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Demoralizing Moralism: The Futility of Fetishized Values

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mo·ral·i·ty
N. (pl. -ies) principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior. (The New Oxford American Dictionary)

mor·al·ism
N. the practice of moralizing, esp. showing a tendency to make judgments about others' morality (The New Oxford American Dictionary)

Introduction

Most anarchists — just like most other people on the planet — remain relatively naive concerning the many problems with theories and practices of compulsory morality and moralism. Positive, uncritical references to various forms of compulsory morality are nearly ubiquitous in both historical and contemporary anarchist writings, despite the occasional influence of Max Stirner's critique of morality amongst the more widely read. Even amongst anarchist writers who have actually taken the effort to read Max Stirner's 1844 master work, *The Ego and Its Own* (the publishing date was 1845, but it actually appeared in late 1844), his powerful and important critique of morality often remains either misunderstood, unduly ignored or ignorantly rejected. And although most anarchists may understand that moralism is most often a self-defeating practice in radical social movements, it is generally only excessive references to morality that are so understood, rather than uncritical submission to compulsory morality per se.

Every social theory — including those based on philosophy, religion or science — contains judgments of value by necessity. There is no form of knowledge that can be strictly value-free or even value-neutral. Unlike the natural sciences which can more easily — though never completely — evade acknowledgement of the human values expressed within their hypotheses, theories and research programs, the social sciences are unable to hide their multiple commitments to particular forms and particular expressions of human values. As Max Weber (one of the most important of the early scientific social theorists) put it: "There is no absolutely 'objective' scientific analysis of culture or of 'social phenomena' independent of special and 'one-sided' viewpoints to which — expressedly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously — they are selected, analysed and organised for expository purposes." (see Max Weber's *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* edited by Edward Schils & Henry Parsons [The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1949])

Values are even more obviously implicated in radical social theories which are explicitly formulated to aid the pursuit of deeply rooted structural changes in society. But such values can be constituted in two distinctly different manners:

(1) as finite, historical expressions of people's individual and social desires, and (2) as being imputed to have some form of fetishized, transcendental — often absolute, ahistorical or objective — existence over and above human individuals and communities. Unfortunately, there is no commonplace, well-understood terminology to easily distinguish these two manners of constituting and speaking of human values. And this alone can lead to misunderstandings.

Problems of terminology

Terminology is a problem with many aspects of social critique wherever overcoming the many facets of social alienation is concerned. For every form of compulsory fetishization, whether religion, ideology, politics, commodity-fetishism and work, or morality, there remains a corresponding form of non-fetishized thinking and activity that is most often uncritically lumped together with it. Thus, the critique of religion often founders on a widespread, irrational insistence that nonfetishized thinking about life and the cosmos actually constitutes a form religion (even when it self-consciously denies such an identity). And that, therefore, since this particular imputed form of religion is not fetishized, then the critique of religion as such (as fetishization of the realm of the spiritual, divine or sacred) is argued to be unfounded. Similarly, those opposed to the critique of ideology tend to consistently (if insincerely) claim to see no difference between fetishized social theory and nonfetishized social theory, calling every form of social theory "ideology" in order to evade the sting of criticism for their own devotion to particular ideological mystifications. Where politics is concerned, all human beings are often simply defined as "political animals" by the defenders of political mediation and the state. This poor excuse for reasoning then often goes that if human beings are inherently "political," then the state is a natural form of (political) community that can't (or at least shouldn't) be questioned. Commodity fetishism and the institution of work (forced labor) also have their illogical defenders, including many mistakenly posing as anti-capitalist radicals, who would only like to see commodity fetishism and work redirected to different ends than they currently serve, with new and different forms of police, courts and prisons enforcing their existence.

The pattern here is clear. Where people are committed to undermining, evading or denying radical social criticism, they most often insist on defining away such criticism by denying there is any consistent difference between the present alienated society and any potential liberated (non-alienated) way of life.

The same strategy is usually employed whenever the critique of morality begins to be formulated. Although most dictionary definitions of morality clearly imply

it involves the fetishization of values, this implication is lost on most readers. For example, *The New Oxford American Dictionary* defines morality as "principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior." Obviously, the "right and wrong or good and bad" qualifiers here are most likely to be taken (unself-consciously) as fetishized, transcendental values, rather than as particular, finite choices with no claims to any reality beyond the unique desires of individual human beings. However, the moment the critique of morality is raised, even in *Anarchy* magazine, there are always those who pop up with the aim to confuse things (in order to defend their own moralistic commitments) by claiming in one form or another that there is no such thing as a non-moral human value! Most people, in common with dictionary definitions, would never say that a person expressing her or his own desires with no claim to transcendental status for them is being moral by valuing a particular goal. But the defenders of morality will come out of the woodwork to claim that even the most finite, ephemeral and contingent human desire indicates the existence of a moral system every bit as real as those taught by the various branches of the Catholic Church!

To avoid this intentional confusionism wrought by those afraid of any criticism directed at their own sacred cows, people pursuing critiques of morality usually attempt to make a clear distinction between ethics and morality. In this case, ethics is considered to be concerned with finite, non-fetishized values, while morality is concerned with fetishized, transcendental values: right and wrong or good and bad. Unfortunately, since there is almost no radical and substantial criticism of morality in our popular culture (as opposed to the mountains of superficial and insubstantial, partial criticisms of morality), appeals by moralists to dictionary definitions of "ethics" often derail such attempts. (Most dictionary definitions in an alienated, moralistic society will be unlikely reflect the possibility that a dichotomy between fetishized and nonfetishized values could even exist. For most people consistently nonfetishized values simply aren't considered possible).

Therefore, in this essay, I will try to refer to the critique of "compulsory morality" in order to make it absolutely clear that I'm speaking of a system of fetishized values that demand compliance. And that I'm never speaking of some unlikely form of nonfetishized system (or nonsystematic set) of values that some moralist will still insist on calling "moral" merely in order to confuse things. I will also refer to "finite ethics" to make it clear that the alternative to compulsory morality involves finite, nonfetishized values. And to make it clear that I'm not speaking of an ethics inclusive of both nonfetishized and fetishized values.

The anatomy of compulsory morality

Compulsory morality involves self-subjugation to a system or set of values that are, for one reason or another, believed to require mandatory compliance — even if the person believing this is unable to — as the cliché goes — "live up to them." Although compulsory morality can potentially be grounded within an individual's subjective experience, it is almost always instead grounded somewhere outside the realm of directly lived human experience.

For example, religious forms of morality are commonly grounded in such unlikely (nonexistent) places as "the Word of God," or other forms of supposed direct revelation from some sort of unseen, disembodied, (unreal) Spirit. (Of course, this grounding is generally mediated through the supposed gods' appointed representatives on Earth, however irrational the belief in the authenticity of these representatives might be.) In this form of compulsory morality, God (or Satan, or the Gods, or the Goddess, or the Great Spirit, etc.) are supposed to be the source of moral values that must be followed because the source — whatever it may be — is in some sense considered far more real and important than the unique individual person who cannot be trusted to know what she or he should do without the guidance of a system of fetishized, sacred values. The formal structure of compulsory religious morality is thus: sacred values from an unseen source to be followed by a relatively worthless human being whatever the context. With a system of values like this, whatever the actual content of the morality, is it any wonder that people attempting to live this form of alienation are constantly mystified about their lives, desires and social relationships?

However, in these modern times, the place of religion has often been supplanted by other things, like Science, or particular social or political ideologies (like Marxism) that demand compulsory adherence. Although religious morality can be a dominant social force in areas of the world not highly colonized by capital (like most of Afghanistan, where the Taliban held sway, for example) in areas in which industrial capitalism, mass media and commodity consumption already dominate social relationships in fact (as in most of the world's urban areas), religious morality will be severely compromised. Other forms of enlightened compulsory morality based upon Science, social or political ideologies, or even rationalist philosophies will contend for the allegiance of the victims of morality. Especially when the values of particular religions get in the way of the exercise of political power, the subjugation of resources, or the exploitation of labor, they will over time find themselves supplanted with more amenable modern forms of thought and morality.

Science is one example of a source of many forms of modern, enlightened compulsory morality. I have capitalized it above to indicate that it is not the actual

practice of experimental exploration of nature in pursuit of knowledge (science) of which I'm speaking, but an ideological construct (Science) of particular fetishized scientific ideas taken out of their finite, experimental contexts and elevated into general, quasi-religious principles. The prestige of the various forms of scientism (ideologies and worship of Science) is based on the practical accomplishments of experimental science in combination with industrial capitalism. Together their power seems to rival that of the old gods for many modern citizens of the civilized world. For those whom religion no longer satisfies, but who do not yet understand the social origins of ideas and values, the various forms of scientism can be very appealing. They all involve the deduction of value systems from particular, reified scientific (or semi-scientific, or even pseudo-scientific) theories. Notable examples include the (misnamed) social Darwinist ideas whose morality is usually based on some version of the Spencerian "survival of the fittest" ("and Devil take the hindmost"), the ideologists of the fetishized gene whose morality is based on imagining what genes (as if they had minds of their own!) would want "their" bodies to do to promote their reproduction or evolution, and all the various ethnological, zoological, or evolutionary psychological reifications of humanity whose moralities are all based on imagining that our values are determined in one form or another by biology or genetics, etc. The formal structure of the various scientific moralities is, once again, the same as that for religious morality: sacred values from an unseen source to be followed by a relatively worthless human being whatever the context. Like religious morality, scientific versions of morality attempt to limit and determine what is supposed to be humanly desirable and possible, narrowing the choices that can be made by true believers.

Within the anarchist milieu scientism is probably less of a problem (though it certainly influences a lot of people), than are (usually half-digested) social and political ideologies like Marxism. Left anarchists are often especially influenced by the approaches taken towards morality by the various strands of Marxist ideology.

The Marxist Evasion

Amongst the more sophisticated Marxist theorists and writers (as with Marx himself) morality often gets much less overt respect than in the anarchist milieu, but forms of scientism and objectivistic dialectics tend to take its problematic place. Many anarchists have little problem perceiving and understanding the ideological nature of the attempted self-identification of the Marxist project as "scientific." This rhetorical trope was originally based on harnessing the 19th century credibility and mystique of the natural sciences to help drive one particular form of attempted radical social critique ahead of others in popular consideration. (Even some

anarchists, including Kropotkin, were not immune to this temptation, attempting to harness the mystique of natural science to an ideological form of anarchism.) Anarchists also generally understand that the objectivistic (naturalized) dialectics of all the most prevalent forms of Marxism function as little more than arcane formulae for justifying whatever Karl Marx and his epigones wanted justified. The abstract and highly speculative nature of Marxist dialectics is usually obscured in an attempt to lend an appearance of logic and solidity to ideological arguments and positions that defy conventional attempts at more transparent rationalization. (While critical dialectics can raise many worthwhile questions and open up new perspectives, the ideological dialectics of most forms of Marxist thought — i.e. dialectics in the service of Marxist ideologies — have nothing to offer to any genuinely radical theory.)

Interestingly, the Marxist turn towards "scientific" legitimation and objectivistic dialectics was directly influenced by Max Stirner's critique of morality. Before *The Ego and Its Own* appeared at the end of 1844, Karl Marx was a humanist political philosopher in the style of Ludwig Feuerbach (see Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, for example). After the sensational debut of Stirner's phenomenological philosophy of the ego ("ego" was another word for "self" at the time — well before Freud transformed its popular meaning) with its trenchant criticism of morality, Marx was forced to come to terms with the naiveté of his moralistic humanism and abruptly transformed his entire social philosophy, beginning with *The German Ideology* — written in 1845 in an attempt to evade Stirner's stinging critique. However, Marx was ultimately unable and unwilling to leave his philosophy unjustified by a metaphysically objective or material world, frequently describing his ideology as "scientific" and increasingly allowing his dialectical speculations to be mistaken for supposed objective truths. Marx's various epigones (including even his erstwhile partner, Friedrich Engels) attempted to systematize Marxism in various fashions, each of which tended to deny whatever was of value in Marx's more critical dialectics, while reifying a few decontextualized insights into dogmatic principles of Marxism.

Ultimately, most ideologies of modern Marxism have developed explicit forms of compulsory morality which have been deduced from what have become the supposed transcendental truths of the Class Struggle revealed by the various "scientific" formulations of Marxism. Marxist movements that have achieved state power have given especially concrete and bloody meanings to the predominant worker's-gulag morality of Marxist class-struggle ideologies, though this hasn't stopped some left anarchists from appropriating aspects of the various forms of Marxist morality as their own, as when they argue that particular analyses of the class struggle demand the submission of workers or citizens to the dictates

of certain organizations which are claimed to represent them — whether labor unions, "dual power" community or municipal organizations, etc.

(I should also note that there are still a very few would-be radicals attempting to construct non-ideological Marxist social critiques — or better, social critiques influenced by Marx. However, these attempts almost always founder on the pervasive Marxist contempt for human individuals and human individuality. This Marxist phobia for concrete, living individual human beings — Marxist theorists themselves excepted, of course — requires the consistent fetishization of collectivities as the only genuine social actors, collectivities whose own social and political dynamics always remain at least partly mystified by the refusal to acknowledge that they are made up of individuals whose existence is by no means exhausted by membership in the various collectivities.)

Radical moralism?

In the absence of genuinely lived community (of contestation) and a genuinely revolutionary movement throughout society, many would-be radicals tend to retreat into other activities that substitute for radical, direct action. One of the easiest traps to fall into is the reduction of the radical project into a moralistic project (and, as a corollary, the reduction of subversive, radical discourse into relatively meaningless moralistic discourses). Instead of creating a subversively radical social theory in concert with other rebels and putting it into practice with them with the aim of directly eliminating as many aspects of domination and social alienation as possible, the goal becomes the rigidly Manichaean division of the social world into "good" and "bad" parts (in themselves — outside of any context), with the aim of mechanically suppressing the "bad" wherever and whenever possible, and enlarging the "good."

Instead of a dialectical social theory aimed at increasingly sophisticated understanding in conjunction with an increasingly sophisticated, subversive practice, moralistic ideologies are aimed at simplistic dividing and labeling with little or no regard for context or the totality! For environmental moralists, for example, recycling and wilderness are always good, while SUVs and new housing developments are always bad. Context doesn't matter, resulting in mechanistic strategies aimed at, for example, simply discouraging SUV use (whether by firebombing new SUVs or working for legislation that makes them more expensive), or discouraging the construction of new housing (whether by arson or attempting to organize political pressure on developers). Rather than encouraging the spread of the (practical and theoretical) critique of capital and state as parts of a worldwide system of social

alienation and domination, moralism tends to result in always seeing the entire social world in a series of single-issue blinders.

Moralistic practice always tends towards guilt-mongering (towards those who engage in activities that can in any way be labeled "bad") and towards self-righteousness (since one already has all the detailed answers ready, regardless of context or real-world developments), and is most easily practiced by those privileged enough to enjoy a wide array of consumer choices (which facilitates the ability to boycott the correct corporations, while supporting the correct "fair-trade" or subcultural commodities). Because moralistic practice aims at maximizing one's attainment of certain fetishized "good" qualities and minimizing any demonized "bad" qualities, there is little or no place for the development of any nuanced understanding of the social and historical systems that give overall context to the superficial moralistic dilemmas with which people seem to be faced. The resulting choices are nearly always "either this/or that and nothing else," with the full range of actual possibilities stifled.

PC moralism is probably the most easily recognized form taken by moralistic practice. For people whose identities are tied to their skin color, the PC tendency is towards a reactive, racialist moralism. For women whose major identity is tied to gender, the tendency is to demonize all men, both individually and in reified form as the "patriarchy" as a gender-defined super-group.

Examples could also be given for other forms of would-be radical moralism like pacifism, many forms of leftism including most Marxist ideologies, and various other single-issue campaigns.

One of the most striking aspects of moralistic practice involves the generally futile attempts to communicate across the finite ethics/compulsory morality divide (which will surely be evidenced in moralistic reactions to this essay). Even when those who have no belief in any fetishized value-systems make quite clear that their criticisms and commentary develop from their own practical experiences within particular social contexts and historical situations, their words are almost automatically interpreted instead through a moralistic framework that assumes these criticisms and commentary must be based on some undeclared, but still-transcendent system of values! Moralists most often see only other moralists, even when none are there. And, further, moralists often see — and criticize — these other (phantasmic) moralists as being exceedingly (yet occultly) moralistic, even when absolutely no evidence can be found for such a charge!

One of the most empty and self-defeating aspects of morality within the would-be radical milieu is lifestyle moralism — a moralistic stance supporting fetishized identities based on particular forms of commodity consumption. Instead of acting on the radical critique of all the social institutions which reinforce

and justify our alienation and domination, lifestyle moralists elevate their consumer choices to moral choices, which they see as making them better persons than those who do not share them. These lifestyle choices can involve adopting rigid diets (vegetarianism or veganism), wearing a specialized uniform (punk, or working-class), practicing particular forms of sex, or consuming subcultural commodities. (Note: Obviously, none of these practices — particular diets, clothing, sexual practices, or commodity consumption per se — are in themselves necessarily debilitating or self-defeating; it is their fetishization and elevation to decontextualized moral standards that makes them so.)

The effects of morality

Whatever the specific content of compulsory morality, the effects are basically similar. A person's ability to think clearly and act decisively in his or her own interests (within appropriate contexts) is compromised or sabotaged. If people are not able to consciously act in their own individual and communal interests, they will almost certainly end up acting instead in the (alien) interests of another in some fashion.

In most forms of compulsory morality this other around whose interests values are oriented is an abstract idea rather than a person or persons: God, Science, Nature, one's Country (or Nation-State), the Economy or Ecology, etc. (Although there are always real people, social groups and organizations just waiting to exploit the victims of morality by acting as mediators between them and their abstract ideals.) Even in those cases in which values are explicitly oriented towards people or groups of people (for example, the class-struggle morality that puts the Working Class at the center of value), these values usually remain oriented much more towards the abstract idea of the person or the group than towards any actual, concrete, living persons: the fetishized idea of the Proletariat or the Party (rather than actual living and breathing workers or the individual members who make up the party), Humanity (in the abstract rather than in the form of an aggregate of concrete individuals in all their interrelationships), the State, etc. People whose compulsory moralities are organized around these abstract ideas attempt to force themselves to follow their demands because they have displaced (projected or alienated) their own subjectivity onto them, usually through the influence of years and years of alienating and demoralizing socialization and indoctrination. Rather than understanding and acting for themselves the victims of morality attempt to make themselves the puppets of the abstract ideas they fetishize.

Living without morality

The radical alternative to morality involves the creation of critical self-theory. The formation of any coherent and effective anarchist perspective and practice requires that people develop (through interaction with their natural and social environments) a relatively sophisticated understanding of themselves and their places in their social and natural worlds. Without a consciously understood subjective locus of understanding, without a clear focus on one's own personal and social interests, it is impossible to develop a critical social theory that can comprehend social alienation and the possibilities for its supersession. Critical self-theory and critical social theory are two essential poles of one comprehensive project.

Only by developing and maintaining a self-critical understanding of oneself and one's world can people make comprehensively rational decisions about what their most genuine interests are and how to pursue them (rather than making narrowly or partially rationalized decisions which won't accurately reflect themselves or their overall context). In the 19^{th} century language of Max Stirner, this kind of critical self-understanding was termed "self-conscious egoism," but today it makes more sense to jettison this outdated, pre-Freudian term in favor of "self-theory."

Critical self-understanding involves the simultaneous development of a finite ethics, a set of values consistent with what are considered and felt to be one's most important interests, that are expressed in everyday life activities. These values are organic expressions of one's radical subjectivity, of one's self-possession, self-understanding and self-activity. They don't originate outside of one's life, demanding one's subjection, because they originate from one's own direct life-experiences and serve one's own interests.

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