

Motorism – or how technology creates social monsters

Mogens Lilleør, 2008

Foreword

This paper is an English version of a paper on Motorism published in 2003 in the Danish periodical 'Filosofi' (Philosophy)¹. It is meant to be a reflection on the phenomenon Motorism using an analogy between motorists and socially function-reduced citizens. I argue that society ought to react and treat motorists as though they are social deviants.

What is a motorist?

By definition a motorist is the combination of a person and a car! – or better, a driver behind the wheel in a car. A motorist is a person surrounded by a motorized wheeled shell, which reduces the person's capability of relating to environment. Within the car-shell encountering the external world is obstructed by the comfort of the car, by what might be called the 'monotony of driving', the speed, and the background noise from wind, tires and engine. The speed reduces the person's possibility of seeing and understanding the seen; the background noise reduces the persons possibility of using his sense of hearing; the comfort reduces applying the senses of touch and smell.

As car-driver one has plenty of tasks: Master the complexity of bodily skills needed driving the car, and master adapting to the traffic, to navigate, tuning in the radio, adjusting sound or volume on the cd-player, lit a cigarette, using the mobile, perhaps a dictaphone, or making conversations with the passenger, or only focusing on expectations related to arrival, perhaps thoughts related to start, or surfing in the secret recesses of recollection. This last point counts especially for the one who drives the same route day after day: 'How did I get here?' one sometimes may ask, when approaching the destination and one don't remember having seen or done anything for some time to get there.

To imagine a being by and large equipped with one sense, sight, only and therefore able to navigate by relating to what it observes only, such a being would socially be like a bull in a china shop. The motorist by my definition above is such a being. As a motorist one can only by and large apply sight to ascertain being a certain place within a certain complexity of traffic, and by a certain speed. This I would like to unfold further.

Technology changes how one relates to environment

Don Ihde has described how technology simultaneously mediates and alternates how man relates to his environment – the physical environment as well as fellow man. The notion 'technology' includes simple physical items, complex engines and sophisticated social structures organized for a specific purpose. When technology mediates it operates as a transparent extension of bodily functions, for instance the hammer extending and making the impact of the hand more efficient, the cane letting the blind man sense the world or the eyeglasses extending the functionality of the eyes. The point is that technology applied in this sense operates without itself being in focus, but instead creates awareness of the object of mediation - the blind is not conscious of the cane but rather of what it touches. One might say that awareness is constituted by the technology. The technology itself is tacit and transparent. Technology, however, also mediates how man relates to environment in a way that implies focus on the technology itself. This happens when man encounters environment through the decoding of instruments such as a fuel gauge, an echo sounder or a

¹ I owe a great deal of my inspiration to several quite different thinkers: Don Ihde, Eric Klawonn, J.Wetlesen, Niels Thomassen, Hans Skjervheim, Thomas Nagel, P.F.Strawson, O.F.Bollnow and L.W.Sumner as well as some NGO's in Denmark critical of motorism.

thermometer. Technology in this sense blocks vision and mediates environment through its symbols. In a sense the interpreted message stands in for the world.

It is essential according to Don Ihde that technology is never neutral. It changes how man relates to environment. Technology works by way of 'intensification by reduction', that is, by concentrating awareness on an object by simultaneously reducing the object. The efficiency of a specific technology is due to the promoting one function disregarding others, and it is this abstraction that constitutes its utility. It is because the dentist applies the relevant instrument that she is able to discover weaknesses in decayed teeth. If she were just applying her finger she would in the moment discover both the moist heat of the oral cavity, the softness of the skin, the hardness of teeth, sharpness, flatness etc., but nothing useful because the perception would be too complex. By applying the instrument the dentist abstracts the irrelevant sense impressions. The instrument intensifies one characteristic, for instance hardness, by oppressing other possible characteristics. The dentist, therefore, encounters the oral cavity, as it appears mediated by the instrument. The efficiency is gained by disregarding the more complex relation. So, as such technology is not neutral.

The car is such a non-neutral technology. The car enhances mobility, but restricts simultaneously the possibility of the person to relate to environment. The car functions on the one hand as a transparent non-neutral medium, which tacitly, by its functionality, decides, how the person in the car experiences and relates to the world outside the car. It mediates a certain type of encounter. On the other hand it explicitly shadows or blocks the vision while concentrating awareness on instruments that have to be interpreted: Speedometer, fuel gauge and control lights and warning lamps etc. The car reduces how the person relates to environment – the person encounters environment, as it appears mediated through the functionality and instruments of the car. This is why a motorist on the road might find it quite natural to pass a cyclist or a pedestrian close by at the speed of 80 km/h himself being convinced that he cares about the road-user – he might have reduced speed from a 100 km/h.

The motorist is a frail moral subject!

Morally this world consists of objects that are not entitled to consideration and objects that are entitled to consideration. What are the characteristics of objects that are entitled to consideration? Or in another way: What kind of objects, belong to the ethical field of responsibility?

Objects to whom it doesn't make a difference how they are treated are intrinsically indifferent and trivial; they do not justify in and for themselves that they are entitled to consideration. The necessary and sufficient condition for an object intrinsically to justify consideration, that is, to belong to the ethical field of responsibility, is that it is not indifferent to the treatment it is exposed to. The point being that for an object to be ethical it has, as a minimum, to be able to adopt two modes of experience and prefer the one – it makes a difference for the object, whether it is in the one mode or the other. 'That object to which it makes a difference ...' is a moral subject and is consequently entitled to relevant consideration.

The ethical field of responsibility fosters the concept of right. It includes the civil rights, which protect the individual against infringements. These rights apply to all moral subjects irrespective of them being able to or being motivated for accomplishing anything. But it also includes political rights aiming at the social participation and autonomy of the individual. The political rights apply to beings that besides being moral subjects also are moral agents, that is, are beings having sufficient

skills and motivation to manage social life. To manage social responsibility one should as a minimum master three skills – be able to: a) Recognize the relevant situations included in the field of responsibility, that is, possess sufficient insight, empathy, and feelings that makes moral perception possible. b) Estimate the relevant situations, that is, possess insight and feeling that are colored by ethical values and principles, which set the standard for right and wrong. c) Make decisions concerning the situations, that is, combining the capability to reflect the aims and means with the capability to accept or change aims and means. In short: A person identifies and estimates morally relevant situations by three skills: Moral perception, socialized judgment and autonomy.

Two persons in an encounter appear to each other as some sort of an embodied non-literally articulated appeal. Each one of them perceives a preference for something by the other, that is, they are not indifferent to each other. It is this having a preference for something that constitutes the moral subject: On the one hand it justifies the entitlement to consideration, for instance in way of protection; on the other hand it is a necessary capability for fostering social awareness. To take on responsibility it is not enough to be open for impressions, one should also be able to recognize specific needs and act on them. This is the power of the moral agent. He or she is able to identify the moral significant in the situation, to make the relevant decision and to take on responsibility to carry out the decision.

A being that is both a moral subject and a moral agent is a moral person. To sum up the moral person is characterized by two dimensions: 1) Openness to impressions which implies that it makes a difference how one is treated, a difference that justifies being a member of the field of ethical responsibility that convey entitlement to consideration and protection. 2) Capability to recognize and estimate the moral relevant in situations and act on it appropriately.

The motorist, a driver and a car, should be described as a frail moral subject, which due to the functionality of the car is not capable of recognizing and respond to the needs of the external world. The motorist is not a moral agent and is therefore not to be considered a moral person. If the driver in the car should act as a full-scale moral person practicing the relevant consideration while driving he should himself penetrate the shell of comfort. The driver which normally do not register any appeal from the outside should by own intellectual power articulate and maintain a consideration, which substitutes that reading of situations in normal life that triggers the automatic of moral perception. This is not easy due to the shell of comfort, speed, background noise from wind, tires and engine, and so fort.

The motorist needs help!

A being, which is only able to apply sight, would rightly be regarded as seriously disabled needing help and support. The motorist is to be considered such a disabled being. The motorist functions as a person with strongly reduced social ability or as a moral deranged human, which normally would be exposed to a certain treatment or otherwise supervised. Society therefore on the one hand treats the motorist as a stranger that needs special treatment, for instance by demanding driver license, establishing traffic separation and upholding speed limits. But strange enough society, on the other hand in spite of the reduced functions and the numerous violations of basic consideration, acts as though it recognizes the motorist as a moral person being able to adapt to normative ethical demands. It is as though society not quite understands what ‘motorist’ implies, not yet has figured out the right treatment of the diagnosis ‘motorist’, or is not willing to or able to cope with the phenomenon motorism. It doesn’t make sense to moralize on motorists when motorists in fact are not able to overcome simple moral demands. The motorist should not be subject to duties, which

only a full-blown moral person is able to honor. 'Ought imply can' is a fundamentally ethical principle: Demand nothing from somebody who is not able to fulfill the demand!

To sum up, the problem of motorism is that a sound and reasonable human being unintentionally is violating dignity so much that the same person would be shaken if he knew better, that is, were able to apply all his sensory faculties. But the trouble is that he is not. Therefore, preventing the harmful effects on human welfare following from let's just say the normal so-called decent motorism, has to begin with the moral capacity of the motorist, not that of the driver, and continuing by applying the relevant, sufficient means.

Afterthoughts

The car changes the person's capability to encounter another being. But in fact it is the person who changes himself choosing to get into the car. This is a radical change: A person who makes himself a motorist deprives himself the capability of using several important senses in relation to environment – he commits depersonalization, so to speak. He reduces himself to an object. One might therefore consider the phenomenon 'motorism' as an impact of the person objectifying himself.