

WHY WE DRIVE: TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF THE OPEN ROAD

(MATTHEW B. CRAWFORD)

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Philosopher Matthew Crawford's third book is ostensibly a book about driving, but as with all Crawford's works, that is merely the jumping-off point. Crawford expands our minds by exploring a range of related ideas, usually through concretizing abstractions, tying them to work done by real people in the real world. *Why We Drive* uses this structure, as did his first two books, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* and *The World Beyond Your Head*. Such writing is not for everyone; the payoff can take some time to arrive. But it's worth the modest effort required, and offers insights into critical modern problems, most of all the pernicious vice of safetyism.

Why We Drive revolves around what driving tells us about human capabilities and limitations. Crawford, as a philosopher, is very, very interested in human capacities, and how modernity affects such capacities, in particular how it often limits, or even cripples, them when appearing to enhance them. All of his published thought revolves ultimately around the creation of agency through learned skill, and of its erosion in modern life, "a creeping colonization of the space for skilled human activity." This is not a discussion about economic efficiency or productivity, however. Rather, Crawford talks a great deal of man's quest internally for meaning, and externally for status and honor, both earned through the works of his own hands. The focus is the individual—but through the individual, society as a whole. So why do we drive? The question implies we drive for reasons other than to get somewhere. We drive because driving, like other learned skills, satisfies crucial human needs. In doing so, it improves us in a wide range of ways, many not obvious. And taking driving away from us is therefore a problem.

The backbone of this book is a view of driving machines as "a kind of prosthetic that amplifies our embodied capacities." Crawford begins by explaining how we got to the present time, when self-driving cars, which we by definition do not drive, are imminent. (We can ignore that I, at least, am very certain self-driving cars will never actually arrive.) Crawford considers the history of cars in urban life, good and bad (citing Jane Jacobs' plus/minus thoughts on cars), noting that the

prevalence of cars was a deliberate choice by central authorities. Who are today's central authorities for most purposes? Our tech overlords. What do they want? Self-driving cars. Why? So we can be more creative in our increased free time, as they say? No. "Self-driving cars must be understood as one more escalation in the war to claim and monetize every moment of life that might otherwise offer a bit of private head space." Driverless cars are not driven by consumer demand; they are "a top-down project that has to be sold to the public." Inevitability is asserted by the Narrative and all must bow; you will be required to use a driverless car, the infrastructure and technology of which will not be held in common, but owned by our tech overlords, walled off in secret vaults for their benefit, not ours. And this will come with many, and massive, hidden costs.

One of the charms of Crawford's books is how he prevents reader fatigue at philosophy by frequently turning to stories that are concrete, interesting, and relevant. For example, he recounts a story of his broken-down Jeep failing in rural California, sometime in the 1980s. Later in the book we get a lengthy discussion of metalworking in the context of rebuilding a Volkswagen to be something more than a Volkswagen. Crawford warns this discussion is not for everyone (though with my interest in metalworking, I found it fascinating), but "To go deep into any technical field is to make progress in independence of mind, and feel a freedom to maneuver that grows in proportion with one's powers." This focus on "one's powers" is perhaps the overriding theme of all Crawford's work.

In the 1980s, he was young, and he was learning about physical things in the world, engaging with his Jeep, which was somewhat of a Frankenstein's monster he had himself built, which he understood at a visceral level. Such engagement is rare in modern cars, where what the drivers sees and feels is a mediated representation, not (for the most part) the physical reality of the car. New cars today are largely disengaged, disintermediated—paradoxically, whereas in older cars, the car becomes an extension of the body, "a transparent two-way conduit of information and intention," modern technology makes this impossible, making the car even more apparent to the driver, rather than less apparent, when it relieves the driver of tasks. But excessive disengagement not only reduces the ability to learn and improve; it also erodes psychological

resilience, in cars and in anything else that can be a learned skill, and may in fact be responsible for increases in depression and anxiety, by breaking the connection between effort and consequence. No mental engagement means limited flourishing. Driverless cars are thus even worse than merely modern cars. They are billed as convenient and safe; maybe they are (and maybe not) but they have deleterious consequences.

The problem isn't just the control on our lives exerted by Elon Musk's machines, much more so it is the passivity created by any substantial automation. Specifically, Crawford talks about Audis; I drive an A7, and although I am not a "car guy," and rarely if ever use the vehicle's capabilities, I can see what he means. (I also learned that "Nardo Grey" is a paint, a matte non-metallic light grey, used by Audi on their high-end models. I need to get that paint on my next car to look cool.) All driving becomes analogous to the "created experiences" without agency that pass for most entertainment. "The pleasure of driving is the pleasure of doing something; of being actively and skillfully engaged with a reality that pushes back against us." This is vanishing in today's world, not just in cars, but everywhere. We are not becoming sexy, creative individuals writing poetry in our self-driving cars; we are becoming the fat people on floating automated scooters from the movie *WALL-E*.

Crawford then shifts somewhat, to the "spirit of play." Here he talks a good deal about Johan Huizinga, who wrote a classic study of "the play element in culture," *Homo Ludens*. Play is hostility mixed with friendship, part of the "human need to fight," and this has been found in every human culture. But in ours, it is disfavored. "[I]t expresses a part of the soul that sits uncomfortably with the contemporary taste for order, and is therefore subject to censure as irresponsible (on safety grounds) or, because it is competitive, as a threat to the ethic of equal esteem." Everyday driving is (except for road rage) not part of this type of play, for the most part, but driving machines are often used in this type of play, in various forms of racing and in other competitive activities that revolve around driving, such as car modification.

This introduces Crawford's highly negative thoughts on safetyism. Safetyism has received a fair bit of ridicule as it has inexorably heightened over the past thirty years, but it has always seemed more silly than pernicious, a matter of removing the jungle gyms so little Johnny doesn't cry when he scrapes his knee. That was a wrong judgment, as we have

seen in the incredibly destructive, unhinged, hysterical reactions to the Wuhan Plague, the logical end result, or perhaps only intermediate result, of unbridled safetyism. Crawford wrote before the Plague, so it is absent here, but much of what he says is exemplified by what has happened in our country in the past six months.

Crawford points out that safetyism is primarily a symptom of declining societal trust. “Rules become more necessary as trust and solidarity decline in society. And reciprocally, the proliferation of rules, and the disposition of rule following that they encourage, further erode our readiness to extend to our fellow citizens a presumption of competence and good will.” Self-governance of a polity is rooted in activities that demand cooperation not mediated by government action. Driving is precisely such an activity, though only one of many. Automation is a response to lack of trust—if we cannot trust each other on the road, automation will fill the gap. Yet automation itself increases lack of trust in other drivers; each driver becomes “spiritless” and less capable (a problem also found in automated airplane cockpits), especially in an emergency, when trust in others needs to be at a maximum. We become incompetent as a result. Thus, we hand over our agency, our human capacities, to those who make the rules, the lords of tech or the state, which are increasingly the same thing. And they take action to keep us safe, since we are no longer capable of cooperating to balance safety with other needs. This process has no logical end.

Not just activity, but the rules themselves, are automated in the name of safety. “Left to its own internal logic, the regime of public safety must find ways to justify its own growing payroll, and its colonization of ever more domains of life. This can always be accomplished through further infantilization of its clients; under the banner of good democratic values.” The result is very bad. “Infrastructure predicted on too rigid an ideal of control fails to accommodate the exercise of our human capacities, or to exploit the social efficiencies they offer, leading instead to the atrophy of the human.” This is true for automated cars; it is also true for society as a whole, Crawford says, citing James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like A State*. Shared norms, on the other hand, such as those developed during driving, create trust and allow mutual prediction of others’ action (which is why diversity is not our strength, totally aside from driving, and Crawford cites Robert Putnam’s study proving

this obvious truth). They are the solution; we should go back to them. Organic growth, whether of towns or driving, may look disordered, but it is resilient and far more efficient than it appears to outsiders. We give up the common law, which provided legitimacy, and we allow it to be replaced by rules issued by faceless men, or by computers, based on opaque Big Data, which we must not question, because the experts tell us this is the Right Thing To Do.

Pushing back against this is very difficult (particularly, though Crawford does not say so, in a social media-dominated environment filled with shrieking Karens), and safetyism is then used by people for their own purposes, large and small. “Those who invoke safety enjoy a nearly nonrebuttable presumption of public-spiritedness, so a stated concern for safety becomes a curtain behind which various entities can collect rents from perfectly reasonable behavior.” Crawford’s focus is on speed cameras and the like, but the preening self-regard earned by those demanding safety is a much broader phenomenon (yesterday, in my semi-rural area, a woman posted on Nextdoor congratulations to two small boys riding their bikes wearing masks, “for keeping us all safe,” causing me to vomit all over the screen). This is not only dumb, but “[T]he pursuit of risk reduction tends to create a society based on an unrealistically low view of human capacities,” which frequently exacerbates the very problems safetyism supposedly is meant to solve. With respect to cars, while some safety devices such as traction control no doubt save lives, drivers in modern cars lose embodied cognition, making driver incompetence, and thus ever-increasing reliance on semi-automated systems, a self-fulfilling prophecy—thereby decreasing safety. Thus, any driverless car that is only semi-automated may increase, rather than reduce, danger—especially with the herd mentality in favor of such cars, which has led to manipulation of data that understates their risks. Yet “the logic of automation is joined, in the public mind, to the moral logic of safety, which similarly admits no limit to its expansion.”

Crawford never comes out and says it exactly, but safetyism is tied to a society excessively skewed toward the feminine. With all of Crawford’s books, men are the focus, something he does not specifically advert to, but which is entirely obvious. Nearly all his discussion, both practical and philosophical, revolves around primarily male talents, traits, and interests: risk, justification through endeavor, competition, combat,

the desire to feel fear and overcome it, the creation of things with one's hands. As far as safetyism being the feminization of society, this comes through in Crawford's talk about play, which in the sense Crawford discusses it means societally-organized and recognized competition. Crawford notes that for the player, almost always distinction is the goal, not domination. "[I]t is the aspect of the contest, the thirst for distinction, that Huizenga identifies as the crucial, civilizing element of play." This thirst is an essential building block of society; Crawford cites Huizenga for the proposition that "The contest for honor gives rise to deference and trust among players," in part because "[u]nlike the simple lust for power, [games] require that participants recognize the legitimacy of standards that aren't simply emanations of their own will."

But the quest for honor and distinction is far more a male instinct than a female instinct; thus men are the crucial players, and a society run wholly by women would entirely lack both this quest and its benefits. Why a particularly defective brand of feminine thought, of ways of feminine thinking, has come to dominate the ruling classes of the West is a topic for another time (soon!), but one symptom of this disease is that competitive play is today strongly discouraged by those who rule society. Sometimes this is demanded obliquely, under the guise of increased safety (for the children!), but now is often demanded openly, to end "toxic masculinity," meaning all masculinity. The result of eliminating competitive play is therefore feminization, but not one where the feminine virtues are amplified—rather one where equal esteem is forced through eliminating the quest for honor, thereby harming society, and most of all eroding trust, without any benefit. Crawford says forbidding competitive games leads to infantilism, to a failure to understand reality and its limitations, which "guarantees arrested development on a mass scale." Games, especially risky games, build societies and civilizations. Lack of games, the reverse. Moreover, when equal esteem is forced, people become easier to control—which is why those in charge of our schools hate and fear traditional competitive games. They want feminine-type compliance and agreeableness, little boys marching quietly in a line.

There are some places where this is still not true, and Crawford goes out to find them, going to a rural Virginia dirt bike race. It's the essence of masculine competition. Yet there are several women dirt bike racers,

who compete, unremarked and unheralded. These women aren't trying to be men, the new false feminine ideal seen in movies and media everywhere. They enjoy competing, although they are probably not getting the exact same thing out of it that men are—but the human need to for exercising skills is universal, and that's what driving provides, to both men and women, even if it provides something additional for men. Strong women in reality neither need nor want weak men, nor are they simply carbon copies of men, nor does the lying propaganda about "fierce girls" benefit girls, or women, at all, because it denies reality. Crawford notes that these Virginia women expect their men to be men, and act like it. He contrasts sex relations in Virginia to those at an adult soapbox derby he attends in Portland, where emasculated men defer to women who signal an artificial and farcical fierceness, wearing "costumes of empowerment." In Virginia, there is instead an "unforced ease of gender relations." Crawford even, in a very un-politically correct manner, notes that the sex relations in Portland reminded him of pre-Revolutionary France, of a "society that was about to collapse."

Outside the professional-managerial elite, whose nasty habits are too often viewed as normative, it may be that patriarchy is still the norm. "Yet such patriarchy, if that is what it is, appears quite compatible with cocksure women who seem to have no problem controlling their men—if necessary, by berating them to 'man up.'" It's a myth, one cherished by the elite, that in the lower classes women are subordinated. Rather, the lower classes still maintain what the elites have lost—the idea of men and women as partners, improving each other in part by demanding excellence of each other, that the other reach what he or she is capable of, in his or her talents and fitting the nature of each's sex. In such a society, safetyism could never become dominant, and we could have taken a measured, non-destructive, sensible approach to mitigating the Wuhan Plague. Maybe we should replace Congress with a random sampling of Virginia dirt bike racers.

Still, this is not a political book, even if it's evident that Crawford, firmly rooted in realism, leans right (anyone who cites Michael Oakeshott frequently is unlikely to be Left). But I think the very core of all Crawford's work is seeking how to enhance each person as someone embedded in society. This is directly related to my main philosophical target, the destructive Enlightenment project of ever-greater atomized

individualism. So under Foundationalism, I have decided, Crawford is going to be court philosopher, if he'll take the job. It'll be well-paid, and more importantly, have honors and distinction!

Finally, I note that *Why We Drive*, without intending to, evokes many of the resonant themes of the fermenting Right, as it supersedes the dying catamite pseudo-Right of Jonah Goldberg, Jeb Bush, *National Review*, and the Heritage Foundation. In fact, embedded in much of this book is a focus on what is lumped under the name vitalism, a common discussion point today among the vibrant Right. Tellingly, Crawford cites Nietzsche, that "joy is the feeling of one's powers increasing," the same sentiment that dominates *Bronze Age Mindset*. I doubt if Crawford has ever heard of Bronze Age Pervert, but this convergence on certain ideas by those with fresh, interesting thoughts means something. What, exactly, I do not know.