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Philosophy and NASCAR

Jake Bates, Editor

Philosophy is typically considered a thought-provoking science appropriately reserved for discussion between “intellectuals,” and NASCAR contrarily carries a stigma of uneducated masses of fans supporting a racer of their choice with a frequently drunken passion. Thus, the marriage of these two topics may seem entirely inappropriate. Despite their conflicting stereotypes, philosophy and NASCAR must not necessarily be separated. Philosophy—at least the right philosophy—exalts the use of the mind in furthering man’s capabilities and simultaneously seeks to understand the limitations imposed by nature. It is the science presented and, ideally, answering questions such as “Where am I?,” “How can I discover it?,” and “What should I do?”¹ The use of a rational mind is what supplies the answers to philosophers and NASCAR drivers alike.

In wondering “Where am I?,” NASCAR drivers, just as the renowned scientists of the Renaissance, must analyze their metaphysical surroundings. There are many aspects of the world which are beyond a driver’s control, but must be within their consideration. The laws of physics are still being discovered and elaborated upon on a daily basis; and while we have come to fly airplanes by understanding and applying Bernoulli’s principle, we recognize that a *homo sapien* will never fly unaided. NASCAR drivers likewise must understand the properties of the world speeding past them. After all, the job of a driver is to manipulate their vehicle, not the physical laws acting on it. If these physical laws are left unconsidered, the results are sure to show the kind of scene which leaves emptiness as an unavoidable gut reaction—cars spinning beyond hope of control and ditches littered with refuse consumed by violent conflagration.

In answering “How can I discover it?,” the science behind the racing must be known as infallible. Drivers must recognize that the laws of physics are consistent—not only unwilling to bend to their whims, but unwilling to bend at any moment’s notice for any reason at all. They must rely on and trust the science, their senses and a great deal of technology utilized

1 From Ayn Rand’s West Point Academy commencement address “Philosophy: Who Needs It” on March 6, 1974.

in racing. If any person doubted their senses, they certainly would not be audacious enough to drive, let alone at such high speeds. While drivers communicate with crew chiefs constantly, they must also understand that the crew chief's senses and the technology used to facilitate the communication are dependable, lest they fend for themselves not recognizing their surroundings or their ability to interpret them. Having answered "Where am I?" and "How can I discover it?," what follows is an answer vital to success: the answer to "What should I do?"

In the words of Ayn Rand, "The fact that a living entity *is*, determines what it *ought* to do."² Similarly, a NASCAR driver's location and the laws of nature which he works with directly determine what action must be taken. What ought to be done in every situation is dependent upon a prior understanding of their surroundings, specifically their precise location and the way forces act upon cars in such situations. The man-made, then, must be created and manipulated with the purpose of victory, not in defiance of, but in accordance with their metaphysical surroundings. Understanding the peculiar nuances that make each racetrack unique and the manner in which an automobile acts when directed in a variety of ways is essential. As the banking of racetracks varies anywhere from three degrees to over twenty degrees, cars behave differently. As straightaways are longer on some tracks than others, the timing with which drivers release the throttle in favor of the brake pedal must be precise. Because some tracks have tighter turns than others, the car must be set up in such a way as to handle its circumstances perfectly. Additionally, the weather becomes an issue of consideration. In the final race of the most recent season, NASCAR drivers and their crews found themselves adjusting strategies as rain encroached on the track. Some made pit stops prior to the rain, hoping the race would quickly resume but leaving them further behind when rain brought a delay, while others chose to postpone their pit stops until after the rain, propelling them to the front of the pack before the delay. On this occasion, the former strategy proved successful. Whether regarding an aspect of a racetrack or the weather, drivers must understand how to achieve their goals given the surroundings beyond their control.

In NASCAR, dozens, if not hundreds, of man-made achievements

2 From Ayn Rand's essay "The Objectivist Ethics" in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 18.

as old as the wheel and as modern as a 5866 cc FR layout engine come together for use in sport. Competition has surely been one of mankind's most exhilarating pleasures spanning generations and civilizations. Now, nearly every Sunday for several months of the year, NASCAR's competition makes use of rubber, steel, oil, concrete, plastic, wrenches, hammers, and welding torches, among other substances and tools. Utilizing the automobile—indisputably one of the crowning achievements of the twentieth century—forty-three racers per week travel over two-hundred miles per hour, with millimeters separating their bumpers and thousandths of seconds deciding their positions. A quick 1.306 seconds decided the first and second-place finishers in the final race of last year's season, placing them first and second, respectively, in the final standings for the year. Over 400 miles of one race, 1.306 seconds is the difference of drops of fuel being conserved, a couple Newtons of force exerted on gas and brake pedals, and split-seconds of difference in the speed with which pit crew members turn wrenches just several degrees more. NASCAR's competition undeniably offers one of the finest exhibitions of man manipulating machine. Through thousands of miles each season, those drivers who best understand and answer "Where am I?," "How do I know it?," and "What should I do?" emerge as champions.