

Response to the Hagerty magazine's May/June 2018 issue on self-driving cars.

Dear Hagerty's magazine editors,

I was deeply disappointed by the attempt in your last issue to effectively "cheer up" the collector car community over the "inevitability" of self-driving cars. As I see it, your experts conceded matters that are anything but certain and overlooked the critical role that driving enthusiasts can play in shaping this evolving technology.

Recently, I was driving on a two lane road when I spotted a sequence of slow moving dump trucks spaced a few car lengths apart. Immediately, I started to plan how I would move past this series of obstacles. Sadly, other drivers were not so observant. Some would come up to a dump truck, pass it, only to move back into the slow lane until they reached the next dump truck.

Skillful drivers approach driving in a manner analogous to modern fighter pilot tracking multiple targets simultaneously. Having dabbled in artificial intelligence as part of my PhD, I'm confident that AI is up to the higher planning skills I demonstrated in passing those dump trucks. It is also clear that the present generation of self-driving systems lack this sort of higher level strategic maneuvering. We all should be asking ourselves - why not? If we are going to have self-driving cars, shouldn't they emulate the skills of our best human drivers instead of the worst?

Self-driving vehicles came out of the blue from a myriad of secretive companies and have been dumped on the public as black boxes we must accept. Any reasonable person should be up in arms of this affront to public safety and driving enthusiasts should be leading the charge. Human beings are not permitted to drive without first passing tests. Why are machines not also required to demonstrate competence through meeting a set of safety and performance standards - standards that must be open to public scrutiny! Until now, the claim has been this technology is still in development. Yet lives are already being lost. How many more must die before we say no to being used as guinea pigs for this sort of development?

When such objections are raised, the industry chafes that it needs freedom from regulation in order to innovate. However, this demonstrates the lack of worldliness and commitment to public safety. In the 1950s, recreational scuba diving was threatened with government relation. Instead, the scuba industry set up its own agencies to come up with safe equipment standards and teach the public how to dive. This self-regulation has a commendable safety record and is a sterling example of how an industry can police itself to maintain public safety. As driving enthusiasts, we need to appeal to the press and public for changes in the way the self-driving industry conducts business and threaten them with government regulation if they don't clean up their act.

As some of your columnists pointed out, there will be a period when self-driving cars will have to cope with human drivers. If this technology must be developed anyway, precisely why should human drivers ever be banished from the roads? It is true that incompetent drivers are a hazard to the public, but anyone passionate enough to drive classic and collector cars should be prepared

to drive skillfully, cautiously, and courteously such that he/she can peacefully coexist with self-driving cars. Perhaps human drivers should be required to pass much more rigorous driving and health checks, but there no reason whatsoever for human drivers to be completely banned for our roads. There are those who prefer the freedom of not driving. Nonetheless, such people have absolutely no right to impose their preferences on the rest of the driving public. This is a right for which driving enthusiasts can and absolutely should fight for.

In many respects, the high-tech industry has selfishly interfered in the affairs of the general public in a way that make the robbery barons of the last century seem virtuous. When Henry Ford mass produced his Model-T, he didn't seek law banning the horse and buggy. At issue isn't simply what the future will look like, but whether or not government should be used impose the preferences of a few upon all of us.

The geeks like to think of themselves as a kind of high-tech super-hero, but in truth they are very narrowly specialized technocrats with a very poor understanding of how human civilization came about. Technology like social media has experts expressing alarm for having effects as extreme as increased depression and bullying. At issue is the extent geeks manufacture their own future for themselves alone. Effectively they have "sold their souls to the digital cloud." They cannot be expected to look at their creations critically. Moreover, while they may claim that their creations are neutral technologies that the public can freely choose to use or not, this simply isn't honest. Facebook doesn't make any money when we drive our classics. However, Facebook does make money on any activities involving our classics that we choose to do on Facebook. This new generation of monopolistic trusts is trying to do something that never happened 100 years ago: attempting to influence how we spend our time in order to make a profit. The apparent impatience to bring forth self-driving cars now has a sinister motive - to free up commuting time so that people could spend even more time on social media.

It is clear that no one should accept the purported benign intentions of high-tech companies. More importantly, we simply cannot allow a group of narrow-minded technocrats chart a future for humanity simply because they were able to come up with this or that technology.

The problems we face are ultimately extremely complex and will require tapping into the depths of human wisdom, not merely the technical wizardry of silicon and software. My PhD sought to unify two different theories of how learning occurs. One focused on the interactions of learners with physical objects. The other focused on social interactions between learners. In order to tackle this daunting task, I turned to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Martin Heidegger could be thought of as an egg-head in his own right, but one of his most profound insights came to him while he pondered how one drives a nail with hammer. From that insight came a new view of how humans encounter anything which challenges conventional science and challenges us as to how we should live out our lives.

Heidegger ultimately comes up with the very radical notion that humans are less biological entities than we are the nexus of relationships we possess. As the hammering example makes clear, Heidegger doesn't simply mean our relationships with people, but with things as well. All

this was critical to my research because it involved trying to understand how people learn to scuba dive. There are few pastime which are so dependent on technology, and yet, require a supportive community in order to cope with the fears and challenges of actually functioning under water. Scuba diving, like collecting and driving automobiles, is a realm where the physical technology and social relationships mesh in a way that cannot be separated from one another. Neither can be simply shunted into a virtual world without losing the experiences that make all the hardships worthwhile. There are many human activities that involve “getting our hands dirty” in a way virtual technology cannot hold a candle to. What do we lose when we replace the “hand’s on” experiences of living in the world with a sanitized virtual one? At issue here isn’t simply the freedom to drive, but all those physical experiences that geeks are all too eager to discard. Having worked in this industry, it is clear to me that their eagerness has already started to come back to haunt them.

Heidegger is one of those few philosophers who started with the question of what exists in the universe and gets all the way to proposing a philosophy for how human should live out their lives. For profoundly complicated reasons, Heidegger proposes that we must seek to live out an authentic existence moving forward from the present but nonetheless consistent with the customs and traditions of our past. It is that harmony that will permit us to make the most of our lives - it is all we have to turn to in Heidegger’s secular view of the world. The automobile is just one institution that has made our lives possible for over a century. Those of us who are passionate about cars are in part because of the contribution cars have made to our lives. In my case, I am passionate about the Buick wagon my parent bought in 1968 and I grew up in. It is also the very same car that drove to all those dive classes during my research and is even featured in my PhD. I’m not willing to let this car die or have her banished from the roads she has traveled for decades. In this case it is about cars, but the argument is much deeper than that. It is time that as a society we ask ourselves: when should virtual reality replace physical experiences and who should decide? The time has come to push back against the high tech companies who have way more technology than they have the wisdom to use it properly. This isn’t simply an argument to save our cars, it is nothing less than an argument for saving what makes us truly human.

Sincerely,

Edouard Lagache