

SHORT REPORT

Auto-autonomy: the ethics of end of road-life issues

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THE PROBLEM: MOTORCAR MORALITY AND AUTOMOBILE AGEING

Advances in modern technology mean that cars are living longer than ever before. This raises important end-of-road-life issues, as it becomes increasingly difficult to provide leaded fuel and shelter for our hydraulically challenged, ageing automobile population. The garage is full, and off-street parking is beyond the financial scope of most low and middle income families. It is a case of rust or bust.

NATURAL LAW THEORY, TRAFFIC, AND THE TRUTH

Society has long been reluctant to countenance the concept of actively ending the road-life of motor vehicles, preferring to allow Nature to take its course. Simpler to let the natural phenomena of corrosion and inbuilt obsolescence take their inevitable toll, until the head gasket blows and the piston rods seize up for the last time.

But can we afford to allow elderly cars to simply choke and splutter as our roads become increasingly over populated and our atmosphere ever more polluted? Old bangers demand our attention, as their paint peels, their balding tyres leave their tread at every T-junction, their suspension sags, and their chrome corrodes. Is there an alternative to the ailing alternator and the carbonised carburettor?

EQUAL ROAD RIGHTS

Principles of distributive justice (equitable distributor distribution) and vehicular rights dictate that the road should be shared equally between all cars, regardless of colour or cubic capacity. Any vehicle has a right to be on the roundabout of life, even if this is a circular argument. But other over-riding (or, in this example, over-driving) principles also warrant consideration. The life of a new car, fresh from the showroom, is one of great expectations, as owners with autoerotic fantasies spend endless hours buffing the exterior sheen, and sniffing the interior leather upholstery.

As a car approaches the end of its natural road-life, however, its existence is less obviously pleasurable. Metal fatigue sets in. Every joint and ball bearing complains. The prospect looms of the car spending its twilight years on blocks, its odometer inert, its flat battery becoming ever flatter, its plugs barely able to raise a spark. The car is on a slippery slope towards the scrapheap. Even if it is decided that a vehicle is no longer suitable for roadside resuscitation, there is no certainty that the car will do the right thing and develop terminal engine failure. The young upwardly mobile family, with a new hatchback to nurture, can scarcely be expected to spend time and money on reinvigorating their ageing automobile, treatment which may anyway be futile. The virtues of loyalty and compassion do not permit the owners to trade their old car in for a new model. Responsible owners can hardly abandon their automobile on a secluded roundabout at the dead of night: the moral principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, and motor car maintenance preclude such behaviour, let alone the traceable chassis number.

MECHANICAL MERCY AND JALOPY JUSTICE

Nor is it merciful to leave the ancient family estate car to rust in one of those sad roadside repositories of abandoned roadsters. The quality of mercy is not strained, nor is the

engine oil filtered. What sort of way is this to treat an elderly member of the extended family who provided luxurious transport for the family for all those years? Such behaviour contravenes the moral principle of jalopy justice. The Doctrine of Double Effect does not apply automatically to double declutching. If we are going to put the car out to rust, surely it would be morally equivalent and more merciful to end the car's road-life there and then. Many mechanics are loathe to give a lethal fuel injection, but there are alternatives. One quick crunch in the trash compactor in a modern scrapyard, and at least the old Volvo could fulfil a useful function as a paperweight, to sit on the family mantelpiece next to the urn holding Granny's ashes.

QUALITY OF ROAD-LIFE ISSUES

The family car does not have an intrinsic right to road-life, and there comes a time when we should cease ordinary and extraordinary means of support and accept that all motor vehicles will eventually end up at the Pearly Tailgates. Premature compaction is ethically acceptable if it is in the car's best interests to end its road-life, and if the vehicle is fully informed of the implications, and competent to consent to the process. The key moral principle is quality of road-life: the indignity of a grating synchromesh and a corroding chassis, the so-called axle of evil, may outweigh the thrill of an occasional family spin in the country.

AUTO-AUTONOMY AND VEHICULAR VIRTUES

Principles of auto-autonomy already dictate that car owners should be allowed to choose for themselves the cars they drive. Perhaps this is why society reluctantly tolerates the ever increasing numbers of four-wheel drive vehicles on our suburban roads. Vehicles driven by owners with more money than common sense, despite the conflicting moral issues of excessive fuel consumption, pollution, and the safety of other road-users. Owners who see the environment as a parking spot. No man is a traffic island, except listening to Mozart in quadrophonic splendour in his fully air conditioned, leather upholstered, four-wheel drive coupé.

ENGINE EUTHANASIA

However, before envy turns to road rage, let us return to the main moral issue. Suppose the elderly car wishes to end its road-life prematurely. Providing it is fully aware of the significance of its decision, surely principles of auto-autonomy dictate that we should fulfil the car's final wishes by putting a timely spanner in the works.

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Potential conflicts of interest: Dr Isaacs and Dr Fitzgerald have never owned or even driven either a Volvo or a four-wheel drive vehicle

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