

Case 3 ♦ Should Google Be Your Designated Driver?

One of the advantages of mass public transportation is that it takes one's mind off the road and allows it to do other things: listen to music, read the newspaper, talk on the phone, catch up with websites online, read a book, or just space out and get some much needed rest. Unfortunately, these activities are almost uniformly very dangerous things to do while driving a car. So, in places without mass transportation, commuters lose millions of hours everyday to minding the road in their automobiles.

Enter the idea of an "autonomous car". Companies like Google, Toyota, Nissan, Mercedes and others have been pioneering technology that would take the chore of driving away from people who want to free up some time for the sports section in the morning or to readjust their makeup on the way to the club at night. While the technology looked daunting at first, recent autonomous cars run complicated algorithms that can detect cars around them, adjust to changing road and weather patterns, and signal before braking for a turn. The technology is more feasible now, and with big tech startups behind it, it only promises to get better and safer in the future.

There is a problem with these cars, however. They may be *too* good at driving. In fact, tests currently being run by autonomous car makers suggest that they may be considerably better at keeping up with traffic and avoiding accidents than actual human drivers. Google's self-driving car recently logged its 300,000th mile without an accident.¹ Americans like to drive. But let's face it: we're pretty bad at it. According to the United States Census Bureau, there were 10.8 million auto wrecks in the United States in 2009, with 35,900 deaths.² Autonomous cars can do things people just can't, like keeping an eye on all four sides of the car and road conditions underneath the car at all times without getting tired. They correctly anticipate passing times and turning radiuses and never take foolish risks. Plus, unlike human drivers, they never age, tire, drink to excess, get distracted by music, incoming texts, or billboards, or get carried away by that car which totally cut you off in traffic two miles ago.

This leads to an interesting question: if autonomous cars get to the point where they are objectively safer than human drivers in almost all instances, should regular people be allowed to drive at all anymore? A commuting public that never wrecks, gets distracted, or experiences road rage would be a tremendous boon to society. A right to drive isn't explicitly spelled out in the United States Constitution. But even given the quantifiable safety benefits, time benefits, and sanity benefits, some auto-enthusiasts may declare that you'd have to pry the gas and brake pedals from their cold, lead feet.

Case from the 2013 Regional Ethics Bowl. Copyright, Association for Practical and Professional Ethics.

<http://apeonline.com/ethics-bowl/regional-ethics-bowl/>

¹ Rebecca Rosen, "Google's Self-Driving Cars: 300,000 Miles Logged, Not a Single Accident Under Computer Control," The Atlantic, August 9, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/08/googles-self-driving-cars-300-000-miles-logged-not-a-single-accident-undercomputer-control/260926/>

² "Motor Vehicle Accidents—Number and Deaths: 1990 to 2009," U.S. Census Bureau, August 5, 2013, <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s1103.pdf>