

Why Is There No Speed Limit on the Autobahn

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Germany is famous for its strictness in rules, especially the ones that greatly concern safety and lives, for example, the traffic rules. Munger (2018) described his experience trying to jaywalk at a crosswalk in Munich when an old lady struck him as hard as she could with her umbrella and yelled “Kindermörder (child murderer)” at him because jaywalking by adults would set a bad example for children and could get them killed. When pedestrians take traffic rules seriously in Germany, it is only reasonable to suspect that traffic rules for driving are also very strict; however, a worldwide traffic rule is missing in Germany, which is the speed limit on highways. On 70% of the autobahn, there is no speed limit and drivers can go as fast as they want (McCarthy 2019); the average travel speed of automobiles on unrestricted autobahns is 141.8 km/h (88 mph) (Scholz, Schmallowsky, & Wauer 2007), which is much faster than most speed limits in other countries.

The absence of speed limits on autobahns raises two puzzles: of all the places in the world, why does Germany, a nation so fond of rules, not have speed limits on autobahns and what are the conditions that ensure traffic order on the autobahn? In this essay, I will argue that Germany does not have speed limits on autobahns because of three main reasons: economically, the government does not impose speed limits on autobahns to support the prestigious German automotive industry; culturally, the autobahn represents superior German manufacturing and symbolizes personal freedom, which are the qualities that associate with the nation’s identity. Finally, traffic order and safety on the autobahn are ensured despite the absence of speed limits thanks to existing state regulations on road conditions, vehicle standards, and the acquisition of a driver’s license, which set good norms of compliance with traffic rules and better traffic order, allowing more freedom of speed and more enjoyable road safety as a public good on the autobahn.

The German automotive industry is incredibly successful and enjoys an excellent reputation domestically and internationally: it is the largest industrial sector that symbolizes high-

quality engineering and industrial strength. According to Fortune 500 (2021), three of the world's top ten most profitable automotive companies were from Germany, including Volkswagen in the first place, Mercedes-Benz Group, and BMW. Employees in the automotive sector counted for 2% of the total labor force and it generated 24% of total domestic industry revenue in 2022. In the global market, 23% of premium vehicles were produced in Germany, and every 1 in 5 vehicles manufactured worldwide was a German brand (Zhang 2022). Automobiles are undoubtedly vital to the German economy. World-famous luxury brands such as Porsche, Mercedes-Benz, BMW, and Audi take the prestige of German vehicles to the next level. However, high-quality acceleration, steering, and balance of a vehicle cannot unleash its optimal performance when drivers can only go up to 60 mph. As a result, the German government accommodated the industry of high-performance vehicles in the legislation of traffic rules and decided that no speed limits on autobahns would allow the automotive industry to thrive because it encourages domestic consumers to buy German vehicles and bring them on the autobahn where those fast and precise vehicles can be easily distinguished from others.

Beyond the economic power of the automotive industry, the autobahn has also become a part of German culture and identity, as automobiles are the first few things that come to mind when people talk about their impression of Germany. To drive at high speeds without tardiness or inaccuracy, one needs vehicles that are competent of it. Thus, the autobahn signals that German vehicles are capable of performing exceptionally on it. In the eye of international consumers, the autobahn brings a unique quality and irreplaceable reputation to German automobiles, and in a broader perspective, it serves as a symbol of high-quality German engineering, a part of the identity that Germany is proud of. As a commercial implication, Volkswagen named its high-performance trims “Autobahn”, such as VW Jetta Autobahn and Golf GTI Autobahn. On top of that, the

autobahn is an icon in pop culture since traveling on the freeway that takes you wherever you want to go often characterizes freedom, especially with the element of unlimited speed, which inspired TV series, movies, video games, and music associated with it. In 1974, the famous German electronic band Kraftwerk produced a song and album “Autobahn” and used an autobahn as the cover for it to symbolize individual mobility, freedom, and a bright future for the young generation in postwar Germany (Schütte 2017).

Fast cars and unrestricted roads appear to make a dangerous combination since speeding could cause more severe traffic accidents because of heavier impacts. However, German autobahns have proven to be relatively safe regarding fatal accidents. In a report by the German Federal Highway Research Institute (2021), 1.41 people were killed per 1 billion kilometers of vehicles traveled on motorways in Germany, compared to 3.45 in the U.S., 2.13 in France, and 3.66 in Italy in 2019. Even when 70% of autobahns do not have speed limits, fatal accidents happen less often on them than on American, French, or Italian motorways which have speed limits. Taylor (1982) argued that social order is a public good that can be provided by the state, the market, and the community. A public good is non-excludable, non-rival, and jointly supplied by users. I argue that road safety qualifies as a public good that is provided by enhancing traffic orders and road quality. Road safety is not exclusive because it is enjoyed by all drivers and none of them can be kept from being safe. It is not rival, wherein some drivers’ consumption does not take away others’ chances to consume. At last, road safety requires all traffic participants to drive safely to provide traffic orders in which a driver’s safe behavior enhances other drivers’ safety.

In most countries, road safety is partly provided by the government in the form of speed limits which determines the maximum (and sometimes minimum) speed travelers should go. Speed limits are imposed primarily out of concern for travelers’ safety. Because of that logic, people tend

to take speed limits for granted in terms of making driving safer and forget that as long as the vehicle is in good condition and it does not hit anything, it is unlikely that going high speed will definitely cause accidents. It is usually the disrespect of driving rules, poor vehicle conditions, or incompetency of good driving that causes collisions. From this standpoint, speed limits touch on the surface but fail to resolve the causes of traffic accidents. Alternatively, without speed limits, traffic orders could be left up to the drivers themselves, relying upon norms and rules that allow the public good of road safety to be provided. Nevertheless, traffic orders do not emerge naturally; prior institutions that set the rules and norms of driving are necessary to promote traffic orders and safe behaviors on the roads. In the upcoming paragraphs, I will use the autobahn as an example to demonstrate that freedom from speed limit is desirable thanks to regulations that are in place to ensure good traffic conditions.

In Germany, the state's efforts in keeping the autobahns safe cannot be ignored, which is reflected in the high quality of autobahns and high-disciplined drivers. Autobahns are made of multiple layers of concrete and are regularly inspected to ensure that the road condition is good enough for high-speed traveling. Opposite lanes are separated by landscaped green medians or guardrails, which disallow passing on the opposite lanes and prevent head-on collisions when both could lead to fatal accidents. Beyond road conditions, the federal government also heavily regulates the cars and drivers that get on the road. By law, all vehicles in use for more than three years must be inspected yearly to test if the vehicles meet safety standards and are in good condition. On top of all these regulations and maintenance, getting a driver's license in Germany is much more complicated than in the U.S. One must be 18 years old, pass the theoretical exam, and take a first-aid course before training at driving schools for the practical exam. It is obligatory that throughout the training, learners will experience driving in several settings, including darkness,

rural areas, and the autobahn. Licensing for automatic and manual transmission vehicles are separated, as obtaining a driver's license for manual vehicles, which is allowed to operate both transmission types, requires the driver to be tested in a manual vehicle.

The regulation of vehicles and the complex process of getting a driver's license seem to take away a lot of individuals' pure negative freedom by restricting their behaviors, as they otherwise might not do the same things without those rules. Nonetheless, I argue that by giving up some degree of liberty collectively, drivers gain more freedom on autobahns because they are in a safer environment to exercise their right to drive and enjoy more desirable traffic order as a public good. Strict vehicle inspection and driver-training institutions yield better traffic conditions and more disciplined drivers by screening out vehicles and drivers that should not go on the autobahn and restricting access to the competent ones, which reduces safety hazards and creates the necessary conditions for unlimited speed on autobahns. As a result, drivers face less risk of being endangered by other drivers and gain more freedom from avoiding being affected by the negative outcomes of others' disruptive behaviors. The existence of rules and a base of more disciplined drivers also promote the compliance of rules and norms on autobahns since traffic order is a public good that every driver demands and benefits from. Therefore, it is rational for drivers to obey traffic rules and norms such as leaving the left lane for fast vehicles, passing only on the left lane instead of randomly on any lane, and keeping a safe distance instead of tailgating cars in the front. Contrary to the tension between anarchy and the state, the leading role of the state in providing traffic safety results in better voluntary compliance with the roles and norms of driving on autobahns which helps maintain safety and make no speed limits desirable.

In the essay, I argued that there is no speed limit on autobahns because the autobahn supports the prestigious and vital German automotive industry and symbolizes high-quality

engineering and personal freedom. To that end, the autobahn is more than a highway but an economic and cultural identity of Germany. The formal institutions that make autobahn safe not only did that by the power of coercion but also by improving compliance and norms that encourage drivers to maintain safety voluntarily. The liberty of drivers seemingly taken away by the state rewards them with more freedom on autobahns as they get to go unlimited speed and worry less about other drivers' destructive behaviors. The next time you visit Germany, feel free to go as fast as you want while following the rules and norms on the autobahn, cheer for the top automotive engineering and freedom, and know that the autobahn is probably the safest highway to do that.

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