

Somebody Used to Sit There

There is a particular kind of silence that only exists inside a taxi. Not the silence before conversation. The silence after it. The driver has just told you something unexpectedly personal. A divorce. A country he misses. A restaurant that failed during the pandemic. Now both of you are looking forward through the windshield as if nothing unusual just happened. Then the light changes, and the ride continues. These moments are small enough to forget almost immediately. Cities are built from millions of them anyway.

That arrangement lasted a surprisingly long time. Ancient Romans hired carts to cross crowded streets. Seventeenth-century Europeans flagged down coaches for hire. The vehicles changed over the centuries but the social structure barely did. One stranger needed to go somewhere. Another stranger knew the way.

Ride-sharing apps, arriving around 2009, streamlined the transaction without dismantling it. Passengers no longer had to stand in bad weather hoping a cab would appear. They could track their driver, pay automatically, and avoid arguments over directions. The system became faster and more predictable, and most people were genuinely grateful for the improvement.

What is being proposed now feels different in kind, not just degree. Companies like Waymo and Tesla are investing billions into autonomous taxis: vehicles designed to carry passengers without drivers, steering wheels, or pedals. Waymo alone recently raised sixteen billion dollars in new funding and is expanding into more than twenty American cities. The broader autonomous vehicle industry is projected to reach \$87 billion by 2030. The justification is straightforward: human beings cause the vast majority of traffic accidents. A computer does not drink, panic, or glance at its phone. Replace the human with software and the roads become safer.

The argument has genuine force. More than a million people die in traffic accidents globally every year, and any meaningful reduction in that number would matter. But the conversation about automation tends to narrow quickly around efficiency and almost never asks whether efficiency should always be the deciding factor.

Driving is not only transportation. In many cities, it is one of the few remaining occupations that requires no expensive credentials and no institutional connections. Immigrants drive, retirees drive, and people recovering from layoffs drive. A failed business owner can be behind the wheel within days. The work is exhausting and inconsistent, but it remains one of the last economic entry points open to almost anyone. Automation will not erase the need those people have for income. It will simply remove one of the places they could still find it.

Still, the economic argument is probably not the most important one. The more unsettling possibility is that driverless taxis may fit perfectly into a society that many people have already started building for themselves.

Modern urban life contains an enormous amount of managed avoidance. Food arrives at apartment doors without anyone exchanging names. Headphones signal a desire not to be approached. Phones fill every gap that might otherwise produce accidental conversation. In cities full of millions of people, it is possible to move through an entire day without genuinely interacting with a single stranger. Many passengers already practice this inside cars. They retreat into their screens the moment they get in, and some drivers have learned to read the silence professionally, the way bartenders learn when not to ask questions. The silent robotaxi is not arriving in opposition to public behavior. In some ways, it is arriving because of it.

That is what makes the question genuinely uncomfortable. The loss may not feel dramatic when it happens. Most people will adapt almost instantly to a quieter, more efficient ride. Some will prefer it. And yet something real disappears when every encounter in public life becomes something people can choose to opt out of entirely.

Drivers carry stories that surface without warning. A retired military officer mentions a son he just discovered through a DNA testing website. A young man from overseas, days away from his wedding, asks a stranger for advice he will actually take. A former stuntman describes what Hollywood looks like from the bottom of the industry. None of these conversations happen because anyone planned them. They happen because two people are briefly stuck together and one of them starts talking. The city outside the window is the same city it always was. The person in the front seat is the part that changes each time.

Technology companies have a word for that kind of unpredictability. They call it friction, and the goal is to eliminate it. Yet even as companies remove human workers from the equation, they also understand that people still want to feel a human presence on the other end. Some have developed software that generates fake keyboard sounds during chatbot conversations, so customers think a real person is typing back. They are not restoring human contact. They are simulating it. The simulation is not incidental. It is the product. Each step removes one more situation in which people must deal with someone whose life looks nothing like their own.

Convenience has a direction. It moves consistently toward less contact, less friction, and fewer obligations to strangers. The problem is that obligations to strangers are part of what holds a society together. We have been here before. Every new platform arrives promising to bring people closer, and somehow they end up further apart. The tools keep improving. The distance keeps growing.

A driverless taxi will pull up to the curb. The door will unlock. The route will be optimal, the payment invisible, the ride smooth and silent. Nobody will glance back at you in the rearview mirror. Nobody will say anything that stays with you for reasons you cannot entirely explain.

The seat at the front of the car will still be there.

Somebody just will not be sitting there anymore.

- 1) Would you feel comfortable riding in a completely driverless taxi?
- 2) Have you ever had a memorable or unusual conversation with a taxi driver?
- 3) What are the biggest problems with the current taxi system, and how would you improve it?
- 4) Do you usually talk to drivers, or do you prefer silence during rides?
- 5) Why do you think many people avoid talking to strangers today?
- 6) Do you think convenience is making modern life less social?
- 7) Should companies replace human workers with technology whenever it becomes cheaper or more efficient?
- 8) If technology removes small everyday interactions, does society lose something important?
- 9) What kinds of human experiences cannot truly be replaced by technology?
- 10) Do you think technology is making people lonelier, or are deeper social changes more responsible?

The pandemic	(exp)	used by English speakers without further explanation to refer specifically to the global COVID-19 outbreak that began in 2020	A lot of the habits people picked up during the pandemic, like ordering groceries online and working from home, just never went away.
Arrangement	(n)	a system, plan, or set of conditions that has been agreed upon or that exists between people or groups	The two neighbors had a simple arrangement: one collected the mail whenever the other was out of town.
Coach	(n)	a horse-drawn carriage used to transport passengers, especially in historical contexts	A journey that now takes two hours by train would have meant three days cramped inside a coach back in the eighteenth century.
Streamlined	(adj)	made simpler, faster, or more efficient by removing unnecessary steps or elements	After the merger, the hiring process was so streamlined that candidates heard back within a week instead of waiting over a month.
Dismantle	(v)	to take apart or gradually destroy a system, structure, or organization piece by piece	It took decades to build the public transit network, but the new administration began to dismantle it within its first six months in office.
Degree	(n)	the extent or level to which something exists	The two proposals were similar in structure but differed in degree, with one offering nearly twice the funding of the other.
Pedal	(n)	a foot-operated lever used to control a machine, vehicle, or instrument	He stalled the car three times in the parking lot because he could not coordinate the clutch and accelerator pedals.

Project	(v)	to estimate or forecast a future amount, level, or outcome based on current information or trends	The city projects that its population will grow by around fifteen percent over the next two decades, which means more schools and housing will be needed soon.
Credential	(n)	a qualification, certificate, or piece of evidence that proves a person's ability or right to do something	She had years of hands-on experience but lacked the formal credentials most employers required, so she enrolled in a certification program.
Unsettling	(adj)	causing a feeling of anxiety or unease that is difficult to explain	There was something unsettling about the way he smiled all the way through the meeting, even when the news was clearly not good.
Signal	(v)	to indicate or communicate something indirectly, without stating it explicitly	Not responding to emails within a reasonable time signals that you either do not care or cannot manage your workload, and most people will assume the worst.
Retreat	(v)	to withdraw from a situation or move into something safer or more comfortable, especially to avoid difficulty	After a long week, she would retreat to her apartment, turn her phone off, and spend the whole Saturday doing nothing in particular.
Opt out	(phr v)	to choose not to participate in something that is available or that others are doing	Staff were enrolled in the new health scheme by default but could opt out at any point by filling in a short form.
Surface	(v)	to appear or become known after being hidden, forgotten, or unnoticed for some time	Old resentments between the two co-founders began to surface the moment the company started making serious money.
Friction	(n)	in a business or technology context, any difficulty, inconvenience, or resistance that slows down a process or discourages people from taking an action	The checkout process had too much friction, and customers were abandoning their carts before ever completing the purchase.
Simulate	(v)	to imitate or reproduce the appearance, feeling, or conditions of something real	Pilots train in machines designed to simulate emergency scenarios so they can practice their responses without any actual risk.

Incidental	(adj)	not the main purpose or focus; happening as a minor or unplanned result of something else	The trip was officially a work assignment, so any sightseeing was purely incidental.
Obligation	(n)	something a person is morally, socially, or legally required or expected to do	She felt a genuine obligation to be honest with her students even when the feedback was not what they wanted to hear.
Optimal	(adj)	the best or most effective possible under a given set of conditions	The doctor explained that early morning was the optimal time to take the medication since the body absorbs it better before eating.

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