

Artifact Liberation

Bill Capra considers the controversial argument that things have rights.

A hammer is *for* hammering; and to use it for something else is to *misuse* it. We should use it as a hammer; and we should hammer with it if we use it. If something is a hammer, that means that there is a norm that we ought to strike nails with it, at least if we use it for anything. Similarly, something's being a present means that we should give it perhaps to Aunt Mabel, and maybe wrap it up in nice paper. In general, artifactual functions generate norms.

What if we decide to open a can with the hammer instead of striking nails with its head? Or what if we knock in nails with the handle, not the head? Or what if we lock the hammer in the cupboard and turn out the light and leave it there, unused, for many years? That's artifact abuse! We are not using the hammer as we ought to use it, in as far as it is a hammer.

"Who cares?" you might say, with a radical swagger: "If it opens the can well enough, or knocks in nails with the handle well enough, it is alright so to use it; and if you have no need for knocking in nails, don't use it – put it away in a cupboard." And you might continue, dogmatically, "Surely only some kind of weird function-fetishist would object that we must use a thing only for what it was designed to be used for, in the way intended."

But this may be complacent! For it might be that we have duties to artifacts! Indeed, perhaps artifacts themselves have rights and duties. Perhaps a bicycle has a right to have its tyres pumped up and a right not to have sticks thrown in its spokes. Perhaps bottle openers have the duty to open bottles for us, or at least to help us do that. And perhaps they have the right to be used for that end, and no other.

Do we see here a hitherto unrecognised form of oppression? Should we 'expand the circle', as Peter Singer would say, to include artifacts? Should there be a liberation movement for the defence of the rights of artifacts? Should there be an organization called the Artifact Liberation League?

The conservative anti-Artifact-Liberationist might say that the maker's intentions, which dictate artifact functions, are distant and irrelevant history, and we can and should disregard that distant and irrelevant history and do what we like with

functional things. The history that originally gave an artifact its function has no normative authority over us, not even *some* normative authority that is potentially overridable by other concerns. We can rudely flout their function. The ancient hammer function has no mysterious authority over us today. The conservative might continue by objecting that Artifact Liberationism is a silly political movement because artifacts *themselves* don't have rights, only the people who made them.

However, compare slavery. At one time people thought that the only rights slaves had derived from the rights of their owners, but then some radical people came to think that slaves themselves were a source of rights and duties. That was moral progress. Similarly, it might be argued, for artifacts. The Artifact Liberationist says that we should come to realize that artifacts themselves are a source of rights and duties independently of their makers and owners, just as slaves have rights independent of their owners.

Common sense can be misleading and inherently conservative, but let us nevertheless ask: what is the common sense position here? In fact, although Artifact Liberation is in many respects a radical political movement, at odds with conservative 'common sense', there are also respects in which artifacts do have some normative standing in ordinary thought. Maybe we should indeed save a baby rather than a bottle-opener from a burning building, but that does not mean that in the absence of such a conflict, the bottle-opener is owed nothing by us. Bottle openers ought to be used to open bottles, not for picking one's teeth. We owe them that. It seems then that a place for artifact rights is present in our common sense normative outlook. By contrast, it is *not* plausible that there is a common sense tacit commitment to a notion of universal human rights from which, say, an anti-slavery position flows. That idea had to be fought for against an established consensus to the contrary. Yet it *is* an aspect of common sense thinking to accord artifacts a *respect* that transcends their maker's intentions. For example, using a sculpture as a doorstop intuitively feels wrong. It jars. One almost feels sorry for the sculpture. One feels that it has not been respected for the thing that it is. Of course, there could be sceptics about artifact rights, just as there are anarchist sceptics about property rights. But such a scepticism flouts this aspect of common sense. This is not to say that such scepticism would be wrong, but it would be a revisionary doctrine.

The common sense intuitive conception of an artifact, is of a thing that imposes norms in virtue of being an artifact of a particular kind. An artifact is a thing with a nature – a functional nature – which implies norms. So we ought to respect the norms consequential on the artifacts being the particular artifacts that they are. This is common sense when we think in artifactual terms, so insofar as common sense morality denies this, then it is in error, and the moral circle should be widened to bring artifacts into the fold.

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Hammer abuse!