

Rolls Royces, Your Ego and Choosing Who You Are Controlled By

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago I made some money selling a big piece of residential property and bought myself a Rolls Royce Phantom. The car cost \$450,000 when it was new but when I got around to buying the car it was used and a year old and thankfully less expensive.

The car was entirely inappropriate for me to buy at the time; however, while at the dealership looking at various used cars I became enamored with its craftsmanship and how beautiful the car seemed. It is a lot of fun to sit in a Rolls Royce Phantom. This particular Rolls Royce had all sorts of ridiculous options and I figured it would be a lot of fun to own the car. In fact, I believed at the time it was a car I would own the rest of my life.

Purchasing the car was an experience in itself. I purchased it from a giant dealership in Pasadena, California called Rusnak. The job of selling Rolls Royces had been given to Andrew Arizmendi, the son-in-law of the owner of the dealership, Paul Rusnak. As Andrew showed me the used car, he kept saying "I like it!!" over and over again. The main selling point he had for the car was that it had been "well thought out" even down to things as small as the power window buttons: "They are shaped like the buttons on musical instruments," he pointed out.

He also showed me that the Rolls Royce was generally not meant to be driven by its owner (and instead a driver) because the steering wheel has a place for the driver to rest their hands where the passengers in back cannot see them.

"It is considered 'uncouth' to see the driver's hands when you are being chauffeured in back," he told me.

Andrew was a nice enough guy at the time and not a bad salesman. He explained to me that the Bentley car was really just an Audi/Volkswagen that was "spiffed up" inside and made to look like a much fancier car and that the Rolls Royce was more original (although it was also based on a 7-Series BMW and shared a lot of parts with this car). When we had finally agreed on a price for the car he led me into a finance office.

Since I only intended to put down a lot of money and had no intention of paying cash for this ridiculously expensive car, I went to meet with the finance manager. Unlike purchasing a Honda, for example, the finance manager had no interest whatsoever in concluding the transaction that day. Because the car was so expensive, he wanted to "shop around" for the best finance rates to multiple banks and stated that this would require lots of work and diligence. In fact, he told me they were going to need a "personal financial statement" and all sorts of things that I had never heard of at the time in order to do the transaction.

Come Monday morning, the finance manager was on the phone and wanting the name of my accountant and other information from me. We spent the week faxing and emailing him all sorts of information. By Friday I still did not have the car. On Monday morning, I still did not have the car.

"What's going on with this?" I asked when I spoke to the finance manager some 10 days after I had thought I had purchased the car.

"We're still trying to get a better rate," he said. "If Chase will do this we might be able to save you \$30 to \$100 a month on your payments."

"Are you kidding?" I asked. "How much longer of a wait are we talking about?"

"I don't know, maybe a few days," he said. "You have to realize this car costs more than the average American home and the sort of financing deal you get can really make a difference."

A few days later and there was still no word on his deal with Chase and I told him I was going to come pick up the car because it seemed stupid to keep waiting so long.

I brought my wife with me to the dealership and I was informed that Andrew had decided to go golfing that day and was unable to deliver the car. The first salesman who delivered the car was Russian and told me that he had sold Rolls Royces in Moscow for many years to oligarchs and so forth. He was a little "rough around the edges" despite being well dressed and ducked out a few times for cigarettes during the car delivery.

The Russian also started telling my wife and I about how he had something called an "American Express Black Card" that the senior Rusnak guy also did. In fact, a lot of the delivery conversation turned around how much money this Russian fellow was making.

"They gave me the black card when I started spending over \$250,000 a year on my American Express Card," he told us.

This seemed really extreme for a car salesman; however, maybe not one who was used to selling Rolls Royces to Moscow oligarchs.

About 30 minutes into the delivery of the car as I was signing the mortgage/car loan, the Russian indicated to me that he was going to go have dinner at an expensive restaurant in Beverly Hills with "someone in the entertainment business" and that someone else would take over delivery of the car. I told him that sounded fine and another salesman came in and told me he would be helping me after I signed all the paperwork. The other salesman was an older guy and a real gentleman. He was very enthusiastic about his job and told me how much he liked working for Paul Rusnak. He told me that Paul took one of the used Rolls Royces up to Pebble Beach to go golfing and when he returned he put a \$100 bill in the ashtray as a "tip" for the person who cleaned the car for him when he returned. The salesman stated that Paul Rusnak believed that if the person who cleaned the car was careful enough to clean inside the ashtray they deserved the \$100.

The salesman started showing me the various features of the car. There were buttons for everything including closing the trunk and other stuff. The car even had umbrellas that were stored inside the back doors.

"What about the satellite radio?" I asked him at one point.

"Did you think the car came with satellite radio?" he asked me.

"Yes, I believe someone indicated it had it somewhere along the line," I told him.

The salesman politely excused himself and seemed very concerned. My wife and I stood around the car for around 10 minutes doing nothing until the salesman reappeared.

"I'm sorry but this car does not come with satellite radio. This was not included on the cars until the 2006 model," he said. He then started telling us that he would call Andrew on the golf course to see what could be done. I did really want the car so I told him that it was perfectly fine that there was no satellite radio in the car.

We drove the car out of the dealership a short time later and I proudly parked my new contraption in front of our house. The car looked entirely inappropriate in front of my house because my neighborhood simply was not up to snuff. I lived at the time in a neighborhood of doctors, executives, lawyers and so forth and people simply do not drive around in these sorts of cars—even if they can afford them—in most neighborhoods.

The next morning I took the car to the office. While I was able to get it into the parking structure, the car had some strange sort of suspension that made stopping over the parking grate at the entrance to the lot very annoying because the car would make this horrible pounding sound in the wheels.

I got a great deal on the car but I had to admit that after parking it in the lot the first day I was somewhat embarrassed. The car was not only huge but incredibly ostentatious. I was not sure why anyone would need such a large car.

As I spent the next few days puzzling over this giant car in my driveway each night, I decided that it would be a nice idea to take a trip with it to San Francisco with my wife and infant daughter. I had a conference I needed to attend there and was excited to bring them along with me.

It took us a few hours longer to get on the road than we expected because my wife was busy swearing at the car. She was having a very difficult time getting the car seat set up in the backseat. I do not think that Rolls Royces are meant for car seats. In any event, we eventually were able to get the car seat installed and were on our way.

Prior to starting the trip I had programmed the navigation system (which was impossible to understand) and about an hour into the trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco it started taking us on all sorts of strange backroads. I really have no idea which way it took us but I know the trip ended up taking us over 12 hours and was very uncomfortable because we were going up and down a lot of hills and riding in a Rolls Royce is similar to riding on a cream puff. The Rolls Royce has a terrible navigation system in it.

The problem with taking this car anywhere is that people think you are really important when you are driving around in it. Numerous times as we were driving through various California back roads people would speed up so they could drive up alongside of us. TWICE during our trip, people pulled alongside of us with cameras and started taking our picture as if we might be someone famous.

My wife and I try and save money whenever possible so we love to go to Sam's Club a lot. One time when I was in Sam's Club with this ridiculous car a guy came up to me:

"I have no idea who you are but I saw the car you came in. Can I have your autograph?" I gave it to him and he seemed ecstatic to have gotten it. The same thing happened to me when I was in line at a gas station once—another guy asked me for my autograph because of the stupid car.

When I got out of the Sam's Club there was a drunk bum standing next to the car.

"I'm not going to lie to you," he said. "I want money to go buy liquor and I thought with this car you would be the sort of person that would give me the money," he said. I gave him some money.

As my wife and I were driving away from Sam's Club I told her that the car was really starting to piss me off and was not fun driving anywhere. Although the car was clearly large enough to hold 12 rolls of kitchen towels and the other bulk items we had purchased, it just did not seem to make any sense. I could not take the car anywhere and driving the car was not particularly fun. I was worried everywhere I took the car and the car just seemed to get far too much attention. There was no reason for me to be getting all this attention and it was not particularly warranted.

The car also had several issues like little rattles and so forth that I could never get to the bottom of. They were particularly enraging because when you own a car like this you do not expect there to be much rattling. So every time I drove the car I ended up being pissed off.

The more I drove the car and the more I saw the world's reaction to it the more I thought that the car might be a symptom that something was wrong with me. Why would anyone need such a car? It was well engineered but that did not mean much. What was it that I was trying to prove and accomplish with this car? Who did I think I was—or, who did I think the car made me seem like? No one needs a Rolls Royce Phantom.

I started to realize what owning this car meant when things started to go wrong with it. One time I took it into the Rusnak Pasadena shop for a regular service and the service person told me it needed two new tires. Without thinking about what the cost might be I told them to replace the tires. The two tires ended up costing me \$4,500 to have them installed. I had clearly been ripped off; however, that's what Rolls Royce has in store for anyone presumptuous enough to purchase one of their cars. Another time I took it into Rusnak Pasadena and they told me they needed to replace a rear "electronic shock" and charged me \$3,500 for this. That was really something.

The be all end all of insults with the car happened, though, when I was backing the car up one evening to take a trip to Palm Springs for a conference. I own an ATV that I love driving around my yard and the hills behind my house. As I was backing up, the ATV's rubber bumper made a small indentation in the door of the Rolls Royce that was no larger than half the size of a finger and no deeper than half a finger nail. In fact, the indentation was so small that you could not even see it from virtually every angle you would look at the car—you needed to be real close to see the indentation. The indentation was no longer than a few words on this page and no deeper than a single letter.

While I was not particularly bothered by the indentation, I decided to have it fixed anyway. I had a \$1,000 deductible on my insurance and figured that it would not cost more than \$200 or so to fix. Boy, was I wrong. I took it to my old friends at Rusnak Rolls Royce in Pasadena and gave them the car. They gave me a loaner Rolls Royce that was apparently Paul Rusnak's personal car. This Rolls Royce was white and very obnoxious looking.

While the speck on my door was being analyzed I was enjoying driving around in Paul's car when one morning I got a call from the dealership.

"Paul wants his car back because he sold it to someone. Your car is out of warranty and we'll see if we can get you another loaner," they told me. "We're going to send a flatbed over to pick it up."

"You're kidding, right?" I asked.

"No. We are coming to pick up the car right now."

"What am I supposed to drive?"

"Don't know," I was told. "But we will see what we can do."

What they did was bring me a very small, KIA car that I looked up online you could buy for under \$8,000-NEW. I was a little surprised that this was the quality of a loaner that Rusnak Rolls Royce was giving me. I called Andrew about this on a few occasions and he told me there was nothing they could do at all unless I purchased a new car that was under warranty. I called a few other people in the dealership about this and was informed by another Rolls Royce salesman that "things were rough" in the economy and they could not help me with a better car.

Two weeks after having the KIA the dealership called me and told me that I needed to return this or else they would start charging me \$29.95 a day. This was hard to believe but this car was returned as well.

Without getting too far into the door incident, Rusnak and its body shop had somehow conspired and figured out how to charge over \$22,000 for the small ding in the door. They also took over six months to complete the job. They made up stories about needing to replace the "crash bars" inside of the door frame and all sorts of stuff that did not make sense. My insurance company covered this work, of course, but the level of dishonesty that they put into the estimate, the amount of time they took and more was nothing less than astonishing. I literally did not have a car for over six months and Andrew and others in the dealership really did not care at all. It was one of the most dishonest and astonishing experiences I had ever had in my life.

I called Andrew about this on a few occasions as well and he feigned astonishment but did nothing about it.

There was so much dishonesty and other stuff going on that I cannot remember everything that happened. A few times I wanted to come look at the car to see the "progress" and was told that I could not because it was in another location, locked up someplace with no key and other similar stuff.

The situation got worse, however. I had been overseas and they had called stating that the car was ready and that I could come pick it up. I got back from my trip a few weeks later and called the insurance company about the check for \$21,000 (\$22,000 minus my \$1,000 deductible). They stated that they sent us the check and we had no record of it. In the interim, we had sent the dealership \$5,000 towards the work. After the car had been completed for around three weeks and we had finally got the check from the insurance company straightened out, I called the dealership body shop to go pick up the car.

"We no longer have the car," I was told. "We sent it to the auction to pay the balance due on the car."

To say I was astonished by this episode is an understatement. I managed to track the car down and it was literally scheduled to be auctioned off within a few days. In addition to the \$17,000 due for the body work, I had to pay all sorts of other fees to get the car back so numerous I do not remember.

When I got the car back finally there appeared to be 3,000 or so more miles on the car than when I gave it to the body shop. I am not 100% sure this is an accurate statement and I may be wrong about the actual mileage but when I looked back at the previous mileage from another service and knew I had not driven it in the interim this was what I came up with. This made very little sense and even if they had driven the car back and forth for various "service" things this was way too much mileage to have put on the car.

At this point and after all of this I decided it was time to get rid of the car. I realized that this car was doing more to separate me from others than connect me with them. I felt like the car was marking me as a sucker with the people at Rusnak and making me the center of attention for something I did not want to be the center of attention for. Having a car that makes you stand out and appear better than other people only enrages them and makes them want to take advantage of you every chance they get. I can say with 100% confidence that this is what happened with the people at Rolls Royce Rusnak.

A few decades ago I was living in a small apartment building and came home one Saturday afternoon. During my absence, another one of my neighbors had purchased an extremely expensive car whose car payments I am sure were more than the rent on their apartment. I was living in an apartment at the time where most of the people were much older than I was—they were in their fifties and sixties, for example. Some were retired. However, the substantial majority of people had very nice cars.

I have seen this obsession with nice cars with a lot of people. Many times it is the people who are lacking something that are motivated by these nice cars. They decide that, for whatever reason, they need something that makes them look good to others. A car is something that can do it. I have known many people throughout the years whose lives revolved around their cars and whose identities were shaped by them. A car is something that is more about your ego than anything else.

I like to go with my wife and family to Las Vegas and spend time there. I spend several weeks per year there. I do not gamble and I do not drink and I do not spend time chasing women there. What I do love to do is observe and suck up the entire consumer experience of being there. There are billboards everywhere and even on trailers going down the street. There are stores and brands everywhere and images in all the casinos of people becoming rich by winning the slots. All of the best restaurants from all over the United States are there. Las Vegas does not have much to offer except making people feel good about themselves based on their association with something outside of themselves. I love observing the city and people in it because it is capitalism in the extreme and a microcosm of our entire society and its excesses and insecurities.

We have an apartment in Las Vegas and that is the only other place I have seen a Rolls Royce Phantom. The apartment where the driver of the Phantom lives, is surely much less than his payments on the car and/or the value of his apartment.

The people who live in the apartment tower are exactly what you would expect in Las Vegas. There are hookers, drunks, strippers, professional gamblers and others who are all there searching for something I think. They may be living in Las Vegas for their own egos but ultimately they are ending up servicing the egos of others.

When you see signs for the Marlborough man, a Louis Vuitton model carrying a \$1,500 purse, or something else what you are seeing is a brand that is trying to "stoke" your ego and make you feel something by virtue of being associated with it. It is your ego that is driving you to purchase a \$1,500 purse and not the high quality stitching on the purse or its superior

materials.

It is interesting for me watching women and men and how they decorate themselves with various brands. Some of the poorest women I know, for example, have very nice Louis Vuitton purses and wallets. Other men wear Rolexes despite not making enough money in six months to afford one. What is happening to all of these people is that their egos are being manipulated based on their association with a brand. The more insecure someone is with their ego, the more of these brands and other symbols you will see.

Nothing is as insecure in my opinion as someone like me purchasing a Rolls Royce.

When we purchase the car, the bag and other things what we are doing, in effect, is trying to enhance our egos through our association with the product. This association ends up helping us rationalize away our own insecurities and sense of lack. Most people do this to some extent and I am certainly not alone.

The idea that people can become so associated with a product that it almost becomes part of their identity is not something new. Every magazine you pick up will show pictures of models wearing this or that to try and make you associate and want to adopt this sort of identity. The next time you pick up a luxury sort of magazine look very closely at the advertisements. What you will notice is that very little writing and copy is used for these ads. Instead, these ads are more about feeling and association. The ads are being designed to make you want to desire the product at issue based on the feeling the images evoke. A picture of a model sitting on a tiger; a picture of a car sitting on some grass at a Polo match; a couple kissing on a beach. This is all it takes to sell many of the most important things.

The larger the city you are in, the more you will find that people have been taken in by brand association and start basing their egos on this. The whole hierarchy and pecking order of this comes to extremes. For me it has always been interesting observing people in the design and advertising industry because their personal style is always so "in tune" with the things that are hot from one moment to the next. This is how they make their livings and help shape these public perceptions and are, in turn, influenced by them.

You may be wondering what all of this has to do with you and living your life. The lesson I received from the Rolls Royce dealership, the Rolls Royce brand and, more importantly the Rusnaks is a very simple one: The world preys on our insecurities and need to be associated with and feel like something.

It does not matter whether or not we are buying a car, trying to be part of a social group, trying to go to a certain school, trying to get a certain title or responsibility: We are almost always being controlled by the need and desire to be something so our egos can be made to feel good.

From the time I was very young, the desire to go to Harvard for college was something that had been deeply inculcated in me. My father had gone there and a lot of other people in my family had gone there. I was pushed to go there not necessarily for the quality of the education and any particular department: Instead, I was pushed to go there for what it would do for my family's ego and perhaps my own. For the power of the association with this.

The power of colleges is something that can really shape our ego. I did not have what it took to get into Harvard as an undergraduate and was rejected. I felt horrible about this although I did not really know anything about the school. I knew everything about the college I ended up going to and it was a much better fit. Nevertheless, I received an "ego blow".

The need to have an association for our egos is something that sticks with most people throughout their lives and their careers. People stay in the wrong jobs because they feel it is prestigious. People do the wrong types of work because they feel it is prestigious. People enter into the wrong types of marriages because they feel being married to the right person is prestigious.

My mother came from a small town in Michigan and her father owned a hardware store where he fixed bicycles from kids in the town and similar things. Then her father lost all his money and became a security guard. My father's father was pretty famous and well known and he came from a very respected family. She was told that she was "marrying up" when she got married and went into an incompatible relationship largely because of what she represented it meant—that it would do something for her ego. She ultimately got divorced from my father and married a working class boat mechanic and sailor. She was much more comfortable in this relationship.

Are you trying to be something you're not? Are you being driven by outside forces into an ego-centered resistance that makes you unhappy?

Over 10 years ago I was standing in my driveway and my wife at the time was in her car crying. She was in a new \$90,000 Mercedes convertible I had just purchased her less than a month ago. For over a year prior to me buying her that car she had been telling me on a daily basis how she "needed" a better car for the sorts of people she was spending her days and nights with.

She was getting ready to leave and go stay with her friends for the weekend. Her car was packed with too many things for such a short trip and I had the idea she would be leaving me—but at the time I figured we were just having problems. Later that day a process server would walk into my office and serve me with divorce papers in front of my staff.

She too was from a small town (like my mother) and when I had moved her to Los Angeles she started palling around with some of the wealthiest people in Los Angeles. People with \$50,000,000 homes, private jets and many of whom were quite famous. Instead of feeling good about herself and our relationship because of all this, it made her feel a tremendous sense of lack: Her husband (me) was not successful enough, we did not live well enough, I was not interested in travelling in the right circles and so forth. She told me she looked around at our house and life and felt as if we were complete failures. I was in my late 20s at the time and we were doing well living in a house in a great neighborhood that today is worth over \$1,000,000.

"I wish we could get out of here and just go some place isolated like Bora Bora where none of this stuff matters," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked her.

She was sobbing hysterically and so much so that she was choking.

"Never mind," she said and backed up the car and pulled away.

What she was saying, in effect, was that the forces of consumption, the forces of inadequacy and all those things had so much taken a hold of her that our life no longer seemed good. If we could just get away from it all then we could be together and be happy. That was the message.

After rescuing the Rolls Royce from the auction I let it sit in the garage for weeks and did not drive it. The car disgusted me too much and was not something that I felt good about anymore. The car had served to separate me from others, set me up

to be taken advantage of, isolate me and bring out the anger in people. This was not what I wanted for my life.

I work very hard—probably at least 12 hours a day six days per week. After one particularly long stretch of work I got into the car one afternoon and started driving. I pulled into a Porsche dealership and got out of the car and walked inside. I bought the second cheapest new Porsche I could find in the dealership—one with close to zero options.

I think I ended up getting \$14,000 off because it had been on the lot close to two years. I traded in the Rolls Royce and they gave me less money than it was worth. But I felt really good about everything because now I had a sporty little car that did not stick out. In fact, it was very similar in looks to a Porsche I owned 12 years previously.

My second week of owning this Porsche I backed into a tree and put a huge dent in the plastic fender. I kicked the fender a few times with my foot and it popped right out just leaving a scuff on the fender. I did not care. The car is more of who I am anyway. I do not want to stick out. When I take the car to restaurants, they do not park it in front and I am much happier now with a car that no one notices. I like this too.

I have nothing to prove.

The most successful and powerful lawyers I have ever known drove very cheap cars. One drove a Mazda Miata and the other drove a Toyota Camry. When you have really made it you do not care what kind of car you drive because your ego is not being influenced by others. You are in control.

In order to take charge of your career and your life, the most important thing that you can do is be who you want to be. Do not be influenced by what you think you should be. Be your own person and go with what you are and what you like. This is the only way that I know that you can ever be truly happy and free. The more you are influenced by others the more you are fitting into someone else's plan and not your own.

THE LESSON

When you become associated with products and brand names, you are no longer being who you want to be and will find it much more difficult to take charge of your life. Do not be influenced by what you or others think you should be, but instead focus on being your own person. When you are influenced by others, you are fitting into someone else's plan and not your own. When you have really made it, you are in control and are no longer influenced by others.

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