The Rise of the Robot Cars

If you’ve ever felt the urge to fall asleep at the wheel, or wished that your car was able to drive you home at the end of a long night out, you may not have to wait that much longer. Enter the ‘robot car’ – a car equipped with software smart enough to drive on public roads all by itself, without any need for someone to steer, brake, or even input directions. And since massive companies such as General Motors, Ford, and even Google are putting a significant amount of money research for this technology, these cars will be in our streets very, very soon.

The cars are able to accomplish this feat by ‘seeing’ the world around them using a mixture of GPS, radar, ‘lidar’ (essentially mapping your environment using lasers), or using a good old-fashioned camera. This data is then processed by a computer inside the car, which is able to make out the road ahead, obstacles, other cars, and even what the signs on the side of the road are saying. However, even with this advanced detection and interpretation technology, engineers have been trying to create a driverless car since the 1950s, although only recently have they started to become practical for an everyday civilian driver to use. In fact, this September, Carnegie Mellon University released a video of their autonomous car prototype driving itself from the university campus to Pittsburgh Airport, half an hour away and through heavy traffic of people who had no idea this car even existed. The man at the wheel did not touch the controls at any time, and not a single mistake was made.

However, some are not so optimistic about the future of the self-driving car. Putting aside the uncomfortable situation of putting your lives into the hands of a computer, the idea of the car’s autonomy raises some interesting dilemmas. For example, if two driverless cars collide, who is at fault? Who will have to pay the bill? And what happens if the software in the car crashes – does the car do the same?

But for this dark cloud there is an even bigger silver lining. By their very nature, you can own and drive an autonomous car even if you’re underage, blind, or in any other way impaired, and proponents of this technology argue that autonomous cars will also be able to drastically reduce the amount of traffic accidents, as a computer can react to an oncoming collision much faster than a human can. And if there’s enough of them on the road at once, they would be able to work together to improve traffic flow and eliminate traffic jams. While you’re at it, say goodbye to full parking spaces and speed cameras – a self-driving car would always stay under the speed limit, and multiple people could own the same car, driving itself to you as and when you need it, like a personal chauffer.

It is a bright future for the robot car, and it’s a future that’s quickly approaching.

Word Count: 508