



Charged, but unchanged: The EV delusion



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Every civilisation in crisis reaches first for the solution that requires it to change the least. This is not cowardice; it is the structural behaviour of the human ego, which will accept any modification to its tools before it will accept an examination of its wants. The current response to the climate emergency follows this pattern with remarkable fidelity: we will change the engine, we will change the fuel, we will change the grid that charges the fuel; but what we will not change, what we are constitutionally unwilling to even place on the table, is the question of why we must travel this far, this fast, this privately, this incessantly, and what exactly we believe we are moving towards.

In the domain of transport, this pattern has found its most consequential expression in the electric vehicle, and the case for it is built on a mathematical error so fundamental that correcting it changes everything. The error is in treating per-vehicle emissions as the relevant unit of measurement, when the actual problem is the product of two variables: how much each vehicle emits, and how many vehicles there are. The EV addresses the first, but leaves the second not only unaddressed but actively growing, because the desire to own a private vehicle is rooted in something no battery has ever touched: the ego's assertion of separateness, its claim to status, its demand to feel that it has arrived. Improve the rate all you want; if the volume grows faster, total emissions rise. This is not a philosophical observation but arithmetic, and the entire EV consensus has been built on leaving it incomplete. The electric vehicle is, by the metrics that matter, a better machine than its petrol counterpart; that fact is not being contested here, and it should be stated plainly before what follows.

The equation nobody completes

A serious climate thinker would say: the EV is one lever among many in a systems-level transition that includes grid decarbonisation, urban redesign, and behavioural change. This is precisely wrong. Behavioural change is not happening at all; it is what the EV was purchased to make unnecessary. The EV does not function as one lever among many; it functions as the lever that releases the hand from the others. The global fleet stood at 1.31 billion in 2020 and is projected to reach 2.21 billion by 2050, with growth concentrated almost entirely in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. The number of vehicles is driven by the ego's claim on mobility, its

insistence on closing the gap between current life and the imagined life of arrival, and, as Jevons observed in 1865 (Jevons Paradox), efficiency gains expand consumption. The EV makes driving cheaper per mile. The ego will use more of it.

The numbers the optimists skip

Consider India, because India makes the calculation most visible. India today has thirty-four cars for every thousand people; the United States has eight hundred and thirty-two. That gap is not merely a statistic; it is an aspiration, and it is not alien to you. It is yours, or it was yours, or it belongs to someone you love, and the EV has made it easier to hold because now it comes with a green conscience attached. India's total vehicle stock is projected to more than double from 226 million to 494 million by 2050; given India's coal-heavy grid, battery EVs currently offer as little as 5 per cent greenhouse gas reduction compared to the existing fleet, and India's grid profile is shared by China, Indonesia, Vietnam, South Africa, and Poland, the majority of the world's fastest-growing vehicle markets. Around 90 per cent of all federal EV tax credits in the United States went to the top income quintile, and in many cases the EV joins rather than replaces the existing petrol car. The footprint grew. The conscience improved.

The driver has not changed

The second variable is driven by the ego, and no improvement to the vehicle reaches the ego, because the vehicle was never primarily a transportation device; it is an ego-object, and the EV is the same ego-object with a cleaner engine. The personal car is a metaphor for the ego itself:

sealed, self-directed, insulated from the world it passes through; the driver need never adjust her pace to another's, never sit beside someone she did not choose; the

car privatises existence. The electric car is the same assertion, now quieter and cleaner, with the sealed pod intact, the insulation from others intact, and the declaration that one has the right to move through the world on one's own terms, answerable to no shared constraint, entirely undisturbed. This is not incidental to the appeal; it is precisely the appeal, the thing the engineering cannot touch. For the ego that is educated, concerned, and unwilling to relinquish the life it has built, the EV is a salvation narrative: nothing needs to fundamentally change, everything can continue, merely repowered. It arrives in a lineage of such instruments—carbon offset certificates, biofuels, mass tree-planting campaigns—each offering action without transformation and leaving the root intact.

The crisis inside the conscience

The EV is only one expression of a more fundamental error: the belief that the climate crisis is external, amenable to external solutions, and that the inner condition of the person driving the machine is not a relevant variable. The climate crisis is not a product of bad engineering. It is the

ego's inner condition made legible at civilisation-scale. The United States Department of Defense emits an estimated fifty to sixty million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent annually, exceeding the total national emissions of Sweden, Norway, or Denmark, and none of it enters any EV lifecycle calculation; it is invisible not because it is unmeasurable but because the ego has arranged that its climate conscience and its geopolitical preferences occupy separate drawers, never to be opened at the same time. The average long-haul return flight produces more carbon dioxide per passenger than most people in lower-income countries produce in an entire year; you, if you are the EV-driving, climate-aware professional this piece is addressing, likely fly, and each flight is filed in a different mental category from the car, because reconciling them would require examining what the life costs in full, and that examination is what the EV was purchased to make unnecessary. The climate crisis is not a problem the ego has. It is a problem the ego is.

The question that has never been asked

The question the entire EV conversation has avoided is not what we should drive, but why each human being needs to own a private vehicle at all, and what is the incompleteness in us that the private pod is being recruited to fill. That question cannot be answered by a lifecycle analysis, because it concerns not the machine but the one who cannot imagine living without it. And that one is you, the reader, not a generalised consumer, but you, with your own relationship to mobility, to independence, to the freedom from dependence that the private vehicle provides. What is that freedom, exactly? What does it protect you from? What would it cost you to find out?

The technology will improve. The grid will decarbonise. The per-vehicle figures will fall further, and those who have staked their environmental conscience on the battery will cite each improvement as confirmation. None of it changes what has not been asked; it only makes the not-asking more comfortable, more technically defensible, more elaborately self-justified. The engine changes. The fuel changes. The sticker on the number plate changes. The centre from which all of it is driven, the restless, acquisitive, self-enclosed centre that needed the car, needed the military, needed the house, needed the flight, does not change at all. And it is that centre, not the combustion chamber, that is the crisis. It will not be resolved by anything that leaves you untouched. And you know this. The question is only whether that knowledge is something you can afford to stay with.



Acharya Prashant is a teacher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life

