Morality Vs. Ethics

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The difference between morality and ethics is a major misunderstanding leftists have of anarchist politics. Most leftists are unaware of, unwilling to consider, or unable to grasp the distinction. But it's an important distinction for anarchists to make because morals are so entangled with authority. This essay will try to explain the differences between morality and ethics from an anarchist perspective.

In polite society, 'moral' is a label typically applied by people to themselves and their group so they, if we're being perfectly honest, can present themselves as a pure and righteous person capable of doing no 'wrong'.

The 'moral' person sees themselves as fighting a universal battle between good and evil. They of course cast themselves in the role of the righteous crusader for good; incapable of straying from the 'moral constitution' that enshrines them in sanctified holiness.

The label 'immoral' is applied to whoever the 'moral' group decides is counter to their notions of goodness. They do this so they can maintain 'moral' superiority over the out-group and thus justify any action they take to marginalise these undesirables without feeling remorse or having to justify their behaviour to anyone. By

being a proud moral crusader, they don't need to give even a moment's thought to the cruelty they inflict on whichever individual or group they've decided is a threat to their sacred moral constitution.

The immoral villains who violate the sacred constitution can never be forgiven for their perceived crimes against morality because morality is definitive and final. The despicable villains must be forever shunned by the altruistic heroes in order to maintain their pious morals. Racial segregation was considered morally righteous in the US South. As was cleansing the land of 'savages' during colonisation. Lynching bi-racial children for being 'impure'. Denying women equality by reasoning that it would lead to 'moral decadence'.

The recent government massacres of drug users in the Philippines were justified by creating a moral panic. The tyrant leading the massacres appointing himself as the one and only arbiter of virtue, that all moral people should blindly follow.

Perhaps the most deadly moral panic of the last century was spurred by Mao's cultural revolution in China. His Little Red Book of quotes; a virtual moral blueprint, was used by the party-faithful to purge scores of random people for having morally-objectionable... haircuts, furniture, pets or fashion sense. Likewise, Stalin and his supporters in the USSR forced homosexuals and other out-groups into gulags where they were worked to death for 'crimes against morality'.

And of course the prototypical moral blueprint; the Christian bible, was used to lead brutal moral crusades across the world for centuries; mass slaughters, land seizures and forced conversions of non-Christians.

Moral systems are designed to oppress and marginalise anyone the system deems undesirable. They are based on transcendent rules that are forcibly applied to all people from all backgrounds, in all situations; regardless of each individual's desires and values.

Unlike society's authoritative and punitive morals, ethics are decided on a case-by-case basis by the individual based on their own values and desires. Ethics are tangible and tied to real cause and effect outcomes. Ethics are voluntary personal views rather than collectively-enforced top-down ones.

Morality is always formed and upheld by a collective: a religious institution, a workplace, an educational organization, a cultural group, a club, a society.

Ethics are personal, informed by an individual's experiences and their own needs and desires.

Morals are applied to everyone inside and often outside of a group by a collective and its authority. Ethics are applied to the individual by the individual and in most cases affect no one but the individual.

Morals require hierarchy, authority, law and enforcement of said law, while ethics simply require that an individual draw their own lines to determine what they are personally willing to live with, what compromises they're willing to make, what actions they're willing to take against others.

Moralists have differing ideas of morality but they largely operate in absolutes: Some are ardent pacifists who insist there can be no excuse for any form of violence, while others will demand violence be done to those who break their moral law in even the most minor way. But in practice, even the most ardent moral pacifist will embrace violence when their egos are put under enough pressure.

Often pacifist moralists will simply shift what they see as 'violence' to overcome the cognitive dissonance they're confronted with when someone breaks their laws and thus threatens their moral authority. So, suddenly the violence of putting people in cages or sterilizing them or lobotomizing them or euthanizing them is seen by the pacifist moralist as 'humane' and 'non-violent'. The hypocrisy of the moralist is truly boundless, but devotion to their ideology is something the moralist will fight tooth and

nail to cling to, even when every aphorism of that ideology has been warped beyond recognition. This is how we end up with the hypocrisy of Christians preaching "do no harm" one day and then leading bloody pogroms and crusades the next. Or syndicalists in civil war Spain claiming to want to build equality and freedom and to abolish authority, while murdering nuns for refusing to renounce their faith and building forced labor prisons.

A moralist opposition to violence might be: violence is universally wrong, immoral, bad. Why? Simply because the collective authority behind the moralist says so. Requesting justification for such an abstract statement would be scoffed at because morality is seen by the moralist as some kind of divine truth that can't be questioned. The simple act of questioning it or the authority behind it would be enough to render you immoral.

On the other hand, a measured ethical opposition to violence can be made by an amoralist... They can see that in many cases violence begets more violence, fosters systems based on the dominance of the strong, and can lead to deep-seated multi-generational divisions. But in other cases, they could see violence as ethically just. Because the alternative (e.g. fascism) would likely be worse.

A moralist forces their reactionary and irrational will on everyone else. Their morals are absolute. An amoralist isn't concerned with forcing their personal perspective onto everyone, or with maintaining that perspective in every situation as if it were unquestionable dogma.

Morality places paint-by-the-numbers judgement on every action, positing that all actions in column A are inherently 'wrong' and unacceptable, while all actions in column B are inherently 'right' and necessary. Regardless of the experiences of the people involved, their personal convictions and motivations, and the conditions that are present in that place and time.

Inevitably, the moralist collective will go on to break every moral law they've set when they deem it necessary to, and the wonders of cognitive dissonance will allow them to absolve themselves of any responsibility for breaking their supposedly uncompromising moralism.

Anarchists aren't uncaring monsters for rejecting morality, as the moral left will have you believe. We're rejecting an incredibly dangerous, authoritarian concept that directly leads to untold misery for the multiple generations of people forced to survive inside the walls of the dogmatic moral systems imposed on them from above.

Morality and ideology go hand in hand to deny people their most basic autonomy: Their freedom to decide right from wrong according to their own needs, desires and values.