

# The Artist's Duties

There is inborn in every artistic disposition an indulgent and treacherous tendency to accept injustice when it produces beauty.

- Walter Benjamin

It is thought that the Hippocratic Oath was written in the 5th Century BCE, somewhere in ancient Greece. Though its author is unknown to contemporary historians, some of its content is well popularized. Many have heard of the sworn commitment made by physicians to "do no harm." Indeed, there exists an established pilgrimage to the island of Kos, birthplace of the famous physician after whom the oath takes its name, made by medical practitioners from around the world. These pilgrims choose to make their solemn vows in a place of sacred meaning, to underscore to themselves their moral commitment to the duties outlined in the oath.

But doctors are usually citizens. And citizenship is nothing without its own attendant duties, and the repercussions that are promised in case they are breached. Many explicitly swear to uphold these duties as part of a naturalization ceremony, but most are understood to uphold them through tacit acceptance. In either case, repercussions for failing to be true to these legally binding imperatives can be dire.

So it is with our moral life. We are always bound to different sets of duties, often simultaneously, and it's not unusual for moral duties to conflict. Some of the most riveting dramatic content hinges on conflicts of duty, necessarily unresolvable, either within an individual, between individuals, or between an individual and a social institution. Marriage, church, the military -- each have their own set of vows, and there is little reason to expect perfect or frequent coherence of duty-bound action across our core institutions.

In order to make sense of the human condition within society, we must be able to evaluate an individual from the various points of view arising from the discrete roles he plays. We cannot make moral judgements of a father by the duties and expectations made of a soldier, just as we cannot judge a teacher by the filial duties of a daughter, even in the same individual. Each has its own set of responsibilities and repercussions for failing to meet them. When these conflict, it is not an uncommon tendency to presume perfect knowledge and engage in moral righteousness, "resolving" others' hierarchies of duty as if they were our own. Yet, we are never in a position to morally judge the Quaker soldier, who as a Quaker has sworn to do no violence, and as a citizen to pick up arms to protect his nation. We can, and must, apply any legal consequence when the law is breached; but such consequences cannot be seen as a proxy for correct moral judgement, as any such judgements will lack commonly accepted authoritative grounds. Only the individual can evaluate himself by this measure, as only the individual knows, and is beholden to, his personal hierarchies of value and duty.

In a recent newspaper article, I came across some hand-wringing about the state of the business professions. The author noted that there is no equivalent to the Hippocratic Oath in the world of business, and as a result, only the relatively weak requirements of the law hold back egregious business practices. I prefer a stronger formulation. For what is a scruple to the free market libertarian, other than a handicap willingly chosen by the competition? When there is only law disincentivizing unscrupulous behavior, we expect the absence of such behavior at our own folly. The law has weak provisions, is inexhaustive, and its mechanics are strongly dependent on the political, cultural, and material environment in which it is practiced. So it is with the sciences. We read in horror of the deceit of Alzheimer's researchers in John Sullivan's recent post. Days later, we learn that popularly held ideas about second hand smoke arose from an unsubstantial study made decades ago, and subsequently unconfirmed by replication. An initial study,

if accompanied by the pomp of celebrity, will eclipse decades of subsequent failures to replicate its findings. As the author points out, "positive results are the currency of science and are essential to future grant support and career advancement."

Is the currency of science currency? We can better understand this dynamic if we break out the roles that businessmen and scientists play, and evaluate behaviors and expectations accordingly. Specifically, I am speaking of the role of economic actor -- that role which has us engage in commerce and gain economic sustainability (if not mammon). The role of the scientist is not the same as the role of the economic actor. A single individual can play both roles, yet in very different ways, under very different normative guidelines. In some cultures, this distinction is so stark that unusual success in one of those roles can be strongly stigmatized. Though we seldom encounter this today, in some historical contexts it was not so uncommon to regard a wealthy businessman as potentially immoral, from the perspective of his role as an economic actor within society. To be a great merchant did not entail the accumulation of personal wealth, as the two roles were clearly separated. Individuals, who embraced such norms and accepted their contours as personal moral codes, practiced under powerful behavioral restrictions. If these personal scruples were strong enough, a great businessman could be expected to live quite modestly.

When scientists conflate their role as scientists with their role as economic actors, we should expect them to pursue moneymaking even if doing so contradicts our rosy notions of what "doing good science" entails. Under such conditions, it is unreasonable to expect the scientist to make the distinction between the moral imperatives of feeding his family and building society's knowledge. To a scientist lacking moral duties within his *métier*, sloppiness, propaganda, and deceit are not only justifiable but expected, especially when personal well-being is threatened by economic scarcity. Such an individual won't necessarily see slovenly research as *The Wrong Thing To Do*, just as a physician who has not taken the Hippocratic Oath in earnest might not have a problem with doling out poorly tested chemicals at the behest of Big Pharma. His family, after all, needs feeding.

This past weekend, one of my favorite musicians, Björn Ulvaeus, wrote an admirable and eloquent plea to protect the economic incomes of artists from the changes to the music business resulting from new technology. The best parts of his article express well an important artistic duty (protecting freedom of expression), and the mechanisms by which one becomes an artist (by building on the work of those who preceded and inspired). But quickly, he shows that he conflates the role of the musician with the role of the economic actor, and in so doing, he weakens considerably his protectionist argument within the Arts. "If you actually then make a living as a songwriter you should humbly acknowledge that you stand on the shoulders of others," he writes. Well, no. If we are to acknowledge that we stand on the shoulders of others, we do so as artists, *not* as economic actors. These days, there are few non-cynical reasons for an economic actor to acknowledge anything at all. Further, there is no natural right to earning money doing what you want. The illusion of such a right is a fantasy embraced by parents and politicians too frightened to confront the truth: less and less likely is it that we are able to select our economic role based on our passions and dreams, however highly we rate our own aptitudes.

I come from a family of professional musicians, going back generations, all to some degree successful both as musicians as well as economic actors. This is a fluke, not a necessity. Nothing guaranteed this result, nor should it have been expected. In part, their ability to earn a living doing what they loved was due to the economic conditions of living in a communist state, softening to some degree the need for artists to compromise their artistic endeavors for the pursuit of economic well-being. But otherwise, they had no recourse to demand payment for their work if nobody wanted to hear it. And, since they were not "original creators", but rather, interpreters of the classical canon, the "rights" that copyright protects wouldn't even apply to them. There is no universally grounded reason that "original creators be properly remunerated for use of their works," as Mr Ulvaeus and practically every writer making a living in the arts would have it. Remuneration of the sort he has in mind is an artifact of a fleeting moment in time -- less that half a century of a really oddball, Western economic eventuality that, by dint of an accident of technical innovation, made some people fabulously wealthy for writing songs. All things being equal, there is no reason to protect economic remuneration of any specific human output if the market demand is

for the output of machines. And yet, there is little reason for musicians to stop being musicians when they don't get paid for it.

Like doctors, artists have duties, and as with doctors, these have nothing to do with feeding their families. Artists of tremendous skill and remarkable achievement do not necessarily respect or comply with artistic duties, just as a doctor who creates groundbreaking, life-saving techniques might harm patients over the course of arriving at his findings. And artists who do stay true to artistic duties are often hopelessly terrible at their craft. But without artistic duties, there can be no sellouts, and talk of artistic integrity is meaningless. Yet, sellouts there are.

The following are what I believe to be the sacred duties of the artist. They are non-negotiable. They do not wither or soften under conditions of economic hardship or normative pressures from one's social environment. Moral duties remain duties even under existential threat. Each individual must make their own moral choices when duties collide, and yes, we all do have moral duties in the economic sphere as well. That changes nothing: a thief stealing in order to feed her starving family can be both moral (*qua* mother) and immoral (*qua* member of society) at once. This is true of the artistic sellout as well. It is the sellout that fails to uphold one or more of these duties in order to make a buck, or to go along with the dogma of their favored political faction. We do Art a disservice when we fail to acknowledge this.

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### **PRACTICE**

The work of the artist is of expressing the true self through artifice. To do this, you must practice your art. Many artists experience long periods of quiescence during which it may appear that they are in an indolent, unproductive state. This can be deceiving. Practice must be habitual, but it need not be explicit.

### **FIDELITY TO REALITY**

Treat the world as it is, not as you would like it to be.

### **FIDELITY TO SELF**

Expressing oneself through art must be done with complete honesty to oneself. This involves a practice of rigorous, tenacious, and unflinching exploration of self. The darkest parts of your psyche must be explored, habitually, and with courage.

### **EDUCATION**

Teach your art. Make certain some of it is *pro bono*.

### **WAR AGAINST CENSORSHIP**

Engage, with martial attitude, against any and all censorship. Recall that there are two kinds of censorship, each equal to the other in their depravity: creative censorship seeks to prevent one from expressing oneself, and receptive censorship seeks to prevent one from feeling or learning something.

### **APPROPRIATION**

Always be appropriating from anything and anyone. Never restrict sources of inspiration for any reason, taking special care to disallow personal discomfort from having a suppressive effect. Ensure that you are not appropriating as an economic actor; you are appropriating always as an artist.

- A. Yampolsky, Los Angeles, 2023

