

## **DUCHAMP, TINGUELY, DELVOYE AND DUPRAT: MORE KANT THAN REMBRANDT**

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Recently, I've noticed an increasing tendency for philosophers, including backyard philosophers, to argue that free will has no place in the real world. These same sage seekers-of-meaning don't live their lives as though they are devoid of meaning. In fact, I note a strong correlation between those who preach choice is an illusion and those who seek to increase their own status by publishing prolix gobbledygook, and using that manure to seek tenure. And their denial of reality doesn't prevent them competing with similarly misinformed maladroits, while trying to get them into the sack, or get them sacked, or both.

The argument that they had no choice won't cut it, either. That's just endlessly circling sophistry; there is always another level of abuse of rationality: 'I had no choice but to make that argument, and I had no choice but to argue that I had no choice but to make that argument'. And so on . . . like the universe resting on the back of a turtle, as some ancients argued. What holds up the turtle? Another turtle. And then it's turtles all the way down.

Having got that off my chest let me get to the subject at hand, Hubert Duprat, in a roundabout sort of way.

My favourite philosopher, Nassim Taleb, whom I choose to describe as a pragmatic empiricist, once wrote that the way to achieve stuff is to go to parties. His argument is that such activities have asymmetric outcomes: a wasted night costs little, while meeting a life partner, or hearing a life-altering idea, can be immensely beneficial. In a world of uncertainty, a profound principle is to be open to asymmetric outcomes. And so it was that I accompanied Olivier on the Paris Metro to see one artist, Michel Blazy, and agreed to meet another, Hubert Duprat, about whom I knew nothing. Usually, when I meet artists, I gain very little. This time I gained a great deal. That's asymmetric, and that's why I keep doing it.

I have a theory—a wild theory—that the various incarnations of Duprat's work with caddisflies are among the most important in contemporary art. I don't expect you to agree with me—now, or even by the end of this short piece of advocacy. For a number of philosophical reasons I think this theory is likely to have very little merit. Nevertheless, I will later try to support it. You keep reading, despite my meandering, and you do so, in part, because you have an evolutionary propensity for curiosity.

Nature knows about the potency of asymmetry. In fact, it is a fundamental mechanism of evolution. Disadvantageous mutations are weeded out. Advantageous mutations, although far less frequent, are propagated. Thus we get vast biodiversity. We get creatures that live most of their life cycles in water, building structures before becoming airborne adults. And we get creatures that make art out of the life cycles of these other creatures.

I think my opinion has little likelihood of having intrinsic merit because individuals' opinions don't mean much. As we throw around ideas willy-nilly, our personal biases convince us of all sort of arbitrary, ill-conceived things. But just like Taleb's justification for sending us all to parties, ideas don't need to be obviously correct to be worth investigating. Because ideas are also asymmetric, one good idea can change the world and, as long as we have a tool for weeding them out, bad ideas don't matter too much. That tool is science—historically known as 'doubt'—and it means that we can benefit from the most baseless speculation. When the baseless speculator turns out to have genuine insights, or just gets lucky, we can blend the emergent idea into the received body of wisdom. Personal speculation means little, but the overarching body of knowledge is a powerful and wonderful thing indeed.

Geoffrey Miller is an evolutionary psychologist who thinks that sexual selection is the primary reason people make art. Because males expend way less energy than females in producing offspring (millions of spermatozoa per ejaculation, and they are less likely to be primary caregivers for resultant children) the investment in the production of the next generation is asymmetric. Supply of the essential female resource is limited, so males have to compete. Showing off excess capacity is one way males compete, and elite art production shows excess capacity. Miller suggests that this process was subverted around 1900, when art went off the rails and became 'nothing but a cultural phenomenon'. There is probably some merit to the sexual selection argument, as evolution will coopt any mechanism available to it. But dismissing a phase shift in art because it doesn't conform to a pet theory is dangerous, at least. Miller does, however, identify a crucial disjuncture in art.

The emergence of conceptual art was such a significant disruption that I'm not even sure that what emerged is art at all. I wonder what Rembrandt would make of a Duchamp ready-made, a toilet for example, but a toilet not being a toilet. Duchamp may never have said: 'It is art because I say it is' (but I hope this crossed his mind). I suspect Rembrandt might well have said: 'It isn't art because artists make art, and whoever made that isn't an artist'. Immanuel Kant, on the other hand, would know what Duchamp's feisty reclassified urinal is because he knows what philosophy is. And

Duchamp's ready-mades are, essentially, an argument for the power of narrative. It's not an argument I agree with but it's a powerful argument, and a philosophical argument, and it represents the moment from which art (if it is art) seeks to explain, rather than engage.

Jean Tinguely made (and patented) drawing machines. Drawing is a human activity, an exuberant expression of will, and passion, and capacity. It isn't just an elite activity. I suspect that almost all humans who have survived past infancy have drawn, if only in sand or soil. There are drawings in caves of our ancestors of 1000 generations ago, and the tiny probability that any such creations survive (and the quality of some that have survived) offers testimony to the universality of creativity. There can be few who drew with less fidelity than I did as a child, and yet I drew. But Tinguely made machines that draw. And they draw mechanically, of course, and unpredictably, but marvellously, and in thrall of Tinguely's will.

They made those who care see the world a little bit differently. Inanimate objects can be animated through the expression of will. Our phenotype can be extended to the environment and impose itself on those in that environment. And that extension can extend beyond a lifetime. Tinguely's machines still draw, and they draw a drawing that wasn't in the maker's mind but is still part of his intention. Duchamp's found object is ephemeral (the original R. Mutt urinal has been lost), but his idea will linger long.

As visitors to Mona know, Wim Delvoye made a number of machines that make shit. This shit is human shit, but no human digestive system excreted it. Bacteria—the ones we need to stay alive, the ones that are part of us, are us, because we cannot be without them—they made the shit. But they made it abstracted from the human matrix. Not completely abstracted, however. Delvoye made the machine that conceptualises the abstraction. This machine doesn't draw like a drawing machine, it isn't abstracting the process of making art. It is abstracting, though; it is abstracting the process of thinking about art. It is a machine that makes conceptual art an engine of philosophy.

The meandering process of evolution made people and bacteria interdependent. Neither can comfortably operate without the other. So far, no one has figured out a way to make art out of eliminating our gut bacteria, although illness caused by their unfortunate absence can be treated by re-introducing gut bacteria from others in a shit transplant. Delvoye has, however, defiled this mutual dependence by building a machine that supports the gut bacteria without humans. Now they don't need us, but we need them. Science and art have often recalibrated (for us) our apparent

place in the universe, and we are becoming more peripheral. But Delvoye's work doesn't merely show us our increasing irrelevance. At least for the duration of an artwork, those bacteria have an alternative life cycle, so Delvoye is *contributing* to our irrelevance.

Delvoye's bacteria (literally, they were cultured from his gut) make shit as part of a deterministic process. They execute his will. Hubert Duprat, like Wim Delvoye, coopts nature in his art. He uses caddisflies to make his art. But they don't make *his* art; they make *their* art. Their innate and possibly even learned biological processes allow them to make things I find beautiful. They may well find them beautiful, too, if beauty is, as I believe, symmetry and symmetry-breaking—characteristics built into organisms to enable them to recognise quality breeding stock and to signal their own quality. Symmetry is hard to fake, it takes a great deal of energy to engineer it. After all, there are vastly more ways to be random than there are to be ordered. But there are a few states of apparently imperfect symmetry that require almost as much engineering as perfect symmetry, and they are also a challenge for the observer. When symmetry is precisely fractured it is a measure of the quality of both an organism and its potential mate. But these caddisflies aren't executing a mate-selection strategy; they are building an enclosure for self-protection. So how can they benefit from excess energy expenditure in creating beauty? Because their environment has been modified with selection bestowed purpose, the caddisflies' creation of beauty is a side effect of necessity, but it is also a characteristic of the biologically compelling virtues of symmetry.

The level of self-awareness that holds a mirror to free will is also relevant here. Can Delvoye morally manipulate bacteria that might, for example, use their capacity to communicate with each other through quorum sensing to choose the right time to become toxic, but have their purpose subverted because they are operators in a machine, not pathogens in a body? Does some compensation principle apply, where the bacteria, having been liberated from their indentured servitude, have to pay by unnecessarily expending energy for pointless toxicity? Delvoye explored this further up the food chain, so to speak, when he tattooed pigs in return for their living out their life spans rather than being killed (to be consumed) at ten months. If it is immoral to meddle with pigs' minds, why isn't that also the case when we use them as unnecessary calories? (We know they're unnecessary to survival, as a large part of the human population finds them unclean and a lesser part gets by perfectly well without any animal calories at all.)

So, to get back to the point: if the caddisflies were conscious would they conclude that it was okay that their life cycle is an entertainment for us, or an engine of philosophy, as we go through ours?

And do they need the capacity to make a completely conscious evaluation for the mechanism of morality to be applicable? Is it okay to torture insects, if that is what Duprat is doing? Apparently it's not okay to just torture viruses; if a virus is a nuisance we can wipe it out altogether, as our attitude to smallpox and polio testifies. Further, if I derive personal meaning from Duprat's work, is it relevant to consider his purpose? Am I, by subverting his art, requiring of him the conscious impairment that he requires of the caddisfly for my reinterpretation of his meaning to be moral?

Steadily through one hundred years of their art—and I'm biased by Franco-centrism that should be acknowledged because my exposure to it was enhanced by near-random choice of French curators—Duchamp, Tinguely, Delvoye, and Duprat have led me through an appreciation of the identity of the object, the nature of purpose, the nature of identity, and, supremely, the reality of the capacity for choice. Art, free will, intention, and morality all come under intense scrutiny, without sacrifice of aesthetics (except Duchamp and, for him, that's probably part of the point). Surely, it's great art if it proposes so much and still looks good? It may well be that the contrivances of these four creators lack the purposes I ascribe them, but to me that adds to the profundity of exploration.

Thinking this hard isn't easy. Reading this essay is hard work, even for the author. That could well be because any ideas are superficial—and poorly expressed. But it seems to me that this great art has given me a tenuous hold on a slightly expanded world view. As I write, we are preparing for an exhibition at Mona of Hubert Duprat's formidable work, and this essay is part of that preparation. By the time you read it the exhibition will have been realised, and you, most likely, will have seen it. I envy you that, even as I prepare myself for the same experience, with an expectation of joy but also with some trepidation.