

To: Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners
From: Prof Adrian Davis, TRI, Edinburgh Napier University
Date: 26th April 2019
Subject: Essential Evidence 4 Scotland No 8 Ethics and road safety

Top line: In ethical considerations of road safety “freedom from” is at least as important as the ‘freedom to’ yet the reality of lived experiences is that the dominance of “freedom to” place vulnerable road users at particular risk and that this is unethical.

The traditional view of responsibility for traffic safety is closely attached to the notion that safety is about individuals driving safely and that accidents are caused by drivers. While this is true to some extent, the emerging view that a major role can and should be played by institutions, for example governments and vehicle-producing companies, is useful and reasonable. The implied notion is that responsibility has to be distributed and shared between different actors if a safer traffic environment is to be achieved. And here we have the notion of road safety as reflected in Vision Zero, as established first in 1997 in Sweden and similar approaches which now align under the heading of Safe Systems Road Safety. Such approaches emanate from an ethical stance that loss of life and serious injury is no longer to be tolerated.

Yet ethical issues have largely been ignored.¹ Falhquist provides a relatively rare exploration of ethics and road safety, and states that “ethical aspects of road traffic have not received the philosophical attention they deserve [yet] a continual ethical discussion concerning road traffic is needed.”² She also notes that people in industrialised societies are so used to road traffic that it is almost seen as part of nature. “Consequently, we do not acknowledge that we can introduce change and that we can affect the role we have given road traffic and cars. By acknowledging the ethical aspects of road traffic and illuminating the way the choices society makes are ethically charged, it becomes clear that there are alternative ways to design the road traffic system.”

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a major contributor to the issue of rights and freedom and this is captured in his Universal Principle of Right. This is the application of the fundamental command of morality to the case in which one person’s external use of his/her freedom, that is, her/his action in furtherance of some end (s)he has chosen, can constrain the external use of the freedom of others, that is, their freedom of action. This principle simply commands that in such cases each limit the use of her/his own freedom to a level that is compatible with the equal use of freedom by all, but only to that level.³ What does freedom “from” mean in the context of social and political systems? A key expression of this freedom can be found in [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).⁴ The Declaration states in its preamble that “freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.” In the context of road safety Falhquist notes that children, young adults and the elderly are disproportionately exposed to the risk of being injured or killed in a road crash, especially if they are pedestrians. Pedestrians and cyclists are generally exposed to a greater risk than car drivers. Intuitively, there appears to be a morally relevant difference between different groups of road users.

¹ Evans, L. 2008. Death in traffic. *Studies in Ethics, Law, and Technology*, 2(1). DOI: 10.2202/1941-6008.1014

² Falhquist, J. 2008. Saving lives in road traffic – ethical aspects, *Journal of Public Health*, 17: 385-394.

³ Kuyler, P. 2018. Principles of Justice, Primary Goods and Categories of Right: Rawls and Kant, *Kantian Review*, 23, 4, 581–613 doi:10.1017/S1369415418000419 governments to promote its own agenda.

⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> accessed 24th April 2019.