

Book Review: Why We Drive: On Freedom, Risk and Taking Back Control by Matthew Crawford

In *Why We Drive: On Freedom, Risk and Taking Back Control*, Matthew Crawford argues for driving as an activity that illustrates important features of a humanistic outlook worth preserving: the ability to exercise skill and judgment, to balance prudence and risk and, more broadly, to negotiate one's individual freedom within the collaborative give-and-take of the road. While the book underplays the environmental impact of driving on our shared natural world, Crawford makes an eloquent case for better stewardship of our objects and sounds the alarm against the seemingly relentless march of 'connectivity' and 'smart' devices, finds Iancu Daramus.

***Why We Drive: On Freedom, Risk and Taking Back Control*. Matthew Crawford. Bodley Head. 2020.**

Looking under the hood to see what makes us human

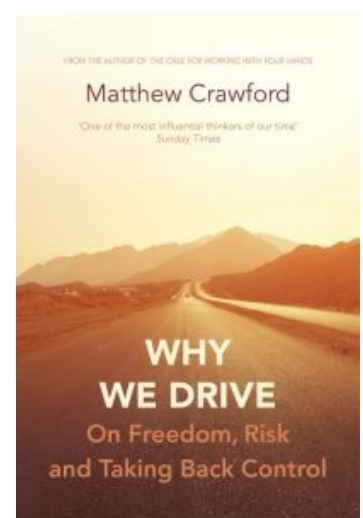
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Ever wonder why, when we select the cars and traffic signs to prove we're not robots, we are helping AI self-driving algorithms narrow the very distance between us and the machines? Matthew Crawford's [Why We Drive](#) is an attempt to sound the alarm against the seemingly relentless march of 'connectivity' and 'smart' devices supplanting supposedly dumb humans.

With my admiration for Crawford's work matched only by a deep loathing of *Top Gear* and macho motor narcissism, I approached this book like some kind of Schrödinger's car with devils and angels trapped inside. [The World Beyond Your Head](#), Crawford's previous volume, was a masterful investigation of one downside of the Enlightenment enthroning the individual as self-legislator – that it engenders a kind of isolation, or disengagement from the world. Yes, in an essential political sense, we should live under and act by laws of our own making, but there are other kinds of freedom which *require* the internalisation of constraints – to freely improvise, a jazz musician must first learn their scales; a carpenter (or sculptor) must work 'with the grain' of the wood. The individual is not always the ultimate arbiter, particularly in domains – the trades, the arts – where there are external standards of excellence. Plumbers don't work to impress other plumbers, as Nassim Nicholas Taleb [put it](#); a shoddy, leaky repair is visible to all.

Crawford's first book, [Shop Class as Soulcraft](#), explored this in more depth, looking at how the trades (and manual labour) are steadily depleted of cultural capital in 'the service economy' and 'the information age'; at how our use of tools and gadgets has become more frequent, but much more superficial. We've become less capable of repairing things – but in an age of products designed for 'planned obsolescence', that was bad for business anyway. One important upshot of his past investigations was that the more society fosters self-sufficient individuals with a trigger-happy disposition for 'says who?' as the knock-down response to critique, the more we open up a marketplace for our unique, sovereign preferences to be sold to the highest bidder.

That one of the most common social manifestations of individualism is consumerism is not really news. But there are other manifestations which increasingly come to resemble rebellion, or at least resistance. This is where Crawford's latest book comes in. On his reading, driving is an activity that illustrates important features of a humanistic outlook worth preserving: the ability to exercise skill and judgment, to balance prudence and risk and, more broadly, to negotiate one's individual freedom within the *collaborative* give-and-take of the road.



No doubt, such a view may strike many as a romantic idealisation far removed from the fumes, emissions, accidents, roadkill and gridlock of the modern roads. A simplification it may be, yet it is itself a reaction to a different kind of simplification, ushered in by the marriage of behavioural economics – with its emphasis on our supposed irrationality – and Big Tech – colonising increasing parts of the public sphere and our private thoughts whilst portraying itself as a value-neutral provider of ‘solutions’. On this view, [we are hopelessly biased creatures](#) who fail to act in accordance with our own best interests, thus ushering the need for the kind of ‘libertarian paternalism’ made famous by the authors of the best-selling *Nudge*, and increasingly used to put a ‘scientific’ spin on corporate and bureaucratic interventions.

We eat too much, save too little, play the lottery despite the odds and, of course, drive too fast. Crawford quotes a senior executive’s conclusions after heading Google’s self-driving car project: drivers need to be ‘less idiotic’. But the solution is not the education of drivers to higher planes of enlightenment; it is to wrest control altogether, through the magic of self-driving cars. As Crawford notes:

automation has a kind of totalizing logic to it. At each stage, remaining pockets of human judgment and discretion appear as bugs that need to be solved. Put more neutrally, human intelligence and machine intelligence have a hard time sharing control.

And although some might find this to be a demeaning view of our faculties, we are told it is an insult added to avoid injury: ‘the logic of automation is joined, in the public mind, to the moral logic of safety, which similarly admits no limit to its expansion. [...] to question Team Progress is to invite being labeled pro-death’. To be clear, Crawford is not indulging in some simplistic rant against seatbelts and helmets and the nanny state. There is smoke aplenty in his descriptions of drifting and demolition derbies, but his moral sensibilities are not those of pick-up drivers ‘rolling coal’ to own the libs.

Which is not to deny that Crawford’s dismissive remarks of ‘carbon teetotalers’ may well attract unsavoury fellow travellers. I am usually of the view that books and works of art should be interpreted for what they are, not what they aren’t – but any paean to driving will sit in uneasy tension with the fact that [SUVs and trucks were the second and fourth largest contributors to the growth of carbon emissions over the past decade](#). Crawford may legitimately question if the effectiveness of ‘cash for clunkers’ scrappage schemes is exaggerated, and he may be right that there are potential fuel- and emission-saving benefits from restoring, rather than discarding old vehicles. But it is dispiriting not to see the case for better stewardship of our shared natural world from an author who makes such an eloquent case for better stewardship of our objects.

Coming back to safety, Crawford points out that not everything done in its name lives up to scrutiny – for example, studies have shown speed cameras are often placed not in the most dangerous, but [the most profitable intersections](#) (with high traffic flow and short yellow lights). Indeed, Crawford makes a very plausible argument that what explains the intense interest in self-driving cars by Big Tech companies is the possibility of tapping into hitherto inaccessible reservoirs of our attention. Although increasingly distracted by our phones, when we drive we remain, for the most part, agents – in control, behind the wheel and focused on the road. How profitable would it be if that hour spent on the average commute could be better *monetised* by turning drivers into passive consumers of content?

To be sure, some of this transfer in control is already happening – [software which automatically limits speed is to be installed in new cars sold in the EU after 2022](#) – and Crawford contemplates cars that *eventually* take you to your destination, but only after you agree to watch a few commercials, or take a detour past a store which had a promotion that you might enjoy. Dismiss such scenarios as fanciful, if you will, but there is a deeper point here which we ought to take seriously. Crawford warns that growing areas of society are falling under ‘algorithmic governance’ that is in tension with democratic accountability: there is no *account* that can be given when the outcomes of machine-learning algorithms are becoming inscrutable *even to their programmers*. As our health, sleep and travel patterns and social interactions get mapped out in ever more detail and deployed back against us by projects to make our cities and homes ‘smart’, it is by recourse to the logic of efficiency, convenience, ‘cutting-edge’ science and analytics – but not to democratic norms of transparency and distributed power. Which is no coincidence – the book ends with a discussion of ‘surveillance capitalism’ whose ultimate goal is not just to predict users’ actions, but to help *direct* those actions.

In a world where driverless cars are programmed to protect their passengers, our bodily safety might be higher, but it may come at the cost of growing social engineering. [Depriving children of unsupervised play](#) and adults of unsupervised driving (which, as our love for singing behind the wheel shows, may turn out to be much the same) is oblivious to the fact that testing our will against an uncertain world helps us find our limits and grow to surpass them.

Crawford is right to remind us that between the safety that comes from self-mastery and the safety that comes from knowing there is a benevolent guardian watching on stand-by, there is a world of difference.

Note: This article first appeared at our sister site, [LSE Review of Books](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Vidar Nordli-Mathisen](#) on [Unsplash](#)
