Next Generation Transportation

Self-driving is coming faster than you think. High school kids count down the days until they can drive. What if that day never comes? In the coming years, self-driving vehicles should not be the way we get around. Yes, many people believe that there are positive aspects of a self-driving future, such as removing the stress of commuting and giving mobility to people who can’t drive. But driving is a right of passage that high school students nationwide may never be able to experience if self-driving becomes the way we travel. If self-driving becomes the way of the future, many problems will emerge surrounding the transition between conventional driving and self-driving. More importantly, self-driving cars will be responsible for making ethical decisions for us. In addition, technology doesn’t always work as intended, and bugs may create unexpected issues. Finally, driving is fun and we don’t want to give it up.

There are five different levels of self-driving technology acknowledged by the NHTSA, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. A vehicle classified as level 0 has no self-driving technology, while a level 4 vehicle is fully autonomous. For purposes of my argument, when I refer to a self-driving car, I’m referring to a level 4 classified vehicle.

As we consider some of these level 4 classified vehicles, one of the main challenges will be the difficult and dangerous transition between the kind of driving we know today and a self-driving future. Unlike Dagen H, the day when Sweden changed the side of the road they drive on, which was a seamless transition, this transition will be difficult. At the beginning there will be both human-piloted and vehicle-piloted cars on the road at the same time. This can lead to problems down the road because computers could mis-sense a human’s impending actions leading to an accident.
Another issue that surrounds self-driving vehicles is the issue of ethics. Imagine a crash is about to occur. You are in a self-driving vehicle about to rear end a semi-truck. The only way to stop the crash from happening would be for the car to swerve into a biker in the next lane over. Should the car protect you and injure the biker or protect the biker and injure you? The ethical problem here is that somebody behind a computer has made the decision to potentially endanger someone’s life. Currently, if you were put into this scenario behind the wheel of a conventional car, then the decision would be an instinctive reflex, instead of a predetermined outcome programed by someone hundreds of miles away. Is it right for us to let these programers make life-threatening decisions on our behalf? The people at Mercedes have said they will always protect the occupant of the vehicle, even if means killing a pedestrian (Mercedes-Benz’s Self-Driving Cars Would Choose Passenger Lives Over Bystanders, Morris). Is it okay? Is it enough to slam the breaks on self-driving projects?

Another reason self-driving cars should not be the way of the future is because they are controlled by technology, which has many imperfections. Being behind the wheel of one massive device should spark some concern that problems and bugs will occur. And it has. Take Uber self-driving car prototypes, which have been on the road in Pittsburgh since August 2016 (Uber’s First Self-Driving Fleet Arrives in Pittsburgh This Month, Chafkin). Already some of these vehicles are having some problems, some big enough to be called “fails,” where the driver needs to take over control of the vehicle. An article from Business Insider gives insight into what happens when this so-called fail occurs, “I was driving on a perfectly straight back road, … without any cars when I heard a ding indicating the car wasn’t driving itself anymore” (I was behind the wheel when a self-driving Uber failed — here’s what happens, Muoio). We can’t have cars that will get confused on empty
straight roads. If they can’t do their job in this optimal condition, then how can we trust them to handle the driving on busy winding roads? Another example of technology not being perfect comes from a crash that occurred in a Tesla while on Autopilot. This crash occurred in Florida and killed a 40-year-old man. “Brown’s car was on autopilot when his car ran into a semi-truck on the road. Both Brown and the car's driverless technology failed to detect the white side of the tractor-trailer against a brightly lit sky, so the brake wasn't activated…” (Tesla self-driving car fails to detect truck in fatal crash, Castro). Once again, we cannot have cars on our roads that are unable to detect large objects such as a semi-truck’s tractor-trailer. This crash occurred in a vehicle where there was a way for the occupant to avoid the collision, but in the self-driving cars of the future, there will be no way to manually drive whether or not you think the car is not making the right decision. These technologically driven issues should be red flags to the self-driving movement, and should put all projects to a halt.

A fourth and final problem with self-driving cars is that they take away all the fun in driving. For starters, motorsport as we know it will completely change. Instead of what it is now, driver vs. driver, in a race to see who is a better driver, motorsport would become who can program their car better than other programers, not drivers. It would just be boring, unexciting, uneventful: a car lover’s version of hell. Not only the lack in motorsport but also the thrill in driving would be taken away. In a self-driving vehicle there would be no more putting your foot down to experience your car’s full potential, a feeling that makes most people feel fantastic. I’ve been waiting my entire life to experience this feeling, and I’m not ready to give up that opportunity to cars that navigate on their own. It isn’t right that this excitement should be taken away from us, it should be reason for all self-driving cars to pull over.
Given all the reasons that I’ve just spoken about, we shouldn’t let companies take away the pedals and wheels we have been counting down the days until we can get behind. The hard transition, the ethical considerations, technology that fails, and the removal of fun on the road should be **red lights** to self-driving car projects. We must use our consumer power and make a pact to turn our heads away from showrooms with self-driving cars, and go straight to dealers with the classic steering wheel and pedals. If we work together we can successfully put a stop to a self-driving future.