

Zen and the Art of Lancia Maintenance

Steve Taylor applies his love of philosophy to his love of Lancias, and concludes that things aren't always what they seem.

Here's an article for the Journal/News Sheet along the lines of nothing I've ever read in it before. I have often felt that the study of philosophy has an important contribution to make to vehicle restoration and maintenance, and this article is an attempt to put that into practice.

Recently, while reading another August motoring journal, I was reminded of the need occasionally not to regard a car as a single indivisible unit. This immediately struck a chord with me, after replacing the four-into-one

part of my 2000 Coupé's exhaust. The system can no longer be regarded just as an exhaust pipe – rather, it is like the EEC – an apparently incompatible collection of entities which somehow muddle along together in a noisy and sometimes heated manner.

Never one to put an original idea onto paper, I thought it might be of use to despairing owners of irrevocably problematic vehicles to expand on this thought a bit.

We are accustomed, are we not, to reading about each other's cars and treating them as identifiable entities. It seems reasonable to suppose that after reading about a particular car in this journal, were we to encounter that car at an event or meeting, it would correspond to what we had read about. But it is

not always so. When we read a road test of the new Bloggs Phantom, what we read applies not only to the particular car the tester drove, but to all the cars like it that have been made, and others not yet made. Does my copy of the book *The Lancia Fulvia and Flavia* refer only to the two cars on the cover? Of course not. It refers to all the cars ever made which have been given those names (and some others, for that matter). There are numerous ways of interpreting 'The Beta Coupé' (said in general) – it can be all the Beta Coupés that have ever existed, all the ones that exist now, a sort of idealised one that doesn't actually exist, or even the sensations associated with owning or driving one. Or lots of other ideas.

I make these points simply to highlight the problem of identifying anything, which is closely associated with the problem I really want to deal with – that of the Self, which I am beginning to realise could have crucial implications for all of us in the LMC.

We are all, I take it, owners of non-new Lancias and we refer to them as 'The Red Car' (mock indifference to the thing) 'My Aurelia B20GT' (justifiable pride), 'Ethel' (anthropomorphism) etc. How many of the major components will have been changed by now? Is there a single original part on the car? If I restore a basket case from beyond the grave is it really the *same* car?

Ever changing entities. Is this Flavia the same as it was yesterday? Depends on your point of view . . .



'We assume that the car we refer to now, in 1993, is the same car as we were talking about in 1992, 1991, and as far back as the history of the car goes. Is this reasonable?'

Supposing I see an ad. for something particularly desirable and find out, on enquiry, that 'it's all in bits'. There is a lock-up somewhere that has all the parts of a certain car, and they just need assembling. We would say that this is a car in bits. Suppose then that I buy the engine, someone else buys the gearbox, someone else gets the interior, and so on. Pretty soon we would no longer say that this is a car in bits, even though all the parts still exist and have not yet been incorporated into other cars. When does a car stop being one, and, in the case of cars made post-production like some Stratos, when does it become one?

I could go on like this for ages but of course you get the point. It is almost an accident of nature that cars are things that we feel confident about referring to and identifying repeatedly, whereas clouds and stomach pains are not. We go on to suppose that cars have selves, and that, however much we hack them to bits, there is some essence of *that car* which remains.

'Suffering is an unavoidable part of human existence'

The most conspicuous expression of the illusory nature of the Self is in the central doctrine of Buddhism. Quite simply, Buddhist doctrine says that there is no soul and there is no self. What appears to be the self is actually an ever-changing bundle of perceptions, desires, sensations and thoughts associated with a body.

And this doesn't just apply to people. Even the mountains, the Buddha said, are changing – all is impermanent. I would suggest that members of the Lancia Motor Club, for their own mental well-being, would do well to take a leaf out of this book. (Incidentally, LMC members already partially subscribe to Buddhist belief in their adherence to the idea of reincarnation and the fundamental point that suffering is an unavoidable part of human existence.)

When we acquire our cars they are either a) perfect, and we intend to keep them that way, or b) could do with improvement, and we fantasise about how good they are going to be after our rigorous restoration efforts. Unfortunately, thanks to the fact that, like everything else, they change, we are sooner or later disappointed. The once-perfect concours winner deteriorates, and the improvements we bring about in less impressive vehicles are balanced by unplanned changes to the car's structure brought about by rust and general age.

'An ever changing sideshow'

But if we accept that what sits outside the house is not a fixed entity, but an ever-changing sideshow, we can delight in these erstwhile frustrations. Daffodils would hardly be the stuff of famous poetry if they just sat there in flower day in day out for ever. No – they partake in a cycle of events which makes the world more inspiring and interesting to live in. The car can be part of this – thought of as an engine with pistons gradually sinking away from their bores, a gearbox turning to iron filings, and bodywork in stages of ecdysis as well-documented as that of any snake, and the fact that you can get in the thing and go anywhere will be a constant source of delight, on the occasions when you can actually do so. If you find that you are the proud owner of a car fitted with a self,

remove it – it is only put there by your overactive imagination.

So, if our cars don't have selves, are they there at all? Why bother adjusting the handbrake, if it's an illusion? (A sentiment that any Flavia owner would readily agree with.) If I actually *do* own a car, what is it? Or as the French would say, what is it that it is?

'Your car is a process'

If you're still influenced by anything I'm saying, I'd venture to suggest that you should consider you car as a *process*. Processes are normally things like parenthood, going to sleep, *Tosca*, and hypnosis. Not solid things like cars. But if you consider yours to be one, the benefits will be unimaginable. You will become attuned to the fact that the car is measured not just in mass and length but in time, too. And then the real benefit of classic car ownership unfolds – the fact is that most cars are described by a constant process of atrophy. They are built, they get driven, they go wrong, and they fall apart. With classic cars, there is no guarantee at all that things will happen in this order, and that's what makes them interesting. (I might say it's what makes concours very *uninteresting*, to me, anyway).

Now, there is one more thing to do to make your enjoyment of Lancias complete. There are two elements to your membership of the LMC – your car or cars, and you. If you can stomach the idea of your car being a process, you can probably do the same for people – after all their body cells are constantly regenerating and their thoughts wander all the time. So, the car is an ever-changing process, and so is the driver – even more so. Now you're really motoring . . .

* They say that everything in the Universe vibrates. My Gamma does it brilliantly. Me, I'm a severe existentialist. It's my steak, my Gamma, my beer and my dogs – it doesn't bother me whether it's an illusion or reality, I enjoy it regardless.

Jack Romano