

Why Smashing Teslas Won't Save the Planet—or Prove a Point

By Theodore Dalrymple

One of the characteristics of our age is both the intensity and the shallowness with which people hold their opinions and likewise experience their emotions. They are inclined to believe that the more vehemently they express themselves, the more strongly and sincerely they believe or deeply they feel, when the opposite is often nearer the truth. It is not surprising, then, that gestures take the place of thought.



The burnt-out remains of a Tesla electric car in the Steglitz district in Berlin, Germany, on March 14, 2025. Omer Messinger/Getty Images

The reaction against Tesla cars is a case in point. Not very long ago, they were considered a powerful tool in saving the

planet from the ravages of climate change, which was believed by many to be the greatest threat facing humanity—indeed, threatening it with total extinction.

Now, a few months later, they are symbols of absolute evil because of their connection with Elon Musk, and the people who a few months ago were helping to save the planet are now trading them in, refusing to buy another, or even vandalizing them wherever they find them.

First, let me say that I have no shares in the company, so I have no personal axe to grind. Second, I admit to a certain skepticism about the supposed benefits of the switch to electric vehicles. Even if the theory of anthropogenic global warming caused by carbon dioxide emissions were wholly correct, I am not sure that the balance would be entirely in favor of electric vehicles, though I admit to not having studied the question closely or having the technical competence to do so. But where is all the electricity to power them to come from, and what is the cost (in pollution) of ensuring sufficient outlets for recharging? Are not the batteries produced with minerals mined often in abominable and highly polluting conditions, and largely fabricated in a country, China, that is building coal-fired power stations in order to keep up with demand? Are electric vehicles not extremely heavy, possibly to the detriment of infrastructure? How will the batteries be recycled? And so on and so forth.

No doubt there will be technical solutions to these problems, and let us assume—as until very recently it was assumed—that the purchase of a Tesla car was virtuous from the point of view of saving the biosphere of the planet from further degradation. What sense would it then make to trade in such a car already in your possession because of a fit of rage or disgust against the chief executive of the company that made it?

The argument in favor of electric cars is that we humans face

an existential crisis. The seas are rising, the glaciers and ice caps are melting, insect-borne diseases are spreading, islands are sinking, species are going extinct, the polar bears are sweltering, heat stroke is becoming epidemic, and New York will soon be under water. This is surely not a time for empty gestures, let alone for harmful ones.

What does trading in a Tesla do for the health of the planet, which only a short time ago needed you to purchase such a car in order to save it from the harms done by the internal combustion engine?

It seems to me unlikely that those who trade in their Tesla, which is still in perfect working order, will go without a personal vehicle for very long: they will have to buy another. After all, conditions of modern life make the possession of such a vehicle essential for the majority of the population.

The replacement vehicle will come at considerable cost to the environment, which shortly before was cherished, at least in theory, like a newborn infant in intensive care. Meanwhile, the traded-in vehicle, though perfectly usable, might very well remain unsold, given the sentiment against Tesla that is now commonplace. If it is not sold, it will eventually have to be scrapped, which is not the best outcome for the planet. The difficulty of selling it will be all the greater because of the fear of vandalism or of social disapprobation that any purchasers will now have, and, in any case, sales of second-hand electric cars were already plummeting before the turn against Tesla: they were not easy to shift because of increasing consumer skepticism.

As for the vandalism itself, it is a manifestation of a growing lack of self-control when it comes to the expression of disapproval. Statues are pulled down, paintings defaced, chief executives menaced, death threats posted, all in the name of a supposed moral purification. But a Tesla car is someone's property; he or she might be very proud of it or

have gone to some sacrifice to buy it. For the vandal, none of this is of any importance: most Tesla owners are comparatively well-off, and the well-off are legitimate targets of hatred even without their Teslas.

Now if anyone *really* believed that humanity faced an existential environmental crisis, arguments against destroying or trading in Tesla cars would prevail over distaste for Elon Musk, however strong it might be. After all, he is but a temporary phenomenon, and all that he does may be reversed, given the nature of political life in America. But the supposed existential threat is much larger than that posed by any one man, and we must all do our little bit to prevent the catastrophe that will otherwise overwhelm us. That is the reason, or one of the reasons, that people bought Tesla cars in the first place.

The sell-off of Tesla cars demonstrates how shallow is the belief in the so-called climate emergency, however shrill and emotional may be people's pronouncements on it. They are soon enough distracted by something else that catches their attention, and that is not untypical of modern life. There are gusts of moral enthusiasm, soon followed by counterblasts of some other enthusiasm.

In essence, this is frivolous, but such frivolity is not good fun, as some frivolity is. When frivolity is combined with earnestness, which is the appearance of seriousness without the substance of seriousness, it can do great harm. Among other things, moral frivolity can tear the fabric of a country apart. There are no doubt arguments both in favor of and against electric vehicles, but fear of vandalism should not enter them.

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