VOLUME XX, NUMBER 4, FALL 2020

CLAREMONT
REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

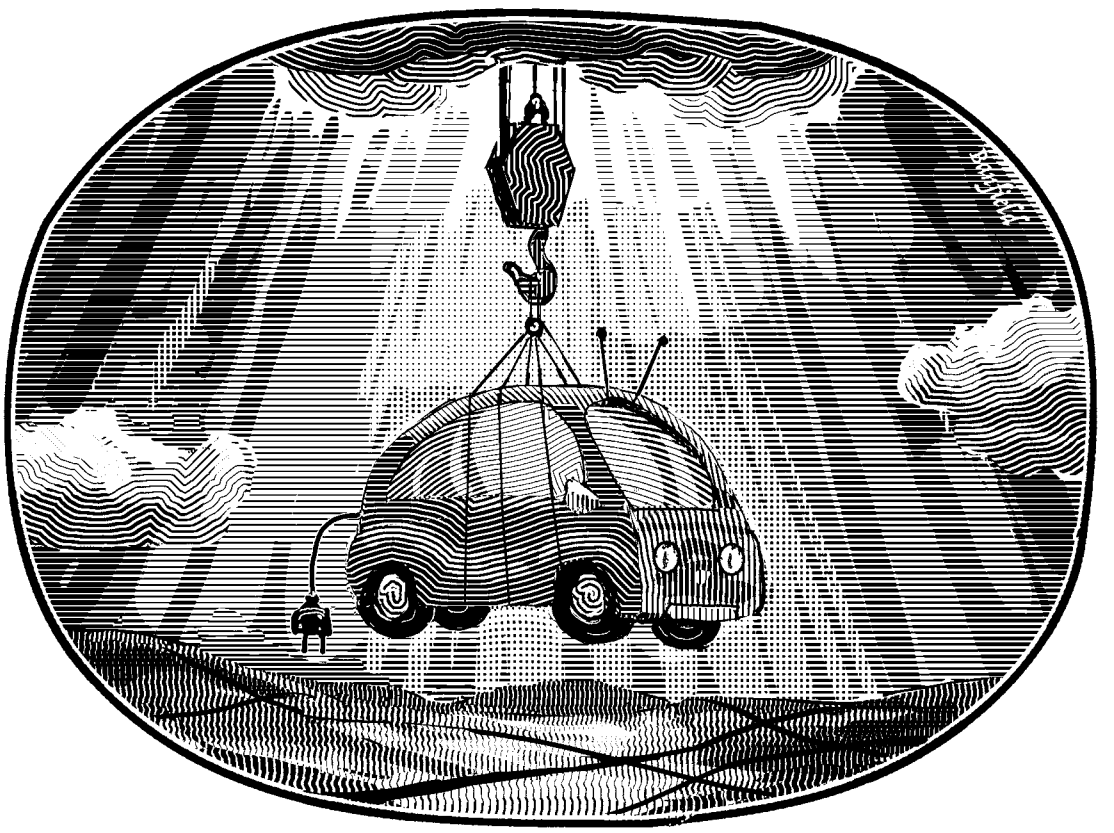
CHOOSE, AMERICA!

A Publication of the Claremont Institute
PRICE: $6.95
IN CANADA: $9.50

Book Review by Christopher Flannery

Self-Driving, Not Self-Governing

Why We Drive: Toward a Philosophy of the Open Road, by Matthew B. Crawford.
William Morrow, 368 pages, $28.99



A vision of the future spreads across the land—a vision of benevolence, progress, and inevitability, endorsed by the highest authorities in science, technology, culture, and politics. Barack Obama and Donald Trump sing its praises; government bureaucracies join the wealthiest corporations and the dominant media to swell the chorus. It is a vision of the goodness, efficiency, and inevitability of the driverless car. In *Why We Drive: Toward a Philosophy of the Open Road*, Matthew Crawford invites us to think about the realities of this vision, while we sleepwalk toward its fulfillment as if it really were inevitable, which it isn't, and good, which it might not be.

The vision of the driverless car is just one current example of a larger vision that has spread across the world in recent centuries, the vision of "progress" toward the supposedly inevitable "new" that is waiting around every corner. Whatever benefits the driverless car may have to offer, Crawford wants us to consider what we will lose when driving comes to be outlawed. More generally, he wants us to consider what part of our humanity is lost when we think of our world and our place in it as governed by "progress." And he wants us to think about this "vision": How does it come to be so powerful? What is behind it? Is it possible to resist it? Is there an alternative?

Matthew Crawford was born in California in the mid-1960s, was a physics major as an undergraduate at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and went on to get a Ph.D. in political philosophy from the University of Chicago. He is a senior fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. As the world learned in Crawford's bestselling first book, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (2009), he is an experienced and even devoted automobile and motorcycle mechanic, who once owned and operated a motorcycle repair shop. At the time of writing *Why We Drive*, he had spent eight years and considerable money rebuilding and re-engineering a rusted 1975 Volkswagen Beetle, when, by his own admission, "a person of more cultivated tastes could have learned Chinese, or made good progress toward mastering the violin."

As his subtitle indicates, Crawford is not offering a static finished product; he is moving *"toward* a philosophy of the open road." He has a direction, so he's not just roaming, but on a good road trip there will be some roaming, some unexpected discoveries and side roads to explore. For his thought to make its way toward its destination, he "found it necessary to offer arguments, stories, interpretations, and observations that are wildly different in kind, according to their place in the whole. Some of these are highly personal." Crawford follows hunches and flies by the seat of his pants, on principle, and his sources of insight and inspiration are wide-ranging.

He begins his book by describing the thrill—and the existential significance—of losing control of his dirt bike when trying to navigate a mountain trail. He recommends being "scared shitless" as an essential learning experience, and he has the broken bones to prove he has the courage of his conviction. Back on pavement, on a different bike, he finds in a line from Snoop Dogg an "attitude to emulate" and sings the line into his helmet while steering his

motorcycle kneescrapingly through switchbacks on California mountain roads. He has a liking for Friedrich Nietzsche's vitalism and his contempt for "the last man." He writes of several speeding tickets he has been issued and quotes Hunter S. Thompson on how (not) to interact with the Highway Patrol when pulled over for speeding. He draws on Jane Jacobs's classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), for insights into the nature of cities; and on Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) to understand the nature and importance of "play" ("Huizinga writes that 'the human need to fight' is intimately connected to 'the imperishable need of man to live in beauty. There is no satisfying this need save in play.'"); Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) guides much of his understanding of the workings of Silicon Valley.

He has a good word for adolescent hooliganism and occasionally employs the language of an adolescent hooligan. In certain moments as a driver and thinker, he sympathizes with the problematic character Callicles in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, who says, "I believe that the people who institute our laws are the weak and the many. So they institute laws and assign praise and blame with themselves and their own advantage in mind." But he admires Michael Oakeshott's thinking about the reasonableness of attachment to old things and affection for the present, and he thinks of himself as writing in "the liberal-republican tradition of political reflection." He takes guidance, in particular and in his own peculiar way, from Alexis de Tocqueville on the importance of associations and the habits of self-government:

> [W]hen people come together around some particular interest that they share, such associations become a rival to the central power. They provide a check on its tendency to gather ever more power to itself. That central power needn't be the state; it may be an apparatus of techno-capitalism devoted to our comfort and convenience, and to keeping us entertained. The rival sites of association I want to consider in this Tocquevillian light are the cells of car enthusiasts that we will encounter in this book. The book proceeds in part by an examination of various automotive subcultures—a demolition derby in the American South, a desert race in southern Nevada, the professional drifting circuit, a hare scramble in Virginia, an adult soap box derby in Portland, Oregon. Though they may appear a bit exotic, the heightened enthusiasms of these groups are not simply alien. They will bring into relief different aspects of the appeal that driving has for all of us. And because they are subcultures, they help to clarify what is precarious in the freedom to drive against the backdrop of a certain vision of progress. What is at stake is not simply a legal right, but a disposition to find one's way through the world by the exercise of one's own powers.

As it did in Crawford's first book and his second, *The World Beyond Your Head* (2015), the theme of self-government runs through this book like a well-traveled road—the self-government of just controlling one's own car (and body, and life) with skill and responsibility, and the self-government on the larger scale of who decides "what sort of regime of mobility we will inhabit." The two levels or scales of self-government are related: "if we are so distracted behind the wheel that we are already driving as if our cars were self-driving, this suggests we need some benevolent entity to step in and save us from ourselves, by automating a task we are no longer capable of doing for ourselves." In the liberal-republican tradition Crawford favors, "a people worthy of democracy must be made up of individuals capable of governing their own behavior in the first place, and [who] have therefore earned their fellow citizens' trust."

Automation requires deference from the driver (or citizen).

Crawford wrote his book before America experienced the Great Lockdown and the Great Masking, during which a once-great nation of supposedly self-governing citizens gave up their businesses and jobs, sequestered themselves in their homes, and covered their faces in deference to the authority of opaque and demonstrably fallible science. But he anticipates this experience completely in his analysis of how the "safety-industrial complex" advances the vision of the driverless car. Like all rational creatures, he recognizes the appeal of safety. But "safetyism"—the "never-satisfied quest for greater safety"—"admits no limit to its expanding dominion. It tends to swallow everything before it." If one cares about safety (and who doesn't?), one does well to take a skeptical look at the safety-industrial complex, and its reliance on moral intimidation to pursue ends other than safety. To do this thoroughly, one must venture beyond the mental universe of risk reduction altogether. That universe takes its bearings from the least competent among us. This is an egalitarian principle that is entirely fitting in many settings, a touchstone of humane society that we rightly take pride in.... But if left unchallenged, the pursuit of risk reduction tends to create a society based on an unrealistically low view of human capacities. Infantilization slips in, under cover of democratic ideals. I will insist, on the contrary, that democracy remains viable only if we are willing to extend to one another a presumption of individual competence. This is what social trust is built on. Together, they are the minimal endowments for a free, responsible, fully awake people.

All of us are now familiar with "cruise control," by which we program our vehicle to proceed at a certain speed. When cruise control is on—when we have ceded control of the vehicle's speed to the computer—we no longer have to adjust the throttle to maintain the desired speed. This means that we no longer have to pay attention to controlling the speed of the car. We can spend more of our attention on our cell phone or anything else, and we do. Circumstances change on the road, of course, and sometimes require us to take back control of the speed at which we are traveling; so we intervene momentarily with the cruise control. Simple enough. But research confirms common sense and shows that drivers who are relieved of control of their vehicle's speed tend more than otherwise to "become sleepy and less vigilant, and it takes them longer to respond to sudden events." If a situation arises requiring a response in a fraction of a second, which is not unusual on the road, bad things can happen.

This problem can be solved by adding more computer control. Adaptive Cruise Control (ACC) automatically adjusts a vehicle's speed in response to the distance of the vehicle ahead. With ACC operating, even less attention is required from the driver, with the predictable result that he will find it even more difficult to respond in a fraction of a second if needed. This problem can be partly solved by Automatic Emergency Braking (AEB), a system that automatically applies the vehicle's brakes if the vehicle's sensors determine there

is danger from the nearness and speed of the vehicle ahead. AEB will be standard in most cars within a few years.

While one is drifting along or drifting off safely on cruise control with ACC and AEB, one might drift momentarily into the next lane, and the computer has a solution for this problem, too, called automatic lane keeping or Lane Keeping Assist System (LKAS). Beginning in 2022, as Crawford reports, "all new vehicles sold for use on European roads must include lane keeping and automated braking systems." These mandatory systems "will also use GPS and road sign cameras to determine if you are exceeding the speed limit. If you are, the system will reduce power to [your] engine."

As automation exerts more complete control, our attention "tends to go elsewhere for longer stretches of time" and the way we reengage with the task of driving is complicated. Automation, for example, requires deference from the driver (or citizen) if it is to function; but the opposite of deference—a kind of spirited confidence or what used to be thought of as manliness—is what is required from a driver (or citizen) when the automation fails. More generally, "Human intelligence and machine intelligence have a hard time sharing control." Machines reason according to rules; human rationality is not so simple. Crawford invites us to consider the human rationality and "social intelligence" at work in a Roman intersection during rush hour. It looks like chaos, but may be safer and more efficient than anything a computer could devise; and there is something human about it. It only works if every driver is paying sharp attention, exercising considerable skills, and interacting with and anticipating other drivers.

In any case, there is something "totalizing" about the logic of automation. At each stage of increased automation, "remaining pockets of human judgment and discretion appear as bugs that need to be solved." So there is a strong tendency for partially autonomous cars to become fully autonomous cars; and if there are going to be autonomous cars everywhere, there will have to be digital maps everywhere and cars communicating with one another in ways that necessarily leave the driver out of the loop. As one of Crawford's sources reports: back in 2014, "the U.S. Department of Transportation announced its plan to require in the not-too-distant future the installation of vehicle-to-vehicle communication technology in all cars and trucks new and old."

If we are going to have smart cars and smart roads, we will need smart cities. That, too, is in the "vision." Again, Crawford wrote before the Great Urban Renewal Project of 2020, but Portland, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, St. Louis—with many other cities following their lead—seem to be preparing themselves to get with the "vision": to start from scratch, from a blank slate, removing any impediments to the "first principles" approach preferred by Big Tech. Just remove a few statues, old businesses, and buildings, and the regressive "historical awareness" that goes with them will begin to fade. Not just cars and cities but human beings can be automated. Having relieved them of the burden of driving, it is a small step to relieve them of the burden of self-government. If the locals get momentarily disoriented, Google has a safe and convenient "reality platform" for them. It is comprehensive and entertaining. With its help, they will understand in no time that the changes are for their own good and are, anyway, somehow inevitable. They will begin to feel glad to be relieved of their racist, cisgendered nightmares. "Let us go then," they will say to one another, as like sheep they shuffle toward their future, ready for the "breakthrough ideas," the "new," the "progress" that awaits them.

A few spirited individualists will pull their "dumb" old dirt bikes out of hiding in the garage and head for the hills to join like-minded friends. Maybe they will be humming Snoop Dogg, or maybe a line or two from James Madison, about the only form of government that is "reconcilable with the genius of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the Revolution; [and] with that honorable determination which animates every votary of freedom, to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government." They will want Matthew Crawford in their company to help them find their way through this brave new world.

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