

# What We Owe Steve Jobs

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Watching the world mourn Steve Jobs, we are reminded of how massive crowds of Americans used to gather to celebrate the launch of a new bridge or a new railroad. There is a widespread recognition that Jobs was a creative genius who changed our world profoundly and for the better. Even President Obama, not usually given to praising businessmen, said that Jobs “transformed our lives, redefined entire industries, and achieved one of the rarest feats in human history: he changed the way each of us sees the world.”

All of this raises an important and to-date unasked question: what do we owe Jobs and productive geniuses like him?

For one, we owe them gratitude, which we do not always give them—Jobs, here, is the exception that proves the rule. But we owe them something more than that, something not even Jobs has received. We owe them the recognition that their achievements are profoundly moral.

If dedicating your life to creating the values that advance it is a moral achievement, then there is nothing greater or nobler than the creative geniuses whose productive ability has created our modern world: a world where we live more than three times as long as our ancestors; where our homes are heated in the winter, cooled in the summer, and lit at night; where we can travel across a continent in a matter of hours; where we

can say goodnight to our children from the other side of the globe.

But far from holding up the great producers as moral exemplars, we lump them in with the Al Capones and the Bernie Madoffs as people who must be stopped or at least shackled until they learn to selflessly serve others. Even Jobs was criticized because he devoted his life to Apple rather than philanthropy.

This perverse attitude has led us to deny creative heroes like Jobs the third thing we owe them: freedom. Innovators by definition challenge convention, and it is only freedom that protects their right to do it. When government infringes on freedom by initiating force against producers—by

regulating their actions, by controlling their choices, by seizing their wealth—it stifles and ultimately crushes the creative mind.

Jobs was able to thrive because the tech industry has been left relatively free. But what if it had been subject to the same regulatory morass as the automotive industry? What if bureaucrats in the 1970s had started dictating the specifications for making

microprocessors, or if they had dictated energy efficiency standards for server farms? It is doubtful we would have ever had the information revolution.

Let us mourn the loss of Steve Jobs—but let us also use this as an opportunity to look in the mirror and question whether we have treated Jobs and others like him as they deserve.

