Self-Driving Cars are a Disaster Waiting to Happen
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Recently we have seen the technologies incorporated into cars over the previous decades, such as cruise control, GPS, and collision and lane departure alarms, starting to merge into autonomous systems like self-parking and automatic braking. It may be that in the near future, cars will be able to truly drive themselves, which would have very serious ramifications. However, it's not a given that this technology will become available anytime soon either.

The prototype fully autonomous cars that exist today can do impressive things, but there's a big difference between having a capable prototype and releasing an actual product people are going to trust their lives to. The leap may be a lot more difficult and take a lot longer to make than those hawking the technology seem to think, since there are so many complex nuances to take into account.

Meanwhile, the partially autonomous systems currently available on the market, such as Tesla Autopilot, are basically just a gimmick. The most they can do, under the right conditions, is stay in a lane, change lanes, and maintain the distance from the car ahead. While they are an interesting novelty, these systems are not good enough to actually trust. Dodging the liability for anything that goes wrong, the manufacturers tell drivers to keep their hands on the wheel and continue to watch the road, which makes the whole thing pointless, since that's exactly what they would be doing anyway. Drivers just trade the responsibility of driving for the responsibility of babysitting a computer that's driving. In practice, they wind up relying on the systems more than they should, which has already led to fatal accidents. Another issue is that these systems perform surveillance, feeding telemetry back to the manufacturers, which they ostensibly use to further develop their products. The current status of self-driving cars, therefore, is getting people to pay money to do companies' research and development for them in exchange for getting to feel the steering wheel turn itself.

As soon as a real self-driving car is released, if it ever is, most of the millions of jobs that involve driving will disappear almost overnight. The reason is that the biggest expense in transportation is drivers' compensation, and an autonomous car can operate 24/7 without a break. Both of these facts mean companies could tremendously increase their profits by adopting such vehicles. Considering that basically the only incentive companies have is to increase profit, there is no doubt that this is the action they will take as soon as humanly possible. We already see transportation companies such as Uber investing heavily in self-driving technology. As for any delivery service that still has to somehow get goods from the vehicle to the front door, if it's possible to build a real self-driving car, it's possible to build a robot the car can deploy to do this. In any case, a minimum-wage worker can ride along to do the final drop-off, or the customer will just have to come out to get the item.

Even now there are not enough jobs to go around, so suddenly destroying millions of them will greatly increase the already ferocious competition for work, not only leaving countless people totally out of luck but also driving wages through the floor. If self-driving cars are proven, similarly advanced automation will most likely upend other fields as well. The result will be the implosion of most of the population's quality of life.

Some people point to the Industrial Revolution and the resulting mechanization and automation that, while eliminating many jobs, ultimately created many more than it destroyed. But there is no comparison. Industrial technology enabled people to do more work more efficiently. The technology that seems to be coming takes people out of the equation altogether.

Others look at self-driving cars as a panacea for the many problems cars currently have, but that view is also mistaken. The cars will still have to be parked somewhere, they will still be on the roads creating traffic, they will still use a lot of energy, and there will still be collisions. Some of these problems may be reduced, but they won't go away because they're inherent to cars. Self-driving cars also won't do anything about the obesity epidemic, caused in large part by how many people drive everywhere instead of walking, or the suburban sprawl, enabled by the car, that has destroyed the traditional town and countryside in so many places. The real solution would be to stop relying so much on cars, to instead encourage walking, biking, and mass transit, and to make transporting people and goods on such a huge scale less necessary.

Self-driving cars will also create new problems. One thing to keep in mind is that the former drivers and car owners will be giving up all control, and the companies producing self-driving cars will gain it. All the current concepts for self-driving cars depend on proprietary systems that only the manufacturers can in any way service or update. Moreover, none of them are self-contained. They all rely on communication with the remote servers of the manufacturers. For one thing, maybe these companies will decide they don't want to drive to certain places, and if current broader trends are any indication, they will be keeping detailed and permanent records of everywhere people go.