviate the crisis.

## CHAPTER ONE

### DESCRIPTION OF THE CRISIS

#### 1.1. Human Impact of the Creation of Cars

While automobiles have their merits, from convenience to increased accessibility to resources, there are negative ramifications that get overlooked due mainly to the normalization of driving. The car's impact begins at its creation and continues as it hits the roads. There are three main types of vehicles: gas-powered, electric, and hybrids. These vehicle types can be further simplified into two groups: cars that require oil and others that do not. Fuel-dependent cars are widespread, meaning oil must first be extracted for the automobile business to boom as it currently does. The harm of oil drilling exists in both the environmental sphere and the human sphere. From a human perspective, oil rig workers risk their lives every time they step onto the rig site. For example, the Industrial Safety & Hygiene News reports that oil operators have the third most deadly profession due to 46 fatal injuries for every 100,000 workers.<sup>3</sup> These risks are due to exposure to chemicals, working with highly flammable substances, and dangerous heavy equipment malfunctions. Interestingly enough, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, housed in the US Department of Labor, vehicle incidents are the leading cause of death for oil and gas extraction workers, accounting for about 4 out of 10 workers' deaths.<sup>4</sup> Recently, there has been an increase in the use of electric cars, which is expected to reduce the need for oil drilling and the demand for oil, but it comes at a cost.

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<sup>3</sup> Benita Mehta, Roofers, Linemen, *Oil and Gas Workers Among the Top 10 Most Dangerous Jobs*, (Industrial Safety & Hygiene News)

<sup>4</sup> *Safety Hazard Associated with Oil and Gas Extraction Activities*, (U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration)

Electric cars require minerals to be mined to make car batteries. Agnes Callamard, Amnesty International's Secretary General, said, "The human rights abuses tied to the extraction of energy transition minerals are alarming and pervasive, and the industry's response is sorely lacking."<sup>5</sup> Historically and currently, mining harms surrounding communities. In addition to increases in air and water pollution, there are other harms caused by mining. These injuries are caused by inadequate labor laws in various countries in which mining companies operate. In short, mining companies have an exploitative relationship with the countries in which they conduct business. They take advantage of and displace poor families with little to no resistance. Companies go to countries where either child labor laws do not exist or are less restrictive than in America or in the company's home country.

## 1.2. Environmental and Health Impacts of Cars

Besides the harmful impacts of cars on humans, there is an environmental impact from both oil drilling and mineral mining. The effects of oil drilling have decreased due to technological advancements, but there are still inevitable consequences. For example, oil spills are an inherent part of oil drilling. There are constant small spills that usually go unnoticed. However, most attention is focused on larger spills, some that can be as large as a mile wide. An example of a large oil spill occurred on November 16, 2023, in the Gulf of Mexico; this oil spill was 3-4 miles.<sup>6</sup> Large spills inundate the water, polluting it and making it inhabitable for marine life and for

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<sup>5</sup> Julia Conley, *Amnesty Report Reveals 'Alarming' Human Rights Abuses in Extraction of EV Minerals*, (Common Dreams)

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Loomis & Valerie Cleland, *Yet Another Oil Spill Hits the Gulf of Mexico*, (NRDC)

recreation. These environmental impacts have prompted many environmental activists to call for an end to offshore drilling altogether.

As for mining, the environmental impacts are multi-pronged. First, a large amount of space is needed to begin mining, meaning the land must undergo deforestation, and wildlife is either lost or displaced. Then the technology needed to conduct the mining uses a copious amount of water. Lastly, with all the machinery used to mine, there are many greenhouse gases, i.e., carbon dioxide, released into the atmosphere. The effects of these released gases are more catastrophic than many initially realize.

Clearly, then, the pollution caused by the manufacturing and operation of cars not only negatively impacts the environment but also harms human beings. Humans and their environment are irrevocably intertwined. All life is directly affected by Earth's changing conditions. For example, a 2019 study revealed that "Air pollution, in all forms, is responsible for more than 6.5 million death each year globally, a number that had increased over the past two decades."<sup>7</sup> Though there are different forms of air pollution, I will focus on air pollution from cars and on its human impact in greater detail.

To begin, air pollution refers to harmful (carcinogenic) substances in the atmosphere. Some air pollution is man-made, namely caused by vehicle emissions. There is also pollution caused by natural processes, such as volcanic eruptions, wildfires, windblown dust, and biogenic emissions from plants. However, even naturally occurring air pollution cannot be fully separated from humans, because some natural causes are, in retrospect, created by humans. For example, some wildfires are not natural occurrences; some fires are man-made, and the increase in fires in some

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<sup>7</sup> *Air Pollution and Your Health*, (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences)

regions have resulted from human activities. Though there are many types of air pollutants, I will focus on five main types. The first type is smog. Smog is a form of ozone and ozone is essential to human survival. The difference is that ozone exists as a layer in our atmosphere, whereas smog is at ground level. Although ozone is naturally occurring, its location and concentration determine whether it helps or harms humanity.

The second type of air pollution are noxious gases. Noxious gases include carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen, and sulfur oxides. Similarly to ozone, carbon dioxide is a naturally occurring gas produced by organic matter, such as bones. However, vehicle emissions and industrial processes also produce excessive amounts of carbon dioxide. Often, there is a desire to categorize gases as either good or bad, but gases cannot be simplified in such a manner. Instead, there is an order in the natural world that benefits humanity. Ensuring natural gases maintain their place and proper concentration in that order limits the amount of pollution. However, driving and the production of cars are destroying that natural order and, as a result, create significant pollution.

The third type of air pollution is particulate matter, which includes sulfates, nitrates, and mineral dust. The fourth type are volatile organic compounds, which combust at room temperature. A significant perpetrator of VOC are gasoline and natural gas. The last type of air pollution is polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, which “are organic compounds containing carbon and hydrogen.”<sup>8</sup>

All of the aforementioned types of air pollution are known as Traffic Related Air Pollution (TRAP). TRAP is a mix of man-made gases and particles that have catastrophic impacts on life.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

Having established the primary forms of air pollution and their relation to cars, I will now discuss the harm they cause.

In the 1970s, the National Ambient Air Quality Standards classified air pollution as a serious threat to respiratory health. After many studies, researchers found that “short-term exposure to higher levels of outdoor air pollution is associated with reduced lung function, asthma, cardiac problems, emergency department visits, and hospital admission.”<sup>9</sup> For children specifically, especially kids who live near busy roads or play outdoor sports in ozone-filled communities, the chances of developing asthma are greatly increased. Additionally, kids exposed to more air pollutants are more likely to develop bronchitis in adulthood and to have chronic lung damage.

There also seems to be a strong correlation between air pollution and cancer, as well as cardiovascular disease. A study conducted from 2000 to 2016, “found an association between lung cancer incidence and increased reliance on coal for energy generation.”<sup>10</sup> For women, a study consisting of more than 57,000 women found that women living near roadways may have increased chances of developing breast cancer. In light of extensive research linking air pollution to cancer, the World Health Organization labeled air pollution as a carcinogen in 2013. As for cardiovascular disease, researchers found that fine particulate matter known as PM 2.5 “can impair blood vessel function and speed up calcification in arteries.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, studies revealed that exposure to TRAP can reduce levels of ‘good cholesterol’, which increases the risk of cardiovascular disease.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

PM 2.5 (fine particulate matter) alone poses a significant threat to human health and life. Researchers found that the most serious problems deriving from air pollution are caused by PM 2.5. Fine particulate matter is a subset of particulate matter that is much smaller than human hair and that can be inhaled. When inhaled, it becomes embedded within lung tissue. PM 2.5 is associated with increased risk of death. Furthermore, PM 2.5 is linked to children developing asthma and bronchitis, as well as older adults developing Parkinson's disease and dementia.<sup>12</sup> Overall, the effects of vehicle emissions and the industrial processes used to manufacture cars significantly impact the environment, the gases released into the atmosphere, both visible and invisible, infiltrate our lungs and leave lasting effects on vulnerable groups, namely children and the elderly.

### 1.3. Human Impact from Driving Cars

The harmful impact of producing and driving cars is not limited to people's health and the environmental damage caused by car pollution. A more noticeable effect of driving is the constant occurrence of car accidents. Every day, many drivers witness the horror caused by automobile accidents. Yet they carry on with their day as though the scene they have witnessed is just 'business as usual.' According to the CDC, motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death in the US, approximating a death toll at 44,000 in 2022. An average of 120 people die each day because of accidents from reckless driving. Researchers have also reported over 2.6 million emergency visits

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

to medical facilities because of motor vehicle injuries.<sup>13</sup> The death toll and injuries by our driving culture is widely known but we adhere to and gladly cultivate that culture regardless.

In a 2010 study, accidents, homicide, cancer, and heart disease were dictated as the leading causes of death among teenagers. While the other causes of death are the focus of national campaigns, driving is not often identified as being as serious as cancer or heart disease. For example, accidents, also known as unintentional injuries, made up 48% of teenage deaths and among that 48%, 73% was from a motor vehicle accident.<sup>14</sup> Young people are known to be reckless drivers. This recklessness is often attributed to immaturity and a lack of a fully developed cortex. Cars are extremely fatal to minors and young adults, yet we allow minors and young adults to drive from an early age. And in these crashes that kill teenagers, the other party can also die or, at least, be seriously injured. These fatalities raise the question of why we keep the driving age so low. A major reason for this is that these kids enter the work force at a relatively young age, their parents are starting to tire of driving them, and young people want to have their independence. As minors enter adulthood and gain more freedom, they need to be able to maneuver successfully in society and, as established before, walking and public transportation are not reliable or feasible options. Around the age at which minors are legally allowed to drive, they also start gaining more societal autonomy. Due to American urban planning, driving is often associated with autonomy, and autonomy is the main reason why people between ages 16 to 75 drive. Autonomy is the reason for which people residing in the same residence frequently decide they need their own car, despite the other cars already in the household.

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<sup>13</sup> *About Transportation Safety, (CDC)*

<sup>14</sup> A.M. Minino, *Mortality Among Teenagers Aged 12-19 Years, (NCHS Data Brief)*

As already stated, there are difficulties addressing the driving crisis due to rigid distinctions between private and public spheres as well as between humanity and nature. The difficult issues related to these distinctions become more complex as they intersect with additional concerns connected to climate change. One obvious fact is that climate change is exacerbated by our driving. The effects of climate change are often ignored because they are indirect. These include but are not limited to “sea level rises, and increased frequencies of drought, storms, and extreme temperatures.” These changes in turn lead to “food shortages, water crises, disease outbreaks, and transformation of economic, political, and social structures” which means “millions may die as a result of, but climate change will never be listed as the cause of death on a death certificate.”<sup>15</sup> The effects of climate change are both local and global. However, even if we do not observe the damage in our own country, the damage should still warrant our attention. From a different perspective, some of the activities that contribute to the acceleration of climate change occur within the private domain, “such as using computers, hot showers, eating this or that, driving cars, investing here or there, and having children.”<sup>16</sup> But as with these private activities, since the practice of driving has public consequences, it should be also addressed as a public issue and not treated as a private matter of one’s conscience. More so, the issue of driving demands a public solution. The solution involves developing a widespread and reliable public transportation system which demands governmental action. This implies that the public must put pressure on elected officials to implement solutions that will decrease the need to drive and, in turn, its impacts. To acknowledge that driving is not strictly a matter for each individual to address requires that we adopt a moral perspective that is sensitive to both the personal as well as the collective consequences of driving,

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<sup>15</sup> Schultz, *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life*, 169

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 172

I turn now to briefly discuss utilitarianism, especially as it relates to the personal and collective aspects of morality.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CLASSICAL UTILITARIANISM

#### 2.1. Principle of Utility

I believe that utilitarianism is an effective framework to address and bridge the private and public (communal) aspects regarding the morality of driving. As mentioned before, driving may be mainly a private act but since we all are part of a community, private actions affect the whole. Additionally, collective decisions made by the government such as the structure of our cities and how we spend our tax dollars, have greatly contributed to the problem of driving. Therefore, just as the problem was created through collective decisions, its solution can be solved in the same way. Utilitarianism can effectively acknowledge this relationship through its one principle- the principle of utility, also referred to as the greatest happiness principle. Mill, in *Utilitarianism*, explains that “The Great Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness...that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends.”<sup>17</sup> The principle of utility is not solely concerned with the actions of isolated individuals. In fact, even more significantly the principle is not restricted to the pleasure of humans but in “so far as the nature of things admits to the whole sentient creation.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, being concerned with happiness of the whole, utilitarians also take into consideration the actions of the government, more specifically, legislation. Pleasure does not exist in a vacuum, but it is also affected by

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<sup>17</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 10-11

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 18

surrounding circumstances. Aware of this reality, utilitarians, once again, consider the pleasure of the whole, which consists of individual human beings and other sentient beings.

In the case of driving, the notion of private, personal actions results in the deaths of many people, as discussed in the introduction. The deaths, injuries, and sicknesses surrounding our driving culture are a collective issue with drastic consequences for human welfare. Since utilitarianism defined morality as primarily concerned with human welfare, it is fair to consider it as uniquely primed to deal with communal issues. Accordingly, it should be consulted when dealing with the collective harms of driving.

Due to its strong concern with pleasure, people often shy away from utilitarianism because of the fear it would violate some of our moral intuitions about justice, rights, not punishing innocent people, etc. This objection is incorrect. First, it would help to note that the principle of utility is concerned with the greatest pleasure of the whole and/or all those whose interests are involved and not exclusively the selfish interest of any particular individual. Put differently, there is no insinuation of egoism or selfishness promoted by utilitarianism. This point is highlighted in *Utilitarianism*, as Mill acknowledges the ways people's characters affect those around them by claiming that "Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character."<sup>19</sup> In other words, utilitarianism, as developed by Mill, is not merely concerned with maximizing hedonistic pleasures for the greatest number of people. As we recall, Mill disputed Bentham's claim that all pleasures qualitatively are the same but only differ in quantity. He insisted on the individual not being the judge of the qualitative significance of a pleasure in every situation. Mill appreciated the importance of character because he appreciated

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 17

the fact that character matters in efforts to establish the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number of people.

Mill explains that some may doubt that having a good character would make an 'individual' happy, but it is uncontested that having a good character makes the community better and happier. Here, philosophically, it is clear that utilitarians consider the community and recognize responsibility to it. This responsibility consists of making the best decisions for the community as a whole and ensuring the community's survival. As such, utilitarians are called to put self-interest aside and focus on the best interests of the community.

## 2.2 Consideration of People Far Away

Although this call seems honorable, people in wealthy countries continue to drive and to refuse restrictions on their extravagant lifestyles, thereby ignoring the negative impact of their actions on climate change and its negative effects on human beings and the environment. This failure in recognizing the effects of their actions, it seems, is because the effects of climate change occupy a miniscule role in their personal lives; hence, they tend to believe that much of the significant harm occurs far away in poor nations. As such, so long as their personal community is safe and stable, they continue in their daily habits. However, from a philosophical standpoint, one has to examine whether distance should play any role in moral consideration and/or culpability. Peter Singer in *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life* presents an argument against the proximity view. Many of his arguments stem from the following three assumptions: 1) Pain is bad regardless of whose pain it is, 2) The weight of taking a person's life should depend on the individual and their

desire to continue living, not physical traits such as species, race, etc., 3) People are morally responsible for the things they do (commission) and don't do (omission).<sup>20</sup>

Singer claims that location is irrelevant in moral consideration because 1) Pain is the same around the world, 2) It can be assumed that most people want to live, and 3) We are responsible for our role in the harm and/or death of other people. To refine his point, Singer uses an example of a young child drowning in a pond. If a person can save that young child with little to no meaningful negative consequences to themselves (perhaps they get a little muddy) then they are morally responsible to save that child. Now, “globally, some 22,000-24,000 children die daily as a result of preventable poverty-related causes. Failing to save lives in distant places by, say, giving to the Malaria Foundation, is no different from walking by the drowning child.”<sup>21</sup> If a person has the ability to help save one of those children with little to no meaningful cost to themselves, then just as before, the person has a responsibility to do so. These two examples demonstrate that distance is not a meaningful consideration in moral action. In plainer language, because pain and suffering are the same across land and sea, our ethical consideration must be the same as well.

Although some utilitarians claim that there is a moral duty to care for both those that we know and those we do not, other utilitarians believe we should not concern ourselves with matters of the world because pursuing such a goal is futile. For example, Mill argued that it is false to believe that utilitarianism implies that “people should fix their minds upon so wide a generality as the world, or society at large.”<sup>22</sup> He goes on to say that most good actions target the benefit of a few individuals, not the world. He believes that as people act to benefit the individuals around

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<sup>20</sup> Schultz, *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life*, 140

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 140-141

<sup>22</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 28

them, and since these happy individuals help to make up the world, their happiness will lead to a better and happier world overall. While his sentiment that most good actions are not made with the whole world in mind is correct, it is not entirely accurate to claim that people should not fix their minds on the world or society at large. His stance is sensible, as he goes on to write, “his power to [multiply happiness] on an extended scale...are but exceptional,”<sup>23</sup> and it is even more reasonable once one recalls that his life spanned from 1806 to 1873. The world today is far more globalized than it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and our actions are more connected and impactful than ever before. Though I admit that the ability of an individual to impact society at large is slim, doing one’s best with the hope that others will join in is pivotal because the power a collective possesses to increase the happiness of society is far greater. This position is in line with the utilitarian spirit that a group of individuals should come together to increase happiness not for just one person, but the whole, with the interests of the community or humanity in mind depending on the context. Understanding how globalization has changed the level of impact we have on one another reveals how individuals should be held accountable to consider the interests of those living in foreign countries. The scope of morality is not confined to geographical/national boundaries.

### 2.3. Humanity and Nature

Since utilitarians emphasize happiness or welfare, they focus on the consequences of people’s actions, both far and wide. In the case of driving, the buying and selling of cars negatively impacts others as was previously mentioned. But our driving culture does not only harm people; it

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid

hurts the Earth as well. Oftentimes there is a tendency to categorize humans as separate from nature, but utilitarianism provides a different perspective.

Nature's status is closely tied to the happiness and well-being of human beings. As a matter of fact, "Human happiness requires the maintenance of an environmental life-support system."<sup>24</sup> People's wellness relies on clean air and water. Their comfort, and even safety, is highly influenced by Earth's climate. Furthermore, people's lives are affected by the number and magnitude of natural disasters they encounter. Most would admit to their dependence upon Earth to sustain their lives. Many also intuitively carry the sentiment that harming the Earth is morally wrong. As partakers of, as well as being dependent on Earth's ecosystem, harming the Earth also harms us.

Utilitarianism, as a moral framework, permits the use of the Earth's resources but not its blatant and irresponsible exploitation. A utilitarian would not permit the destruction of the Earth because of the intimate relations between the Earth and human beings. Indeed, our survival is so intimately dependent on the Earth that while people may be able to relocate from one city to another, they cannot opt out of Earth for another planet.

Any discussion of humanity's relationship to the natural world should be grounded in the firm understanding of the symbiotic relationship that human beings share with nature. There is no denying that human activity has consequences for Earth. Humans' symbiotic relationship with nature is obvious and strongly influences the way many environmentalists embrace a teleological state of thinking. According to Udoudom, "Environmentalists assume that natural ecosystems are well-ordered and harmonious. All parts of an ecosystem have a unique and distinctive place in the ecosystem. Each contributes in its own way to the natural order of the ecosystem."<sup>25</sup> Removing

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<sup>24</sup> Udoudom, *The Value of Nature*, 38

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*,33

even one species from Earth's ecosystem can have unexpected consequences. A 1987 Crawley study, which contributed to the Nilsson and Grelsson review, found that four factors contributed directly to invasive species: (1) lack of competition with native species, (2) lack of natural enemies, (3) presence of a species that aid the invader in pollinating or dispersing, and (4) lack of difficulty in finding mates.<sup>26</sup> Actions as simple as introducing a new species can drastically alter the population dynamics of an ecosystem. All of this shows the fragility and temperamentality of our environment. This fragility leads most environmentalists to claim that leaving nature alone to run its natural course is often best, unless any interference is necessary to correct the effects of human activity.

Jamieson in *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life* claims that, "There is important truth in the claim that humans are part of nature."<sup>27</sup> Especially during the epoch of modernity, there has been a push to separate humans from the natural world and encouraging an us-versus-them mentality. The truth, however, is that there has only ever been us: a delicate ecosystem that sustains all life. To better understand how to maximize pleasure and welfare for the greatest number of people, it seems we must first rethink our relationship to the natural world and to animals. This perspective of fitting humanity back into the natural world is not new. Many civilizations, in the past and today, reject anthropocentric views and believe that animals and humans should be more equally considered.

According to the Critical Environmental Justice, quoted in *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life* "ecological justice 'destabilizes the notion of the human as a biological category at the pinnacle of human/nature hierarchy and, instead, embraces it as a political category that engages with the

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<sup>26</sup> Christer Nilsson and Gunnel Grelsson, *The Fragility of Ecosystems: A Review*, (A Journal of Applied Ecology)

<sup>27</sup> Schultz, *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life*, 172-173

broader ecological community.”<sup>28</sup> This line of thinking is consistent with a morally informed rejection of speciesism.

Radically rethinking our understanding of our place in the world would allow us to confront environmental problems in a new light. This new perspective highlights that separating humanity from nature is unjustifiable. So, for utilitarians, the environment is important because it is necessary to ensure the wellbeing of sentient beings.

Understanding humanity as part of the natural world and recalling Singer’s point concerning the pain of distant populations, one should view driving in a different light. Because we all share one Earth, actions committed on one side may significantly impact the other side of the globe. For example, the mining companies that mine the raw materials used in car batteries are the same companies that displace other people from their local environments and destabilize their communities. According to Singer, the interests of displaced people should be considered as equal to our own, even if they are not our closest neighbors or even if we do not see them. They and their pains are real, and, from a utilitarian perspective, that is enough.

Because all humans are interconnected with the environment, we must care about the fate of the natural world in order to minimize pain and suffering. Morally, the global effects of climate change demand that people take collective action. However, if we continue to view driving as a private action then very little can be done to address this disastrous issue. It’s critical to recognize that we are tied to our next-door neighbors as well as the child halfway across the world.

Some may claim that while all this talk about being environmentally responsible sounds wonderful, if others continue to drive then personal abstinence is meaningless and, as such, people,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 179

logically speaking, should carry on as usual. This feeling of helplessness resulting from a logical analysis of things is not confined to the environmental crisis. This issue is widely discussed and understood within the context of the paradox of voting. Formalized by Anthony Downs in 1957, this paradox holds that rational beings, which we are assumed to be, make their decision by weighing the costs and benefits of a certain action.

If people are rational and this rationality is manifested in weighing consequences, then citizens should be hesitant to vote. Voters do not know what the election's outcome will be, but they know there will be an outcome regardless of whether they show up. So, the benefit remains largely undetermined. On the other hand, the cost is quite clear. The voter may have to leave work early, stand in a long line, do proper research to be informed on who to vote for, and overall, largely inconvenience themselves.<sup>29</sup> But if no one votes, there will be no election, and no change will be made. Similarly, the environmental crisis, more specifically driving, is not an individual issue but a collective one. Jamieson, in *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life*, properly acknowledges this collective problem by suggesting "a promising utilitarian strategy could be a selective 'non-contingency,' requiring or teaching 'agents to act in ways that minimize their contributions to global environmental change' by specifying 'that acting in this way should generally not be contingent on an agent's beliefs about the behaviors of others.'"<sup>30</sup> If we continue to view the environmental crisis through an individualistic lens, then the rational action is to do nothing at all. However, if viewed through the utilitarian collective lens, then the problem becomes manageable. As a result, to be considerate of the interests of others, we should act on utilitarian grounds. This way of acting means that just as with other green initiatives, people should drive less, carpool more,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 169

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

and decrease their carbon footprint. Consequently, understanding that all living beings are interconnected allows us to consider those near and far and to understand the effects of our private actions.

In regard to driving, our complicity in driving culture is an offshoot of our skewed perception of the relationships among humans, animals, and nature. The governmental structure, which encourages driving, demonstrates its commitment to non-interference with private actions of individuals, but this way of proceeding renders the government's noninterference ineffective in the case of driving. A utilitarian viewpoint is best when considering the environment because it forces us to acknowledge how intertwined we are and how the simple act of driving collectively adds up to create a crisis. Utilitarianism can call for change because it views climate change as a problem that requires a collective action-initiatives in which we should all be involved. Given the collectivist framing of driving culture in this thesis, I turn now to discuss virtue utilitarianism.

## CHAPTER THREE

### VIRTUOUS UTILITARIANISM

#### 3.1. Virtuous Utilitarianism

The Big Problem (the environmental crisis) concerns humanity as a whole. It is clear that personal actions can have public consequences and that we are members of a global community. While more can and should be done politically to alleviate the driving culture crisis, it would be highly inappropriate to excuse people from personal responsibility simply because it is believed that the government(s) should be doing more. The pertinent question to consider is as follows: What approach can we take to appropriately rethink our relationship with the environment and acknowledge the interconnectedness between human beings and the environment?

Here I answer this question by combining utilitarianism and virtue ethics. I contend that the answer to this question begins with our character. People's character plays a large part in societal issues. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill addresses the role of good moral character in promoting the greatest happiness. He establishes that utilitarians should grapple with how people should behave in order to cultivate the greatest good for the greatest number of people. When it comes to people's actions, which shapes their character, many believe that the actions of others should dictate their own behavior, and at times, it does. However, in regard to the environmental issues Jamieson claims that, "the best results will be produced by generally uncoupling my behavior from that of others. Thus, in this case and in this world, utilitarians should be virtue theorists."<sup>31</sup> Although we are communal beings and much about who we are is shaped by our membership in a community, it is still necessary that we cultivate our character such that we do not blindly follow communal

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<sup>31</sup> Schultz, *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life*, 167

norms in every situation. In other words, the point is that we should not allow the actions of others to prevent us from doing what is right. Strength of character is necessary to realize this ideal.

### 3.2. Virtue Theory

Put simply, virtue ethics focuses on character rather than on abstract principles or consequences. A person's character is, among other things, developed and molded through the adoption of virtues. Virtues, according to Aristotle, are the median of two extremes. For example, bravery is a virtue while cowardice and rashness are its corresponding vices. However, it is not enough to act bravely on one occasion to be considered brave. Rather, a virtue is a "trait of character manifested in habitual action" that is good for anyone to have.<sup>32</sup> To cultivate a life of virtue, one must first consistently and intentionally act in accordance with the virtues until they become habitual for them.

In virtue theory, adopting a specific virtue and ignoring the other virtues is not sufficient to be a virtuous person. Different virtues, like honesty, bravery, and kindness, must be used conjunctively and holistically for one to be virtuous. As stated above, virtue ethics does not have obsessed fidelity to abstract principles. To best understand this point, consider the virtue of honesty. Honesty is understood as telling the truth or, as some define it, as not lying. Does this mean that a virtuous person will never lie? Not necessarily. Honesty is one of several virtues that a virtuous person values. A virtuous may lie out of an attempt to be kind. They may lie in order to save a person's life. Again, it should be noted that virtue ethics does not get bogged down in concerns over abstract rules. This is the case because the primary question virtue ethicists ask is: What

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<sup>32</sup> Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 171

would a virtuous person do? The rough answer is that the virtuous person exercises practical rationality such that they do the right thing which is dependent upon being a certain kind of person as in having a certain kind of character.<sup>33</sup>

Now what does virtue ethics have to do with utilitarianism? Concerned with creating the best results for the greatest number of people, utilitarianism must discover a method to achieve this. How can one create the most good daily? Jamieson maintains that to produce the best consequences for society at large, people must identify certain virtues and act in accordance with them. He makes this move because he believes that when dealing with the Big Problem, many of the root issues stem from our attitudes toward nature and our presumed belief about our personal role in it. Consistent with this line of thinking, it follows that to better address the environmental crisis, our attitudes must shift, and this moral shift will happen with the help of virtues. From a different perspective, virtue ethics will provide individuals with the motivation that will enable them to overcome the feeling of helplessness, which often paralyzes people when confronted with the momentous issue of whether they should cease driving altogether.

Integrating virtue ethics within a utilitarian framework creates an interesting balance between the individual and the community. Here, the individual, when thinking about the community and wanting the best for the whole, must bear personal responsibility and act virtuously as an individual while still considering the consequences of their actions for the community at large. Therefore, when faced with the decision to walk or drive, the virtuous utilitarian must ask themselves what is virtuous and what will bring about the best result. For example, kindness is a type of virtue. On this view, a kind person should consider carbon emissions and those who will

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 176

be affected by them. As a result, a virtue utilitarian may choose to walk to decrease their carbon footprint even though most people may not do the same.

### 3.3. Green Virtues

As previously mentioned, there are many respected virtues, such as kindness, bravery, patience, etc. But when it comes to the environmental crisis, Jamieson focuses on different virtues, which he identifies as green virtues. These virtues are meant to help “regulate and coordinate behavior, express and contribute to the constitution of community” and help create “empathy, sympathy, and solidarity among moral agents.”<sup>34</sup> Jamieson proposed three terms to label green virtues: *Preservation*, *rehabilitation*, and *creation*. These categories are the lens through which we can frame our thinking and contemplate the action we should pursue. However, we must bear in mind that Jamieson calls for this mode to be adopted regardless of whether others are willing to adopt it.

A virtue that exemplifies preservation would be humility. This requires viewing other creatures as worthy of their habitat and safety. It also requires that we be humble in our perception of our place within the universe and the natural environment. A virtue under rehabilitation is temperance. Temperance requires recognizing that our current lifestyle is unsustainable and that we need to minimize the inadequate life choices regarding the environment, such as overconsumption and excessive driving. Lastly, mindfulness is a virtue related to creation. Mindfulness requires thinking about what went into product you're about to consume, and “taking on the moral weight of production and disposal.” The clothing consumer would make “herself

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<sup>34</sup> Schultz, *Utilitarianism as a Way of Life*, 170

responsible for the cultivation of cotton, the impacts of the dyeing process, the energy costs of transport, and so on.”<sup>35</sup> The virtue of mindfulness encapsulates much of the essence of green virtues. In other words, we should concern ourselves with matters regardless of their personal impact and whether others are concerned as well.

Many people’s current framework allows them to be passive and not take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The car consumer does not think about how their car was made, how the materials were acquired, how it got to the car lot, the car’s emissions, or where the car will go once it is scrapped.

The green virtues, those named and unnamed, all work together to enable conscientious citizens to pursue positive change and commit to doing what’s morally right. According to Schultz, “The picture of the green virtues has expanded to stress cooperativeness and an attitude of non-domination and respect toward nature.”<sup>36</sup> This picture includes virtues like cooperation and non-domination, which are most effective when people are humble.

Respect for nature requires mindfulness-deliberateness of focus- which should be augmented by devoting time to think about what is involved in respecting nature. Adopting green virtues requires an ideological shift in how one views one’s place within the world and how one should act based upon one’s awareness of one’s relation to the natural world. People will have to rethink what nature means to them through a green lens which requires an attitude of humility. From there, viewing ourselves as continuous with nature, viewing the environment as home, will hopefully motivate us to make everyday choices to be more temperate in our consumption. It is

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 172

possible to achieve this by viewing “nature as a partner in a valuable relationship.”<sup>37</sup> When this change occurs, people should become more mindful of the products they consume. Being mindful- being virtuous- is what it means to be a true utilitarian, being concerned about bringing about the best results for the most sentient beings.

Green virtues are novel because they provide a way to reshape our thinking in relation to the environment and by proxy, other people. These virtues call for consistency in people’s actions while not arbitrarily being concerned with strict adherence to rules. A central concern in this thesis is the relationship between the consideration of the individual versus the community; virtues facilitate respect for individuals and the community because they demand that one should be concerned with the impact of one’s action on the community. By marrying utilitarianism to virtue ethics as regards the environment, people have a specific way to focus and consider human and non-human entities. Virtues provide an approach to bringing about the best result for the greatest number of people. Green virtues manage to holistically view and interact with the individual and community, which includes nature.

For the necessary change to occur, there must be a lifestyle shift, being intentional and virtuous will help produce this shift. A theory that aligns with, and implicitly uses, green virtues is Deep Ecology, proposed by Arne Naess in 1973. He believed that the current understanding of humanity’s involvement with the environment and climate change was shallow and anthropocentric, focused on the consequences of climate change rather than the causes of it. He wanted our understanding of Earth to be deeper, hence Deep Ecology, focuses on a humbler relationship between humanity and nature.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid

Regarding our relationship with the Earth, Schultz writes, “the lifestyle, or outlook, provides the practical takeaways of the basic perspective of Deep Ecology, reflecting an emphasis on living lightly, bioregionalism, local ecosystems, and ecocentrism, which makes for a ‘deep’ sense of ecological justice rather than shallow anthropocentric approaches to sustainability.<sup>38</sup> When there is a hyperfocus on wealth and productivity, people forget the virtues of living lightly. From a utilitarian perspective, the need to live lightly can go unseen because the consequences of light living are often indirect. But due to globalization and our fragile ecosystem, the effects of light living are strong. By minimizing our impact on the environment and changing our daily living to be more sustainable and virtuous, the beneficial outcomes for the world will increase.

### 3.3. Objections

Some critics may remark that while the environment is a concern, one should not focus solely on the disadvantages of driving. Some advantages of driving are that the manufacturing of cars, and the industrial processes involved help create jobs and boost the economy. When cars were first introduced to America, “Factories needed workers to build cars. People worked in gas stations and repair shops... Roads and highways needed workers to build them...The car boosted the economy.”<sup>39</sup> According to this line of thinking, jobs provided by the production of cars support people’s livelihoods, and the benefits of a good economy will increase the total amount of pleasure for society as a whole. The integral nature of cars within modern society exists because of how

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 198

<sup>39</sup> Md Meraj, *When was the First Car Made in the United States*

beneficial driving is to people's lives and society at large. Calling for reform is to ask for an unreasonable choice to be made between the market and the environment.

My response to this criticism is twofold. First, I'd like to address the criticism regarding jobs, and then I will address the market. Foremost, the issue of driving and the environment is one regarding human lives. As discussed in the introduction, the production of cars, the pollution caused by driving, and driving itself kills and is killing people. The pollution from vehicles is sickening our most vulnerable populations, especially children and older adults. Many people are suffering from irreversible lung damage because of our current driving culture. The attempt to frame the issue at hand as between the market and the environment is disingenuous and reveals a framework that devalues the environment and the human relationship with it, as previously discussed. One can reframe the critics' position in light of humanity and nature's entwinedness and view the crisis as one between jobs and the survival of humankind and other sentient beings, rather than jobs and protecting the environment. Earth's degradation is humanity's degradation. From here, the question is whether we will choose jobs or humanity. The obvious choice between the two is humanity. Jobs are created to assist with human survival; humans were not created for the purpose of there being jobs. For example, people farm for food- human sustenance. If a job is not considered needed or wanted by humanity, people would not do it. The purpose of jobs is to serve humanity, as such, between the two, the ends, not the means, should be chosen. It is also important to note that there are other avenues to pursue to create jobs. It is possible that new technologies will facilitate the replacement of cars with environmentally friendly transportation.

As for the market, critics believe the government should not interfere and should allow businesses to operate as they see fit, Mill directly addresses the call for interference in *Principles of the Political Economy*. At his time, as well as now, many people favored a market in which

there was little if any government interference. The idea here is that businesses know best how to achieve their end goals, and that competition will inevitably result in the best products. This premise rests on the assumption that businesses can best select the means to achieve their goals. But Mill challenged this bold faith in the rationality and efficiency of the market. Mill questioned whether buyers are always the best judges of products. The clear answer is no. Now, Mill revisits the idea that businesses are best qualified to determine the most efficient business methods and products through a new lens. He explains that if the method or commodity is one that “society has much at stake, the balance of advantages may be in favor of some mode and degree of intervention, by the authorized representatives of the collective interest of the state.”<sup>40</sup> Just as buyers are not always the best judges of products, businesses are not always the best judges of methods. As such, strict adherence to the free market can be harmful when businesses make poor decisions and harm society at large.

One may argue that the market is often good indicator of worthy products, even if not always. While this is true, market demand is not always a good test for other important things, things that are not concerned with “ministering to inclinations, nor in serving the daily uses of life, and the want of which is least felt where the need is greatest.”<sup>41</sup> An appropriate example given by Mill is the things that help to raise people’s character. While market demand helps determine products that increase accessibility and convenience, it is not well-suited for creating more virtuous people. Cars prioritize convenience over people’s safety, wellness, and life. So, while I understand that the call for reform will interfere with the market and jobs, that is acceptable because reform will prioritize people’s lives and virtue over convenience.

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<sup>40</sup> Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*’ Book Five, (London: John W. Parker, West Strand), 77

<sup>41</sup> Ibid



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as the world becomes increasingly globalized, our frameworks for dealing with collective issues must change accordingly. Utilitarianism is an effective way to tackle problems and produce the greatest happiness for humankind as a whole.

Utilitarianism is especially effective when dealing with collective issues such as the environmental crisis which has been worsened by our current driving culture. Utilitarianism calls for the rethinking of humanity's place within nature. As we rethink humanity's role on Earth and address the crisis caused by our driving culture, we should, under the influence of utilitarianism and virtue theory, adopt green virtues. Living with virtues will help us be more considerate of the collective, resulting in greater overall happiness. Mill claimed noble character is necessary for societal happiness, and I believe virtues should be regarded as a staple within utilitarian life.

In relation to driving, green virtues should be adopted by individuals when they consider driving. We have to reshape the way we view driving. It is not merely an activity done out of convenience and to increase accessibility. It also has dire impacts on people due to injury and death, and it worsen our environment crisis. As such, this is not a call to stop driving entirely, as that is not feasible for many, but to remain aware and cognizant of how one's actions impact the whole. Green virtues are a call to refrain from excess and unnecessary driving, to walk when you can, carpool if possible, and to behave virtuously regarding mankind and Earth.

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