[citation method edited for sampling purposes]

4.2 Should a self-driving car always prioritise the safety of its passengers?

In my opinion, a self-driving car should not always prioritise the safety of its passengers. The decisions made to protect safety should be subject to user's individual preference.

Firstly, the question concerns the issue of ethical decision-making and its subject. When we discuss prioritization, it implies there is a balance between the risks to the user and those to others, which requires ethical decision-making. If we believe that a self-driving car should always prioritise the safety of its passengers, it implies: (1) The self-driving system replaces the user as the subject of ethical decision-making. (2) For different users, the ethical decision presented is uniform and mandatory. These two points make this claim unreasonable. The subject making ethical decisions need to bear the consequences. Technology cannot replace the users in bearing the consequences and the users should not bear the consequences of any ethical decision that technology imposes on them. Therefore, the development of technology should not change the status of humans as the subject of ethical decision-making. Self-driving is just a technology used to replace human drivers in the act of driving, and thus it cannot replace the user to make the uniform ethical decision such as “always prioritise the safety of its passengers”, but should instead follow the individual preference of each user.

Secondly, prioritising passenger safety in self-driving cars may lead to more severe accidents than before since many people are willing to accept the risk of their own minor injuries to avoid killing others. If faced with a child in front of the car, a considerable number of people would instinctively swerve the car rather than hitting him directly, whereas a self-driving car that prioritises passengers would hit the child. In such cases, prioritizing passenger safety can lead to casualties that could have been avoided under the personal preferences of users and is not in line with common moral principles.

One possible rebuttal to my viewpoint is that individual preference may also be unethical, such as when autonomous vehicles harm others based on user preferences. However, firstly, the priority discussion assumes that passengers face safety risks, so any harm caused to others is a result of avoiding personal risks rather than subjective intent. Thus, prioritising passengers’ safety is already the choice least favorable for others and has the lowest moral responsibility. Secondly, even if we surpass this limitation, my viewpoint does not introduce new problems. Even without autonomous driving technology, there may still be cases where drivers subjectively hurt others. Autonomous driving technology that follows individual preferences does not increase the severity or likelihood of harm, nor does it absolve the user of responsibility.

Overall, ideally, decisions about safety in self-driving cars should be personalized and adjusted according to the user's preference. Companies could simulate scenarios and record personal settings for informed decision-making. In emergencies, the system should follow previous settings. Until this personalization is possible, users should still be able to intervene instead of absolutely prioritising passenger safety. According to SAE International, a professional standards developing organization in autonomous driving, the primary difference between self-driving cars at current Level 3 and more advanced levels is that at Level 3, users need to take over in specific situations (SAE International, 2021), which also demonstrates the crucial role of individual preference in emergencies in current driving automation.