Dying of Consumption: Accidents or Sacrifices of Global Morality?

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Tales of the miracles of modern science could fill all of the world's cathedrals. Just four decades ago, to choose a random example, South African surgeon Christiaan Barnard performed the first human heart transplant on Louis Washkansky, turning the tragic death of 25-year old Denise Ann Darvall by a speeding car into what the December 1967 issue of Time magazine called her "great favor to humanity." 1 Who, meeting Mr. Washkansky days later, could dispute the wonders of our collective progress?

Yet, in a world where surgeons now routinely transplant hearts, on average 19 children under the age of five still die every minute from preventable and treatable causes—ticking to a grim total of over 10 million every year. Unhealthy environments aggravate illnesses that kill nearly half of these children each year. 2 Diarrhea alone kills more than one-and-a half million children a year. 3 Each year, millions of people also die violently: in 2000, there were over 800,000 suicides, 500,000 homicides and 300,000 deaths in wars. 4 The biggest cause of violent deaths, however, is the one behind Denise Darvall’s favor to humanity: traffic collisions, which kill over one million people a year.

Why, with so many medical and technical advances over the last few decades, do so many people still die prematurely? Is it genetic fate? Or bad luck? No doubt some of these deaths are beyond our control, a simple result of living. Far too often, though, the direct causes are from utterly unnecessary dangers—avoidable "accidents" or curable diseases. Why, it seems reasonable to inquire, are polities unable or unwilling to create safer environments for the world’s young? Is this not the moral duty of mature adults? Should this not transcend religion? Ethnicity? Nationality? Sovereignty?

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2. World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2002; and WHO 2002a. Also, see WHO (www.who.int) and UNICEF (www.unicef.org).
4. WHO 2002b, 10.

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The explanation for our collective failure, I think, lies not with the behavior of a few callous politicians and corporate executives. Such actions are mere symptoms of a system-wide failure. The explanation lies instead in the processes and structures of a globalizing political economy of ever-rising consumption. This economy feeds the luxuries of a wealthy minority by degrading the environments of the poor majority—making these environments unsafe and unhealthy. It disproportionately transfers the ecological costs and social risks to vulnerable peoples and places (including consuming resources essential for the wellbeing of future generations). And it justifies a world where global governance focuses on the needs of capitalism and national security rather than on the safety of those truly at risk of dying young. The result in practice is a global morality that treats the loss of millions of young people every year as little more than tragic accidents, inevitable, natural even, a Darwinian outcome of choice, circumstance, and, ultimately, economic growth. These consequences are, in a possibly blasphemous metaphor muddling the language of the past and present, the sacrifices to the gods of progress in an era of globalization. There is, however, a reason we call these consequences “accidents” rather than “sacrifices,” as such soft language helps avoid taking a hard look at the guts of global morality in an era of consumptive prosperity.

This ethical failure to protect the global youth is tied to our success in consuming more goods and services with less energy and time. The next two sections examine the economic and ecological consequences of this global consumptive prosperity. The following two sections extend this analysis with a brief examination of the history of the global political economy of traffic “accidents.”

Consumptive Prosperity

Recessions are a crisis, depressions a catastrophe. Just about every modern institution—polities, bureaucracies, corporations—toils to steer economies toward ever-more growth. The globalization of capitalism—a process that is integrating production, trade, investment and financing into a global market of lightning-quick opportunities—is further stimulating global growth. The numbers are impressive. Total global gross domestic product (GDP), in constant 1995 US dollars, climbed from just under US$8 trillion in 1960 to US$35 trillion in 2002 (a per capita increase of US$3000, from US$2,600 to US$5,600).5

Such growth means more of us are buying more of everything in our lifetimes. We respond to instincts for food and warmth, tools and playthings, ease and comforts. Advertisers, too, lodge desires for the smells and tastes and thrills of brands into our cultural psyches. Figures on private consumption expenditures—the amount households spend on goods and services—in the second half of the 20th century confirm the rising tide of consumption. The global total in 2000 was US$20 trillion, over 4 times higher than in 1960 (US$4.8 trillion).6

6. Worldwatch Institute 2004b. The global population, meanwhile, doubled over this time, from about 3 to 6 billion people.
Such spending stimulates economies and corporate profits. Economic growth, in turn, means better technologies, jobs and state services—all of which are essential for the stability and legitimacy of polities. Rising growth and consumption, in many respects, are the global measures of wellbeing.

For the top of the world’s population, new global markets mean more things and more choice. For others who live on less than US$2 per day, it can mean a slow climb out of grinding income-poverty. And for a select few, like the world’s 587 billionaires, new global markets bring palatial riches. Sam Walton epitomizes the potential to live a global American-dream. In 1992 when he died of cancer, just thirty years after opening his first Wal-Mart store in Arkansas in 1962, his retail empire—specializing in bulk sales of name-brands at low prices—was worth billions. Alive today, he would be worth twice as much as Bill Gates, the world’s richest man since the mid-1990s, whose net worth in 2004, according to Forbes, was US$53 billion. (Sam Walton left his fortune to his wife, Helen Walton, and four children—Alice, Jim, John and S. Robson—who, with US$20 billion each, ranked equal 6–10th on the 2004 Forbes’ list of the world’s richest.)

There is now a seemingly infinite mall of consumer products for the wealthy. One reason is the far more efficient production of commodities. Industrial workers can now produce as much in a week, according to the Worldwatch Institute, as 18th century workers did in four years. Steady progress in efficiency over the last 50 years has continued even in the most advanced economies. The Worldwatch Institute further calculates that 12 hours of work in the United States now produces as much as 40 hours did in 1950.

Such economic progress means many of us now live much longer, too. A century ago global life expectancy was just 30 years. Today the average person lives past 66. The average life expectancy, even in the United States, is now 30 years longer than it was a century ago. There are many reasons. Abundant food. Refrigeration. Pasteurization. Vaccines. Antibiotics. Safer technologies.

Dying Environments

Life today is undeniably better for many; but this fact conceals much, too. A glance at the distribution of consumption expenditures shows that the doors of the global mall of prosperity are shut to many of the world’s poor. Much of the global wealth is spent on indulgences: annual global expenditure on makeup is US$18 billion, perfume US$15 billion, ocean cruises US$14 billion. North America and Western Europe, with just under 12 percent of the world’s popula-

7. The average annual incomes in developing countries in real terms (constant 1995 US$) increased by 13 percent in Africa, 35 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 72 percent in the Asia-Pacific from 1972–99. See UNEP 2002.
8. The number of billionaires is from the 2004 Forbes list of the world’s richest people. See www.forbes.com/2004/02/26/ce_lk_0226mainintrobill04.html.
tion, account for just over 60 percent of total private consumption expenditures. South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, in comparison, with a third of the world’s population, account for a mere 3.2 percent of total private consumption expenditures.\(^{12}\)

Why do such acute inequalities persist? The principle of sovereignty is partly to blame. It fragments humanity into nation-states, empowering some with great opportunities to become super-rich, others with great opportunities to become destitute. Economic globalization within this system is a force of change that too often serves the interests of the few with power and money rather than the many in hardship. It justifies a political ethic where state security, steady growth and multinational profits trump concerns for the health of particular individuals, future generations or the global environment.

In such a world it is exceedingly difficult for governments—let alone consumers—to evaluate or control the ecological and social effects of extracting natural resources and producing goods. Importing states, moreover, are often not held responsible for these socio-ecological effects, as these lie well outside of their sovereign territory. Such a political economy of consumption casts ecological shadows across the planet as long and complex trade chains disperse ecological harms disproportionately into poorer and less powerful regions.\(^{13}\)

Globalization is lengthening the distance between consumption and consequences, making it harder and harder to sense and manage how our individual and collective actions spill into faraway lands and future generations.\(^{14}\) There are now ecological shadows everywhere. When Europeans buy shirts made in China. When Hyundai manufactures cars in Thailand. When Australians drive to work. When Wal-Mart hires illegal migrants to mop the floors. When Mitsubishi Corporation finances logging in the tropics. It is increasingly hard, indeed often impossible, for caring people to perceive or manage the consequences of their behavior. In the global sea of cause-and-effect, moreover, one person’s consumption has no measurable consequence, a raindrop in a typhoon. There is naturally no legal or moral culpability. Decent people lose any sense of ethical responsibility for consumption. “Good” governments serve the desires of people within, and suppress and exploit those outside of its borders. “Good” global institutions protect the rights of all countries to develop—which far too often translates into the interests of rich states and multinational firms.

Such a global political economy of consumption is spinning the planet into a full-blown ecological crisis.\(^{15}\) Half of the world’s forests are now gone.

\(^{12}\) Worldwatch Institute 2004b.
\(^{13}\) The United States, for example, with 4.5 percent of the global population, accounts for about a quarter of global carbon dioxide emissions. On the concept of ecological shadows, see Dauvergne 1997.
\(^{14}\) See Princen, Maniates, and Conca 2002.
\(^{15}\) This section only touched on the many complexities of the global political economy of consumption. For elaboration, see, for example, Lichtenberg 1998; Luban 1998; Schor 2000; Maniates 2001, 2002; Conca 2001; Princen 2001, 2002; Manno 2002; Clapp 2002; Tucker 2002; Helleiner 2002; and Fuchs 2002.
About three-quarters of global fish stocks are at or beyond their biological limits.\textsuperscript{16} Over 1000 animal and plant species have gone extinct since 1600 (a conservative estimate based on recorded extinctions). This extinction rate, assuming the average lifespan of these species is 5–10 million years, is 50–100 times higher than natural rates. Around 1.3 billion people live without an adequate supply of safe water; 2 billion without proper sanitation. About one-third of humanity subsist on lands with moderate or severe water stress—a figure that could rise to two-thirds by 2025.\textsuperscript{17}

Climate change is perhaps the greatest ecological threat of current global consumption patterns. The Earth’s average surface temperature, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), has increased by around 0.6 degrees Celsius in the last 100 years—quite likely the greatest rise of any century over the last millennium. The problem seems to be worsening, with the 1990s as the warmest decade and 1998 the warmest year of the twentieth century. By the end of the twenty-first century, the IPCC predicts that the global average surface temperature could rise another 1.4–5.8 degrees Celsius from the 1990 average, the quickest rate of change for at least the last 10,000 years. Ocean levels, too, are rising—the global average increase in the twentieth century was 10–20 centimeters. The IPCC predicts that the global mean sea level could rise over the next century by as much as 77 centimeters above the 1990-level.\textsuperscript{18}

This global ecological crisis in turn is exacerbating inequalities and injustices even as aggregate global wealth rises. Billions of people still live in unhealthy and perilous environments. HIV, discovered just two decades ago, now infects about 40 million people. AIDS kills at least 3 million every year—more than half-a-million are children under 15 years old. Of these, more than two-thirds live in sub-Saharan Africa, where in countries like Botswana, Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, average life expectancy at birth has fallen below 40 years after having reached much higher levels in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{19} There are many equally tragic figures on the global inequality of death as well. For example, in a world with too much food, where rising obesity rates is the latest crisis in North America and Europe, over 800 million people suffer from chronic malnutrition, contributing to 60 percent of all childhood deaths.

This does not mean individuals and governments are doing nothing. There are countless local and national initiatives. There are hundreds of international agreements. At the same time, however, consumption continues to rise and the global environment continues to deteriorate. This trend suggests a profound failure with the global compromise of sustainable development: a failure, especially to confront the “accidental” consequences of consumption. The history of what we call traffic accidents vividly illustrates this failure.

\textsuperscript{16} Worldwatch Institute 2004c.
\textsuperscript{17} World Bank 1998, 82, 84.
\textsuperscript{18} IPCC 2001, chapter 11.
The Road Tolls

Bridget Driscoll was the first to die, on a muggy August afternoon in 1896 in front of London’s Crystal Palace, from a fate that now kills over 3000 people every day. She was 44. Indeed, a long life for the time, but this in no way consoled her daughter, May Driscoll, who was at her mother’s side as Arthur Edsall ran her down in a demonstration “motor-car.” Within moments Dr. Charles Edwin Raddock rushed out of the Crystal Palace. But it was too late. Her brain was “protruding.”

The inquest into Mrs. Driscoll’s death was teeming with barristers and solicitors. A Mr. Kimber and a Mr. Gillman for the Crystal Palace Company. A Mr. Barker for the driver and the Anglo-French Motor Car Company. A Mr. Hood for the relatives of Mrs. Driscoll. So many legal experts did not seem to create clarity. How fast was the car going? One bystander, the domestic servant Florence Ashmore, testified it was speeding as fast as a fire engine or a good galloping horse. Another witness, William James Wood, who inspected the car afterwards, testified it could not exceed a speed of 4 and a half miles an hour. Edmund Gascoigne, the manager of the Anglo-French Motor Car Company, testified it was not even able to exceed 9 miles an hour, although over a year earlier the Birmingham Daily Gazette reported that Gascoigne’s cars could average 14–16 miles per hour and could reach speeds of 22 miles per hour. Edsall testified that a low-speed belt on the car prevented it from exceeding 4 miles an hour—moreover, he wasn’t even sure how Mrs. Driscoll was knocked over, claiming the car stopped 2–3 inches from her body. The doctor who examined the body, however, felt the car must have struck her “very severely.”

There were other uncertainties as well. Was Edsall reckless, zigzagging, swerving to the right, perhaps racing to pass the two cars just ahead? The daughter, May Driscoll, thought so, testifying that Edsall (who was in his early twenties) did not seem to know how to drive. The passenger in the motor-car, Alice Standing, testified that he swerved to the right. Edsall denied this, claiming he was following a car 20 yards ahead, and not attempting to pass. Did Mrs. Driscoll step into the path of the car, confused, rattled, in the words of the witness Florence Ashmore, by her own efforts at “dodging”? Ashmore thought so. So did Edsall. Did Edsall shout out and ring the car bell? He swore he did. The passenger and the daughter both testified that no bell rang. The daughter, too, did not hear a shout, although the passenger testified Edsall yelled, “Stand back!”

The jury for the inquest, wading through this seemingly contradictory evidence, faced some tough questions. Did Arthur Edsall kill her? Was he at fault? The coroner, Percy Morrison, did not see much ambiguity and instructed the jury that they could “come to no other conclusion than the car was properly driven, straight and slowly.” The jury after 6 hours returned a verdict of “accidental death.”

The coroner has gone down in history as saying he hoped “such a thing would never happen again.” Yet today this first “accidental death” repeats itself with the regularity of a drumbeat. It is, as with Driscoll’s inquest, difficult, often impossible, to assign blame. Sometimes we do. A drunk driver. A teenager at 3 times the speed limit. A distracted father running a red-light with a backseat full of children. But often it is a cocktail of hazy blame and bad luck. What we continue to this day to call accidents.

Why do we accept so many traffic accidents? Since Bridget Driscoll, at least 30 million, and perhaps two or three times this number, have died in traffic collisions. There have been great advances in the safety of cars for drivers and passengers. Still, each year, according to a 2004 report by the World Health Organization and World Bank, traffic collisions injure as many as 50 million and kill nearly 1.2 million. Even in the most advanced economies, like the United States, traffic collisions kill over 40,000 people every year, making it the leading cause of death for people under the age of thirty-five. These personal tragedies come with high economic costs for societies. Traffic collisions typically cost 1–3 percent of a state’s gross national product: globally, about US$518 billion per year. Of this, US$100 billion is in developing states—about twice total annual development assistance.

The number of traffic deaths is growing steadily. In 2002, traffic collisions were the 11th leading cause of death, accounting for over two percent of global deaths. The WHO and World Bank predict the number of annual deaths from traffic collisions will exceed 2 million by 2020. The young suffer the most. Traffic collisions in 2002 were the 2nd biggest cause of death of people aged 5–29. There are, inevitably, causes of these deaths. Some relate to individual mistakes. But many relate to national and global politics, and the ways political and social choices create, reinforce and reflect our fears.

Fear and the Reality of Road Risks

Many live in fear of what are often improbable, implausible or even harmless possibilities. Terrorists. Sharks. Spiders. Snakes. Yet, as many a child loves to gush, more die each year from falling coconuts than shark attacks. Most, on the other hand, do not fear the consequences of everyday activities, like walking to the grocery store or driving the kids to school. Nearly everyone is remarkably complacent about the risk of injury or death in a car.

Yet the risk is in fact high. There is, even in the First World, a one percent chance of death and a 30 percent chance of injury in an average person’s life-

21. This comment is in numerous encyclopedias. It is, however, “probably apocryphal.” Hamer 1996, 14.
23. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, report to the UN General Assembly, summarized in Kapp 2003, 1125.
time. Imagine, one day, that a Boeing 747 crashes in the United States, killing 135 people. Imagine the same day another Boeing 747 goes down somewhere in the European Union, killing another 135. Now imagine Boeing 747s begin crashing, like clockwork, every hour all day long—a few over the Pacific and Atlantic, a few into mountainsides, the rest into everyday neighborhoods—that day killing 3240 and injuring as many as 137,000 people. Finally, imagine this continues every day all year long. The technology would seem suicidal. No rational frequent flyer would ever fly again. Yet these are the global figures for traffic for 2002.

The reaction of American travelers to the 9-11 hijackings shows the often perverse choices regarding safety. The number of air travelers in the United States fell sharply in the months afterwards. Many seemed to take to the roads instead, as there was an increase in the volume of traffic. Yet this was a more dangerous option for many. Gerd Gigerenzer of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development estimates that in the first 3 months after September 11, 2001, about 350 people presumably trying to avoid flying, died in traffic collisions in the United States. (The total number of passengers and crew on the hijacked flights was 266.)

A reasonable parent might look at these risks and decide to never allow their kids to ride in a car. But it is not so simple. Pedestrians are at great risk even in the wealthiest states. Children are often safer inside a car than on a bike or on foot. According to Ian Roberts of the Institute of Child Health, children in families without a car in the UK, for example, are twice as likely to be injured as pedestrians. The safest measure, tellingly, is to never allow children outside—a parental decision that authorities would no doubt see as a sign of some sort of mental illness.

There are, as with the general patterns of global consumption, great inequalities in the mortality rates of traffic. Ninety-six percent of the children killed in traffic collisions are in low- and middle income countries. In these countries, 30–86 percent of all trauma admissions relate to traffic injuries.

There is, on the other hand, some good statistical news for drivers and passengers in wealthy states. In Australia, for example, the rate of traffic deaths fell from 30 per 100,000 in 1970 to 9 per 100,000 in 2000. From 1975–98, traffic fatalities fell 27.4 percent in the United States and 24.5 percent in Japan per 10,000 in the population. Yet at the same time automobile and motorcycle exports from these same states contributed to a rise in traffic deaths in developing countries. In Malaysia, traffic fatalities jumped over this period by 44.3 percent per 10,000; in India it rose 79.3 percent per 10,000; in mainland China it rose 243.0 percent per 10,000. These countries simply do not have the safety mea-

sures or road systems to cope with the increase in traffic. The developing world as a result, with just 20 percent of the globe’s cars, accounts for 80 percent of the deaths, according to Dr. Etienne Krug of the World Health Organization.29

A look at traffic in China is revealing. In 2003 there were 104,000 traffic fatalities in China, almost two-and-half times more than in the US even though there are far fewer vehicles.30 This number appears set to continue to rise as the number of vehicles on the roads is exploding. In Beijing alone there was an increase of over 400,000 vehicles in 2003 (a 25 percent increase). The road toll is horrific. The gruesome question on a recent driving test is revealing: “If you come upon an accident and find a motorist lying unconscious on the road, and if that person’s internal organs are also lying on the road, should you pick up the organs and put them back inside the person?”31

The future looks equally bad for other developing countries. While the WHO and World Bank predict a nearly 30 percent decline in traffic deaths in high-income states by 2020, the number of deaths over this time in low- and middle-income states is projected to rise by over 80 percent.32

Traffic is killing more than just people.33 The products of the global auto industry already account for nearly half of global oil consumption.34 There are now over 800 million registered passenger cars and commercial vehicles.35 And the number of vehicles is rising steadily. Manufacturers produce about 60 million light vehicles (passenger cars, station wagons, and light commercial vehicles under 6 tonnes) annually—an increase of 3 million from 2000.36 Sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and other light trucks comprise an increasing share of this global total and, if trends continue, these will comprise half of the world’s passenger vehicles by 2030.37

All of these vehicles emit carbon dioxide, the main climate change gas. As well, they spew nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide and particulates into the air, contributing to acid rain. The SUVs and other light trucks, however, are particularly bad for the environment. The 2001 models sold in the United States, for example, emit “2.4 times more smog-forming pollutants and 1.4 times more climate-altering carbon than passenger cars.”38 These vehicles are also, accord-

33. Paterson 2000 provides an insightful critique of the global environmental politics of cars.
37. Worldwatch Institute 2004a, 6.
38. Worldwatch Institute 2004a, 6.
ing to geographer Andrew Goudie, scarring deserts and stirring up dust: what he imaginatively calls “toyota-ization” as so many of the four-wheel drives in places like North Africa are Toyota Land Cruisers. Toyota-ization combines with deforestation and desertification to increase the frequency and intensity of dust storms—in Saharan Africa, for example, analysis of satellite images shows a ten-fold increase in dust storms over the last half-century. Such storms are contributing to as much as three thousand million tonnes of dust blowing into the atmosphere every year, disrupting climate patterns as well as destroying coral reefs.39

Automobile production also consumes a significant share of global resources. The global auto industry uses almost half of the world’s annual rubber output, 25 percent of the glass and 15 percent of the steel.40 Roads, too, consume vast resources, including petroleum in the asphalt. Paving also disrupts the natural hydrologic cycle, contributing to flooding and the loss of groundwater supplies.41

Let’s return now to Bridget Driscoll’s inquest. Picture, for a silly moment, Arthur Edsall driving, in the words of the coroner, “properly . . . straight and slowly,” over 1.2 million British mothers, tilting the planet toward ecological chaos in the process. Would, in this farcical world, the jury return a verdict of “accidental death?” The global community, with no global plan to tackle the socio-ecological impacts of traffic, in effect, is doing just that. The global jury of states is assigning no blame, no ethical responsibility, dismissing these deaths as mere accidents in the quest for global prosperity.

**A Moral Consumptive Order**

Our collective intelligence can fail us spectacularly. It can draw us into black holes, leave us with stockpiles of nuclear weapons, with the capacity to obliterate humanity. It, too, can create socioeconomic systems so complex, with so many crisscrossing circuits, so many paths of causality, so much white noise, that polities struggle mightily to control them. There is little responsibility in such systems. Even less morality. It is as if the sheer complexity gives it an existence beyond human control. Policymakers rarely, if ever, deal seriously with the consequences for the wellbeing of individuals. The global political economy of consumption is one such human construct.

There is a fatalism and acquiescence of societies to the accidents of consumption even after conclusive proof of harm. States often seem impotent in the face of pressure from citizens, markets, firms, global institutions and other states for ever-higher growth and ever-more consumption. The freedom to consume defines the institutional reactions from the local to the global. Let markets decide: defining a product as illegal, even a deadly one like tobacco, should al-

41. Freund and Martin 1993, 27.
ways be a last resort. Individuals, too, become fatalistic and pessimistic about the side-effects of consumption. “What can be done?” “It is natural.” “A risk of living.” “Not my problem.” “The accidents of life happen to others, not me, not my family.”

Somewhere, a critic is no doubt lambasting: “Is there no individual responsibility?” Certainly some will always perish in the muck of their own choices. This is inescapable in any good and free society. This does not, however, absolve polities from the moral duty to ensure safe and healthy environments for current and future generations of young people everywhere. Without this, we will continue to sacrifice humanity’s children. Without this, we cannot tackle global ecological decline or gross inequalities. Moving toward safer and healthier environments will require polities to deal with the consequences of consumption with more than sporadic education and fundraising campaigns. It will require more than the goodwill of volunteers and activists. Recycling. Donating. Inventing. Campaigns against drunk driving. These can all help. Yet ultimately, achieving this moral duty will require policymakers to challenge the compromise of sustainable development to focus more on ethics and less on macroeconomics and national security, striving for a more humane global political economy of consumption that respects the health of ordinary people as well as the far from ordinary planet Earth.

References


