

Autonomous Cars Have Been Given Ethical Guidelines



By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — November 24, 2017



Courtesy of Pixabay [1]

Here is an old ethical problem, redressed in its new and future framing. As your autonomous car drives down the road, an unforeseen accident becomes inevitable, do you hit the people in front of you, killing four but suffering only minor injuries yourself; or turn your car into an embankment, saving the four innocents, but dying yourself in the ensuing crash. Do you sacrifice the one for the many, or them for you? No need to answer but the government of Germany has taken the first steps in limiting your response. Reuters [reports](#) [2] that the German government is drawing up guidelines for driverless cars. More specifically,

“Under new ethical guidelines - drawn up by a government-appointed committee comprising experts in ethics, law, and technology - the software that controls such cars must be programmed to avoid injury or death of people at all cost. That means that when an accident is unavoidable, the software must choose whichever action will hurt people the least, even if that means destroying property or hitting animals in the road, a transport ministry statement showed. The software may not decide on its course of action based on the age, sex or physical condition of any people involved.”

From a purely practical point of view, how would a car know the age, gender or physical condition of the people? Will we all be required to carry transponders communicating this information to the internet of things? What is the scale used to determine physical condition, if I feel suicidal does

that change the equation?

While these decisions are being made in Germany, in an increasingly globalized world, what the Germans or any other 'first to regulate' country may do, can become the norm. National autonomy in considering these ethical dilemmas begins to fade in an economy where cars are imported and exported. Look at the recent privacy and monopoly concerns for Facebook or Google; they come from an EU sensibility.

Autonomous cars, the "[right to forget](#) [3]," limiting our internet use through pricing all impact the everyday tools we do and will use. Automation is changing our lives. My concern is not automation but how we have left decisions about the implementation and ethics of these technologies to companies, regulators and courts, and more frequently these decisions are made by cultures and sensibilities other than our own. And before the knee-jerk response of xenophobia, I am only saying the cultures and sensibilities are different, neither better or worse.

Companies and regulators, those proffering expert guidance, have a responsibility to make the process of deciding more explicit and accessible to we, the people. Artisans would never allow another person determine how they use their tools, why do we, as a society, abandon our responsibility to the tools that make us a community? Or are we content to let the companies and regulators speak on our behalf?

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