

The Moral Dilemmas of a Safety-belt*

*”The Lord will gird me with his strength
He is my buckler, he is my baldrick
He alone will protect me from my enemies.”*

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Traduction inédite en anglais Unpublished English translation by Lydia Davis]

Cosmologists are seeking the “missing mass” that would allow them to complete the enormous sum they are attempting to calculate : the mass of the universe. Thus far, the tare necessary to counterpoise their cosmic scales continues to escape them. At the same time, moralists continually lament the degradation of morality, the loss of values, the invasion of unfortunate humans by inhuman machines. According to them, our industrial civilizations are lacking an enormous share of morality. Technology is becoming more and more dominant, and weak human beings more and more amoral. Yet I believe the moralists will have more luck than the cosmologists, and that they will quickly discover where they can find the “missing mass” of morality and values. In order to detect it, one has only to turn, not to people, but to non-human beings.

I get into my car, unthinking, and notice that I can’t make it start, it flashes and whines. Surprised, I look at my dashboard : “Fasten your seatbelt !!!” I obey the dashboard’s command, I fasten my seatbelt and am at last authorized to activate the starter. The car itself has prescribed a behavior to me : you must fasten your seatbelt in order to drive. It has prevented me from starting up until I obey. Finally, once my action conforms to its demands, I am authorized to do what I wanted to do all long : drive on the highway as far as my place of work.

There are at least two ways of analyzing this anecdote. The first is moral. The moralist will become indignant at the carelessness of the driver who gets

* Translated by Lydia Davis.

into a car without even thinking of his or her safety, or at the domination of a person by a brute machine which imposes behaviors on that person without concerning itself about individual freedoms or the immense variety of human situations. In the eyes of the moralist, when all is said and done a certain quantity of morality is missing : either from the irresponsible driver, who lacks it ; or from the inhuman machine, which is equally deficient. In both cases, the philosopher will whimper. Neither the person nor the machine knows how to drive or how to conduct itself. This is the hypothesis of the missing mass.

But it is possible to form another hypothesis, one that I call, for the sake of economy, “socio-technical.” The mass of morality remains constant but it is distributed differently. After fifty years of automobile driving, those in charge of road safety saw that one could not rely on the moral sense of drivers to limit their speed. It seems that, in bodies, one cannot permanently inscribe the moral rule : “You shall not go too fast.” Of course, it would be possible by curbing them to inscribe in the engines themselves the rule : “Do not go past 60 mph.” But since we have preferred to leave engines free to go as fast as 110, even while forbidding drivers to attain these speeds, the solution we fall back on is to forbid, at least, the drivers to crush themselves on their windshields. Without seatbelts, however, this rule of last resort remains inapplicable : drivers refuse to prevent their faces from being crushed on the windshield and their chests staved in by the steering wheel.

Human inertia ? Perhaps. But there is also the inertia of heavy bodies hurled at 60, 90, or even 150 mph. Once the automobile has been accepted, one sees that its driver quite simply cannot behave in a responsible fashion ; the driver becomes, willy-nilly, a ballistic body that obeys the laws of dynamics and that can for this reason be replaced in experiments by an anthropomorphic mannequin weighing 150 to 200 pounds. The seatbelt then becomes the means, for those in charge of safety, of inscribing in the car itself the moral rule “you shall not go too fast” by taking into account the fact that the driver hurled at a great speed is a hybrid monster, half thinking being and half heavy body.

Whatever the solidity of their moral sense, whatever the uprightness of their conduct, whatever the asceticism of their lives, in the tenth of a second of an accident, drivers can no longer restrain from crushing themselves against the windshield. The seatbelt can do it in their place — provided it works. The safety belt is thus the delegation of the drivers’ lost morality. This delegation is decided by those in charge of road safety, by the inventors of different types of belts, and by those drivers who agrees to fasten it. The drivers thus protect themselves in advance against their own lack of steadfastness, against their own moral and physical inertia. They know how weak, and especially how heavy, the flesh is at 140 mph. They split into two personages, one, present, who is putting on the seatbelt, and another, future, whom the belt, like a guardian angel, will protect at the moment of the accident. Thus, the driver who puts on his or her seatbelt is not very different from the one who places an amulet or a Saint Christopher medallion on the dashboard in order to enjoy divine protection, or a photo of his or her children as a reminder that it is dangerous

to them to accelerate too much and that they risk losing their beloved parent. In all of these cases, drivers are protecting themselves against themselves ; they are relying on others, guardian angels or springs with ratchets, to remain faithful to the agreement entered into with their conscience.

But what sort of morality should be inscribed in the car ? The seatbelt must be both supple, when the driver is not doing anything wrong or is not in danger, and extremely rigid during the fraction of a second in which it is necessary to protect the driver against his or her inertia. A further difficulty is that the seatbelt must be both easy to fasten, otherwise no one would put it on, and it must not be capable of coming undone by itself even in the case of a great jolt, otherwise it would lose its function of protection.

This is not all. The point at which the discussion of the seatbelt truly enters the domain of Corneille, at which its morality becomes as complex as the state of the soul of King Lear or Madame Bovary, is when we say that the same seatbelt that must be capable of resisting the greatest jolt without coming undone must come undone instantly when the driver, jolted, weakened, finds him — or herself upside down in a crashed car¹... One can understand why morality seems lacking if one confines oneself to contemplating human beings, but that it proliferates once one attentively considers non-humans. We aren't usually very interested in contradictions of mechanisms which we call, quite evasively, "functional." We generally prefer discussions about the heart, the soul, or the spirit, which seem to us more dramatic and more aesthetic. This is a pity, because the great moral crises, the great tragedies, the great dramas are occurring today not on movie screens but in machines and appliances. The mechanisms motivating a vaudeville intrigue are less interesting than the plots activating of a safety belt².

As a moral law inscribed in fibers, the seatbelt is an incredible success : when the driver wants to fasten it or unfasten it, it's as simple as one-two-three, he merely pushes a button or pulls on a small tongue ; but once he has engaged it, a force of several tons would not be able to pull it apart — or at least that is what we would like to believe. The belt is thus reversibly irreversible, and vice versa ! When the driver moves gently and gradually, it follows and obeys ; as soon as the driver moves roughly, it jams and commands. To speak in terms of psychology, the seatbelt is very "touchy" ; it

¹ For a long time, opponents of the compulsory wearing of seatbelts claimed that this latter function was not performed, so that the belt imprisoned the driver in a car instead of allowing him or her to escape. In this case, the same moral law that should protect, instead condemns.

² The airplane seatbelt is less rich, mechanically speaking. Its wearing is imposed by the crew which first explains it and then sees that it is used ; although adjustable, it is only rigid and crushes your stomach ; if it does indeed protect you from yourself, it protects you even more from your neighbors, who could be transformed by an air pocket into dangerous projectiles.

becomes annoyed over a trifle, and certain belts are so disagreeable that they jam even when the driver is only trying to reach the glove compartment. One must therefore learn to live with this moral law that is crossing one's belly and endeavor to make only gentle and gradual movements in order not to irritate the belt, which would in that case immediately stop allowing one to move³. Numerous patents filed by engineers have each aimed to resolve these judicial variations on the theme of permission and inflexibility, reversibility and irreversibility.

Here, then, is the redistribution of the constant mass of morality. A fraction of it is entrusted to the driver — to put on his or her belt and buckle it — while another fraction is entrusted to a device that is sometimes permissive, sometimes restraining, sometimes reversible, sometimes irreversible. This distribution of tasks is important, because it redistributes the proper competences of each : the driver may become more careless,⁴ the car more intelligent. What one loses, the other gains. Each learns to live with the other : the belt needs a human being to put it in place and to take it off, the human being learns to live “on probation” without making abrupt movements. Drivers no longer have to try to restrain themselves in case of sudden braking, the seatbelt does it for them, but they retain the supreme freedom : to engage or disengage the guardian angel.

It is precisely this freedom that those in charge of road safety would like to withdraw in the anecdote I told earlier. Not only can one not inscribe in the bodies and brains of human beings the law : “You shall not go too fast” but one cannot even inscribe in them the simpler law that serves as a makeshift replacement for the first : “You shall buckle your seatbelt,” even though the second aims at protecting the driver while the first wanted to protect others. All the work of moral delegation to the seatbelt and all the inventiveness of the engineers, the biotechnologists, and the filers of patents become useless if drivers do not buckle their seatbelt. Why not delegate the moral law still further and make the car incapable of starting before the driver has attached his or her belt ? One would only have to link the buckle of the seatbelt directly to the starter with an electric pick-up or attach the belt permanently to the door so that one couldn't even sit in the seat and close the door without finding oneself protected, despite oneself, by the famous moral law.

This bold solution shows clearly the direction taken by many effects of morality and the reason why we discern them less and less : non-humans are attached to one another.⁵ The engineer uses the seatbelt to control the starter

³ Taxi drivers, insensitive to the beauty of this morality, have been authorized not to wear seatbelts.

⁴ Certain experts claim, for this reason, that the seatbelt offers a false sense of security and leads drivers to accelerate instead of slowing down !

⁵ One can imagine the next move in the delegations. The European Prometheus program is already preparing this next move. Why allow the driver to drive ? What a

or, even more radically, uses the door as it closes to install the safety belt. The choice becomes irreversible : either the car has its door closed and its engine turning over and in that case the belt is fastened ; or the belt is not fastened and the car ceases to be automobile and instead becomes immobile. By directly linking the non-human organs to one another, the builders have elaborated not only a moral law, but also a logical — or let's say, "sociological" — impossibility. There no longer exists a car such that it can at the same time go and not have a driver encircled and protected by a safety belt. The driver without a belt is excluded by the logic inscribed, thanks to the engineer, in the nature of things. Flesh and blood people expel the excluded middle (the driver without a belt) and thus construct our sociologic ; flesh and blood human beings write into things — thus constructing what becomes our second nature.

This extreme solution is so obviously moral that it was prohibited in the United States, because it challenged individual freedom. A car may suggest to its driver that he or she put on the seatbelt, may beg him or her with alarms and warning lights, can threaten him or her with the worst sanctions, but it does not have the right to use force.⁶ The ultimate solution of the Japanese : a belt hooked to the door frame moves aside politely when you open the door ; but once you are in your seat, it rolls along the doorframe and embraces you, encircles you, clasps you with great firmness. No use arguing. No use cheating. No use asking your mechanic to disconnect the mechanism. Either the car drives with the door open or you drive with the belt in place. This time, the deviant middle is excluded once and for all. It is impossible not to be moral, except by not driving.

It is precisely this difference between right and force, between must-do and can-do, that prevents moralists from seeing the enormous reservoir of morality that exists in technology and contains the missing mass they so despair of finding. Moralists make an absolute distinction between "must-do," which alone is properly human, and "can-do," attributed to technology which is simply efficacious or merely functional. However, the simple example of this safety belt shows that there exists a continuous range of injunctions and prescriptions that can at any moment change must-do into can-do, morality into force.

menace to the public ! One can delegate to the car itself, through appropriate pick-ups, the responsibility for accelerating and braking according to the places and the obstacles that happen to be in front and behind. Taken to an extreme, one would obtain a new hybrid, the public-individual transport in which the driver would pay for the initial purchase of the carriage... as opposed to the Aramis project in which the public transport became a car {Latour, 1996 #2585}! The automobile becomes a heteromobile.

⁶ The difference in plot from airplane seatbelts is striking. In airplanes, no one may be excused, not even the crew, and one can force a recalcitrant passenger to buckle it.

To give a quick review of this range : I can connect the prohibition against going too fast to the customs of a gentle culture (inscription in bodies and mentalities as if I had the chance of living in England instead of France) ; if this yields nothing, I can have it included in the Highway Code (written legal version) ; if this still yields nothing, I can, though the solution is more desperate, at least prevent those who go too fast from killing themselves at the moment when they become simple ballistic bodies (inscription in the ratchets and springs of a seatbelt) ; if the drivers do not put it on, I can insert a panel with a red warning light or a siren in order to remind them of their duty (stage of signs and symbols) ; if the drivers still do not comply, I can have them with ticketed by living police officers (stage of power and the machinery of the law) ; if faithless people continue not to discipline themselves, I can force them to put on their belts by linking the starting of the engine with the putting on of the belt (stage of automatisms and beautiful pleated technology).

This progression does not always end in things, for I can, by dint of constraints, now do without all the signs and injunctions by inscribing the habit of putting on the seatbelt in people's habits and customs ; no one will even dream, anymore, of getting into a car without fastening a seatbelt.⁷ Why in the world should we call the first or the second stage "moral", the next to the last "technological" and the last "cultural" ? Automatism comes to the aid of the belt, which comes to the aid of symbols, which come to the aid of signs, which come to the aid of the law, which comes to the aid of customs... It is possible to go back down or up this series by passing continuously from "you can !" to "you must !"

The starry sky above our heads, the moral law inscribed in our hearts — these were the two spectacles that amazed the old Kant ; let us add to them a third source of amazement which he did not foresee, and that is the moral laws inscribed in the nature of things. We are quite willing to admit that technology is the extension of our organs. We knew it was the reduction of force. We had simply forgotten that it was also the delegation of our morality.⁸ The missing mass is before our eyes, everywhere present, in what we admiringly or scornfully call the world of efficiency and function. Do we lack morality in our technological societies ? Not at all. Not only have we recuperated the mass that we lacked to complete our sum, but we can see that we are infinitely more moral than our predecessors. The safety belt is not technological, functional,

⁷ I know several American and Swedish colleagues who "can't" start their cars if their passengers are not buckled into their belts. From the point of view of an outside observer, it is impossible to decide if this powerlessness has a logical or a material source, comes from a moral law inscribed in their protestant neurons or from a mechanical impossibility inscribed in the electronic wiring of their cars. Several times, I have been fooled.

⁸ See, a propos, the remarkable work of {Akrich, 1992 #2401}.

or amoral. At the moment of danger, it will become, on the contrary, more moral than I, and that is in fact why it has been put in place. If I brake suddenly, it prevents me from creating unhappy orphans.