Ethical Individualism and Moral Collectivism in America

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From Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Bellah and Alan Wolfe, the many observers of the United States invariably call attention to its emphasis on individualism. In the popular culture of American television and movies, the autonomous individual stands out, whether as rebel against the system or as self-centered consumer of endless products, services, and other people. Then there are the advertisements that tell us how important we are as individuals, "you are worth it." Over against these seemingly positive images are those of individuals worried about their personal relationships —lonely, depressed, and forlorn. But everywhere we find individuals thinking about and acting for themselves.

The way ethics is taught in the public schools in the United States does little to dispel this idea that individualism is the hallmark of American culture. James Davison Hunter's recent study of moral education confirms this.[1] He identifies three approaches to moral education in American public schools: neo-classical, communitarian, and psychological.

The neo-classical position is similar to that of natural law theories in earlier centuries. It maintains the existence of universal moral values or virtues, whether that universality as ascertained by reason derives from nature or history. The communitarian approach emphasizes the consensus in the community about what is

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[1] James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

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moral and what is immoral. This consensus should come from democratic participation rather than be imposed from above by an elite. The needs of the community should take precedence over those of the individual.

The psychological approach to moral education is dominant. It is loosely tied to the "self-esteem" movement, which stresses the therapeutic function of education. The purpose of education is as much to make the student feel good about himself as to educate him. In one version of the psychological approach, moral judgments become "value preferences" and values hardly more than individual emotions. The hope is that through self-expression and interaction with others the student will clarify what his values are. In a sense the values are already inside the student and simply need to be teased out. Another version of the approach emphasizes reason and turns morality into a means for individual success or happiness.[2]

In perhaps his most important finding, Hunter observes that despite their manifest differences all three approaches share the same "assumptions, concepts, and ideals."[3] The reason is that each of the approaches takes morality out of its cultural context and thus renders it abstract. Moreover, morality is presented to the students as subjective. With the triumph of the scientific worldview, objectivity became identified with scientific inquiry; religion and morality in turn became subjective.[4] As Louis Dumont[5] observes, the modern ideology turns morality and virtue into personal values that individuals are free to accept or reject. Emotivism as a moral philosophy is the academic recognition of morality having become a consumer choice.[6]

Psychological approach to education marginalizes ethics as abstract and subjective.

In the long run, however, moral education programs are not successful, not even those that occur in religious schools. They are not able to counter what Christina Sommers calls the basic assumptions of students entering college: psychological egoism (mo-

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[2] *Ibid.*, chs. 5 and 6.

[3] *Ibid.*, 122-27.

[4] J. H. van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man*, trans. H. F. Croes (New York: Norton, 1961).

[5] Louis Dumont, "On Value, Modern and Nonmodern," in *Essays on Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 234-68.

[6] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), ch. 3.

Morality reduced to emotional or political preference.

tivation is invariably selfish), moral relativism, radical tolerance, and moral responsibility centered in organizations not individuals. This final assumption is telling. As Sommers demonstrates, the main thrust of moral education beyond self expression is to become interested in the social policy of private and public organizations so that one chooses the right organization to solve the problem.[7] Students become at worst "moral spectators" and at best activists, but without a sense of personal moral responsibility. Morality is either emotional preference or political preference or both. The widespread idea that moral responsibility resides in society and society only is a sign that the individualistic approach to morality in the United States may not be what it first appears to be.

Psychological Weakness

Declining authority of family and community undermined hierarchy.

The theory of the mass society is one of the great theories in the social sciences, I think, and unfortunately one that has been more or less abandoned. It was central to the work of C. Wright Mills, but much earlier in the nineteenth century it appeared in nascent form in the work of Kierkegaard[8] and Tocqueville.[9] A mass society is one that possesses simultaneously a high degree of collectivism and individualism. The medieval state and church exercised little direct control over local communities except in times of crisis, e.g., war and heresy. Even if they had wanted to, transportation and communication would have made it difficult. With the growth of power in the state, administration, and technology and the great increase in migration and social mobility in the eighteenth century, the local community began to decline as an agency of moral control, a development accompanied by the gradual dissolution of the institution of the family. The abstract power of the state, administration, and technology supplanted the moral authority of the community and family. In Dumont's terms, "hierarchy" had previously been set within "holism"; that is, the interests of the community took precedence over the interests of those who had higher status and power in the social hierarchy. With the

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[7] Christina Sommers, "Ethics Without Virtue," *The American Scholar* 53 (Summer 1984), 381-89.

[8] Soren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

[9] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969).

rise of the values of equality and individualism in modern ideology,[10] hierarchy becomes unstable and difficult to justify except in terms of individual competition. Therefore centralized power that affords everyone equal treatment appears an attractive alternative to hierarchy.

But there is a price to pay for equality. That both citizen and government favor equality, Tocqueville noted, should alert us to the danger.[11] The state administratively applies the same regulations to everyone. The state, administration, and technology are considered efficient to the extent they can impose the same abstract rules on everyone.

The individual citizen reacts ambivalently to the decline of personal and cultural authority, Tocqueville tells us. It produces feelings of release, freedom, and power. No one can tell me what to do, for we are equal. At the same time, however, we cannot rely on others for assistance; they are not morally bound to us in a reciprocal relationship. Moreover, our relationships to others become more competitive, more dangerous. This leads to what Tocqueville terms "psychological weakness." We live in tacit fear of others, not so much of their potential for physical violence as of their ability to manipulate us. Trust presupposes a moral community, which in turn requires moral authority. Our relationships become vague because they are based on distrust. Individualism in this context involves psychological weakness; we look to the peer group and the state to protect us from exploitation. Psychological weakness, moreover, is the bridge between individualism and egoism (Tocqueville noted that the former eventually led to the latter.[12])

Systemic equality leads to "psychological weakness."

Fragmentation and Depersonalization

Tzvetan Todorov's masterful *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in Concentration Camps* discusses the fragmentation and depersonalization of the individual in the context of totalitarianism of which concentration camps are its fullest expression. The state assumes control of all social goals and appropriates the individual's social

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[10] Louis Dumont, "The Anthropological Community and Ideology," in *Essays on Individualism*, 202-33.

[11] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 672.

[12] *Ibid.*, 507.

existence. In effect, the individual is denied moral responsibility for her actions. Fragmentation and depersonalization make it difficult, if not impossible, for the individual to exercise moral judgment. Fragmentation and depersonalization, then, represent the internalization of totalitarianism. We will see later, however, that these twin psychological maladies occur today in less extreme contexts.[13]

Fragmentation involves the splitting of the self in a variety of ways, including that between the public and private spheres of life and between thought and action. Todorov provides the example of a Nazi guard who treats inmates in cruel ways at work but hours later is a kind and loving father to his children in the privacy of his home. Another is the inmate who retains his religious beliefs but informs on fellow inmates.

Fragmentation of the self undermines responsibility.

Manifestations of fragmentation in the modern world include technical and bureaucratic specialization and professionalization. Personal responsibility is narrowly limited to one's specialized function. No one person is responsible for a decision in the modern bureaucracy. Our responsibility is further diminished by our dependence upon specialized experts who have invaded all spheres of life.[14]

The more technology objectifies human ability and intelligence, the less one needs to rely on personal experience and tradition. It is easy to forget that technology affects us as we create and use it. What it requires of us in an age of instantaneous communication and action is reflex not reflection, as Jacques Ellul has observed.[15] Our own thoughts are increasingly irrelevant and, in compensation, turn toward fantasy and illusion.

Depersonalization refers to the treatment of a human being as a non-person. To handle a person as simply an inmate, or as an abstract category, to define someone exclusively in terms of statistical information, or to act as if she were less than human is to depersonalize the other. But depersonalization runs in both directions. Under totalitarianism everyone is turned into a "cog in the machine." This in turn results in the obedience to authority syn-

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[13] Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996).

[14] *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

[15] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), ch. 5.

drome or the bureaucratic mind. When faced with unlimited or
arbitrary power, one must submit to it. Totalitarianism deprives
individuals of their will. As Todorov observes, "each and every-
one is both guard and inmate at the same time."[16] Once again
Todorov compares the dehumanizing aspects of modern bureau-
cracy and technology to totalitarian practices. Technology and bu-
reaucracy mediate human relationships, permitting a vast increase
in extensive, abstract relationships in the interest of efficiency at
the expense of intensive, immediate relationships.[17] Abstract rules
govern virtually all human relationships in modern organizations,
including the university. Teaching, for example, is moving in the
direction of a technical and contractual relationship between
teacher and student in lieu of an informal, human relationship.

Technocratic rationalization dehumanizes society.

If the bureaucratic mind leads to submission to authority, it
also results in its opposite—manipulation of others. In a universe
of raw power, one submits to a power greater than one's own and
manipulates that of lesser strength. In such an environment moral
judgment becomes progressively superfluous, for everyone per-
ceives that others invariably act out of self-interest.

Not everyone views fragmentation and depersonalization as
destructive, however. Some postmodernists celebrate fragmenta-
tion and depersonalization as expressions of individual freedom
rather than as a consequence of extreme collectivism. Fragmenta-
tion permits one to escape the moral unity of the self and become
a mere role-player, one who approaches life in an exclusively aes-
thetical and apparently free manner. Life becomes an experiment
or a game, whose rules are controlled by the centralized power of
the state, the corporation, the media, and technology.

Some celebrate fragmentation as freedom.

Depersonalization is also sometimes perceived as a form of
freedom. The spoken word, according to Jacques Ellul, is the most
appropriate medium for sustaining deep human relationships and
for making moral judgments.[18] Do you stand behind your words?
Do you keep your promises? Advertising, however, is anonymous
discourse directed toward an abstract audience of consumers.
With the computer, everyone can actively engage in anonymous
discourse and can say anything, no matter how preposterous and

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[16] Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 166.
[17] *Ibid*., ch. 9.
[18] Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Hanks (Grand Rap-
ids: Eerdmans, 1985), ch. 1.

hurtful, without any risks. The computer encourages the most irresponsible discourse yet known. In effect, it teaches the tacit lesson that freedom exists without responsibility. Psychological weakness warrants such depersonalized discourse. Modern individualism entails a fragmented, depersonalized self living in fear of others. This is hardly the cultural ideal of the individual in the Renaissance or in the Enlightenment. Rather, when expressed in postmodernism, it is the ideological justification of an increasingly collectivized existence.

The Mass Media Aestheticize and Thus Fragment Life

In the subsequent discussion of technology in general and the mass media in particular, I am making several assumptions. First, technology is the fundamental basis of and paramount determining factor of modern societies. This determinism, however, is not metaphysical but sociological; as such it can be resisted and even overcome but only with great effort and keen insight. Second, the traditional relationship between language and visual images is gradually being reversed. In the past, the symbolism of visual art took its meaning from the semantic foundation of culture.[19] Discourse provided the context within which visual images assumed meaning. Today the opposite is becoming true. For increasing numbers of people, the images of the media furnish the context within which words take their meaning. Hence the visual images of the media, which are increasingly first related to one another before they are related to language, serve as "operational indications" of words. The reification of language results, for example, in the meaning of love being reduced to the image of an embrace or a kiss. The reification of language is furthered by propaganda, advertising, and public relations whose use of words destroys their common meaning and thus renders them vague and ultimately meaningless.

Those most affected by the images of the media, research indicates, are those whose reading skills are poor, those who watch a lot of television (and related visual media), and those who are lonely.[20] Jane Healy has documented the serious decline in read-

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[19] E. H. Gombrich, "The Visual Image," *Scientific American* 227 (September 1972), 82-96.

[20] Richard Stivers, *The Culture of Cynicism: American Morality in Decline* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 157.

ing comprehension in the country.[21] There is thus little indication that the process of the subordination of language to images in the media will easily or soon be reversed.[22] In a sense, I am describing a future that is rapidly moving toward us.

The mass media reinforce and deepen the fragmentation and depersonalization that bureaucracy and technology unintentionally create. The aesthetical and the ethical, according to Kierkegaard, are dimensions of culture and ways of existing. Both are necessary to the life of the individual and society. The aesthetical is concerned with immediate experience. Aesthetic existence is principally about enjoyment, to lose oneself in the pleasure of the moment. A purely aesthetical approach to life, Kierkegaard observes, is ethically indifferent to others. When one is not ethically bound to others, one is free to relate to them as best fits one's needs and desires.

The ethical is concerned with responsibility toward and limits in our relationship to others. An ethical approach to life provides a moral unity to the self; one is the same person, no matter what the circumstances. When one stands for specific beliefs and puts them into practice one becomes a coherent, consistent, and unified self. To paraphrase Kierkegaard, one chooses a self for a lifetime. An aesthetical approach to life cannot provide unity for the self because there is no unity in pleasure. Instead pleasure entails self abandonment; one merges with the object of pleasure.[23] Therefore an exclusively aesthetical approach to life requires a multiplicity of selves—a different self in each situation.

Ethical approach to life unifies self.

Television and related media are, in their overall impact, antinarrative. (In this section I will use television to refer in a general way to all media that feature visual images.) Although it can be argued that individual television programs have a narrative form (even here I argue that in the electronic media the visual images destroy the narrative structure of discourse), the entire spectrum of programs is random and incoherent. That is, there is no temporal and meaningful relationship among programs and commercials. One can go from the news of an earthquake to a commercial

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[21] Jane Healy, *Endangered Minds* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 26-36.
[22] See Richard Stivers, *Technology as Magic* (New York: Continuum, 1999), ch. 2, for a fuller discussion of these issues.
[23] Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

for hemorrhoids, to a talk show about men who are looking for a mother figure in the women they date, to a game show, to a program that recreates "true" police encounters with criminals. Therefore television in its total impact destroys the experience of event time. One is left with duration time, the continuous time of description. Television describes reality for us but leaves us with no understanding of it. The more television one watches, the more life appears absurd, but interesting.

The main, if not exclusive, impact of the visual image is emotional.[24] Emotional experiences are principally aesthetical, and as such leave us oriented to the moment of pleasure or pain. By itself emotion does not allow us to transcend the immediate present. What is most distinctive about humans, Kierkegaard argues, is our imagination and anticipation of the future; without this, there is no sense of the past.[25] Television's visual images permit no future and thus no past. Television creates an eternal present. To live exclusively in the moment, to live from moment to moment, is to live a fragmented existence.

Television appeals to instincts.
Television makes a fundamental appeal to our instincts. In short, television's images are pleasurable. Paul Goldberger maintains that "[t]he rise in visual literacy has been accompanied by an almost desperate desire to be stimulated."[26] Our increased visual sophistication lowers our threshold for boredom; we require ever more spectacular experiences.

Television plays a large role in the representation of life as spectacle. According to Guy Debord, we now live in a world of visual representation, a mirror-world in which the image is more important than and indeed defines reality. Moreover, life has largely been transformed into an image for immediate consumption. The spectacle is the "language" of the commodity; it is the visualization of the commodity for spiritual consumption.[27] The spectacle serves to reinforce the extreme individualism of consumerism. I become what I see and what I consume. I possess as many selves as the products I consume. The media fragment time and the sense of a consistent, coherent self.

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[24] Gombrich, "The Visual Image," 82-96.

[25] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

[26] Paul Goldberger, "Design: The Risks of Razzle-Dazzle," *New York Times* (April 12, 1987), p. 1.

[27] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977).

The Mass Media Objectify and Thus Depersonalize Existence

Television makes discourse anonymous. It is information sent by no one to anyone. It is impossible to trace the information back to a personal source, for even newscasters often work from scripts written by others. The audience is only a statistical audience of people with similar characteristics as determined by marketing techniques. Communication achieves its highest state of impersonality in the media. The depersonalized information of the media seems more objective than that provided by a person.

Walter Benjamin has called attention to the destruction of meaning that occurs when a work of art is removed from its historical and cultural context and is technologically reproduced exclusively as a visual image for consumption.[28] This objectification is essentially what television does on a much larger scale.

Television appears to be describing reality, particularly in news programs, documentaries, talk shows and game shows. In effect, it is reconstructing reality by taking reality out of its temporal and cultural context. Reality as we live it still retains some meaning, no matter how small; but television expunges this meaning and recomposes reality as a sequence of image fragments. Television is anti-surrealistic, as Ellul notes; it subtracts meaning from life.[29]

Reality recomposed as sequence of image fragments.

A former graduate student of mine talks about a special song that his girlfriend and he shared. When he heard the song, he thought about her and their experiences together. Once he viewed the music video of that song, his images were altered. Now when he heard the song, the images of the music video appeared in his mind. His girlfriend and their experiences had vanished.

Poems, novels, and stories, by contrast, provide shared symbolic experiences to listeners and readers, which have to be filtered through the reader's own meaningful experiences. The media objectify our experiences and thus control them. Is this not a form of totalitarianism?

Modern individualism exists to permit a non-political totalitarianism to flourish. Consumerism creates a radical individualism. But as Baudrilliard observes, our freedom as consumers to choose among a variety of commodities is set within the over-

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[28] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-51.

[29] Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*.

whelming constraint to be consumers.[30] Consumerism is a forced and total consumerism, a total mobilization of consumers. Psychologically isolated individuals are a precondition for non-political totalitarianism. Psychologically weak, fragmented, and depersonalized individuals are easy prey for the centralized power of the state, corporation, bureaucracy, and technology. If it were not for the mass media, modern individualism might appear impotent. The aestheticizing power of the media can magically transform weakness into strength. The mass media give us totalitarianism with a human face, a kinder and friendlier totalitarianism.

Extreme Individualism as a Necessary Component of Moral Collectivism

As we have already seen, human relationships today tend to be based on considerations of power or on aesthetical considerations of style and consumption. Modern societies make it both unnecessary and difficult for individuals to assume moral responsibility and exercise moral judgment. This is especially true if one considers the emergence of an ersatz morality that is thoroughly collectivistic; it assumes no moral judgment and requires no moral responsibility. Yet its effectiveness depends upon its apparent individualism. I have described this pseudo-morality, at least in its American context, in *The Culture of Cynicism.*[31]

Technology is one of the forms that modern morality assumes; its greatest influence is exerted through organizational and psychological techniques. Max Weber understood bureaucracy to be a kind of machine, a kind of technology.[32] Bureaucratic rules carry the weight of morality for those who possess the bureaucratic mind. Psychological techniques, at least those on an interpersonal level, are imitation technologies that promise an effective way to control the other. The countless "how to" manuals, guides, and books on everything from marital happiness and child-rearing to dressing for success invariably involve a set of steps or a logical process that more or less guarantees success. These become a substitute for conventional manners and morality. They turn human

Rules for success displace conventional manners and morality.

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[30] Jean Baudrillard, "Consumer Society," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 29-56.

[31] Stivers, *The Culture of Cynicism.*

[32] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 2, trans. Ephraim Fischoff *et al.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), ch. XI.

relationships into relationships of power. When we apply a technique designed for maximum efficiency to another it appears to be an expression of individual freedom; when it is applied to us, it registers as collectivistic, as beyond our control. Technical and bureaucratic rules require no moral judgment, for procedural rules do not depend upon context for their meaning as do traditional virtues and moral principles. Nor do they require moral responsibility, for responsibility is embedded in the organization and technology.

Public opinion is a kind of statistical morality in which the majority viewpoint or statistically average behavior becomes the norm. The normal begins to replace the moral with the onset of the belief in technological progress or at least the belief of radical immanentism, that is, that we live in a self-contained world without ultimate purpose. The normal, then, is either the moral in the theory of progress or a practical guide in a nihilistic world. The result is that public opinion becomes a statistical morality in which the normal assumes the guise of a moral norm. American historian Daniel Boorstin discusses how middle class parents in the early twentieth century came to be greatly concerned with their children's measured development in intelligence, personality, and behavior. Parents wanted their children to be normal, to fit in.[33] As Tocqueville noted, public opinion becomes tyrannical in a democratic society because citizens fear being isolated if they dissent from it.[34] This is a variation of Tocqueville's earlier psychological weakness argument. Here it is not the fear of being manipulated, but rather the fear of isolation. Parents feared for the isolation of their children. At the same time, however, we are told that the expression of our opinion in polls is a form of freedom. Public opinion polls flatter us. Public opinion likewise acts to demand that those in power do something about various social, economic, and environmental problems; my apparent freedom is that I do not have to assume responsibility for the problem at hand.

Technology can only continue to progress through constant experimentation and change. Through the images of the media, technology creates and manipulates desire. Public opinion is ephem-

Public opinion tyrannical for fragmented individuals.

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[33] Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), 227-44.

[34] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 246-61.

eral, especially in its demand that consumer desires be fulfilled; for desire is always changing. Based as it is upon desire and fear, public opinion defines each issue in terms of individual well-being (happiness and health).

The visual images of the media are part of the ephemeral side of a technological civilization, the part that provides the greatest compensation for the demands that technology makes upon us. The media serve us dramatized but reverse images of a technological civilization, which is abstract and impersonal. The images of the media become as it were the language of technology. The visual images of the media are in harmony with public opinion in that they appear variously as an accurate representation of *what is* and as an imaginative alternative of *what is possible*. Technology's psychological hold over us is at the level of possibility.

Media images dramatize and make material each possibility, thus turning it into a model for action. In the 1970s a team of Canadian psychologists made a study of three communities in Western Canada, one of which was without television (because of its geographical location) but due to receive it within a year. The communities were studied both before television was introduced to the one community without it and two years afterwards. The study's main purpose was to ascertain the impact of television upon the attitudes, thought processes, and behavior of the residents. Most of the attention was devoted to children, but adults were studied as well. Television watching in Notel, the town previously without television, slowed down children's "acquisition of fluent reading skills"; moreover, children who watched a lot of television were poorer readers than those who watched but little (correcting for intelligence). The introduction of television to Notel reduced the level of creativity among its children to what it was in the other two towns. Children's sex-role attitudes became markedly stereotyped after the introduction of television in Notel. Perhaps most importantly, television significantly increased the amount of aggressive behavior, both verbal and physical, among children.[35] This, I think, is the definitive study of television images acting as models for behavior.

My freedom appears as the possibility of emulating celebrities (anyone who appears in the media) in their appearance, life-style,

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[35] Tannis Williams, *The Impact of Television* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1986).

and behavior. Yet these visual images are collectivistic insofar as they objectify our experiences and choices. Visual images in the media present us with life-styles, experiences, and commodities that are spectacular, and public opinion demands their realization. *This pseudo-morality replaces the dualism of the normal and the ideal (the is and the ought to be) with the dualism of the normal and the possible.* Our ideal is not transcendent now but one of human construction—a technological utopia.

Media images collectivistic.

The Role of "Morality" in Psychological Totalitarianism

This pseudo-morality plays a key role in the operation of an extreme collectivism, of what one might call psychological totalitarianism. Political totalitarianism was always founded on an ideology that made the nation, the race, or the ethnic group sacred. That kind of totalitarianism was symbolically anchored. It was effective to the extent that the political symbolism was accepted by the masses. The psychological pressures of political totalitarianism depended upon shared political meaning however terrible it might be.

The effectiveness of the mass media, however, as the key agent of psychological totalitarianism is not based on political or religious ideology. Rather it rests upon a base that I have described elsewhere as the myth of technological utopianism. Unlike religious myths in which meaning was spiritual—nature or the gods —this myth is thoroughly materialistic. Technological utopianism substitutes the perfect health and happiness of the human body for the spiritual well-being of the human soul. This meaning is ineffective because it is based on individualistic consumerism. For meaning to be effective it must be shared meaning that binds people together in common responsibilities and reciprocal moral relationships. Consumerism is a shared belief but it leaves one psychologically isolated, for it is based upon freedom without responsibility. The attempt to create meaning in consumerism, to spiritualize consumerism, fails because its utopian promise of perfect happiness and health cannot be achieved in this world, and therefore happiness and health remain transitory, as anxiety, suffering, and death constantly remind us.

Psychological totalitarianism driven by narrow self-interest.

Moreover, the reciprocal moral relationships that work to create trust have been replaced by obligations to conform that are a

Reciprocal moral relationships replaced by pressures to conform.

result of psychological weakness or the fear of others. Public opinion and the images of the media serve as a substitute morality, then, not out of shared responsibility and shared meaning, but out of the mutual fear of isolated and anxious individuals. We conform to the "moral" pressures of public opinion, the peer group, and the images of the media as well because we have come to believe that what public opinion desires and what the images of the media dramatize and make material are just what we desire as individuals. Our individuality becomes a random collection of the accidental differences that ensue from consumer choice, so that the collectivism of forced consumption remains hidden. This pseudo-morality provides the binding force of psychological totalitarianism. Psychological totalitarianism and its morality function according to *individual desire, not shared meaning.*

An Almost Impenetrable Moral Ambiguity

Everywhere there is evidence that repudiates my theory. The widespread discussion about ethics today seems to indicate that traditional morality is more or less intact. Every organization, every professional group, every political assembly, every corporation, establishes a code of ethics. Ethicists are in demand in medical schools, business schools, and law schools. Yet despite school ethics programs, parents and teachers are worried about the ethics of children and young adults. For example, student approval of cheating under certain circumstances is quite high.[36] The concern for ethics has perhaps an air of desperation about it. There is, I think, a tacit recognition that a common morality has disappeared, or at least that we have not worked out a moral response to the numerous problems with which technology in particular confronts us, e.g., cloning, genetic engineering, global warming, and so forth. The reason is our failure to recognize the true context of these problems. In *Medical Power and Medical Ethics*,[37] J. H. van den Berg, himself a physician, argues that, when medicine was less technologically effective, it did everything it could to prolong life. But today, with the greater power of medicine, the extension of life sometimes leads to enormous suffering for the pa-

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[36] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, 160-65.
[37] J. H. van den Berg, *Medical Power and Medical Ethics* (New York: Norton, 1978).

tient and her family. The technological context of the attempt to keep patients alive creates a moral problem of prolonged suffering that co-exists with increased life expectancy.

At other times the concern for ethics appears as ideological compensation for the absence of moral restraints. One study in the United States discovered no relationship between business ethics and business practices. Indeed, Robert Jackall's *Moral Mazes*[38] confirms this finding about corporations.

I do not wish to impugn the motivation of well-intentioned citizens who seek moral solutions to the multitude of problems we face today, but for those in business or government who use ethics as a cover for cynical practices we should have little sympathy.

The first confusion about morality today is that between theoretical morality and lived morality. Theoretical morality or normative ethics is a rational account of the virtues and principles people *should* live by. It is sometimes the work of a philosopher or religious leader and is based on revelation or some idea of natural law. Ellul[39] observes that historically there are only a relatively few instances in which the theoretical morality (normative ethics) has actually become the lived morality or effective moral attitudes of a society. Christianity is one example. Even here the time of agreement was rather short. The lived morality rather quickly departs from its ideal formulation. The main reason is that lived morality is most often a spontaneous, largely unconscious creation of a society, reflecting in contradictory fashion both *necessity* and an *ideal image* a group has of itself.

Some of the discussion of ethics today is at the level of theoretical morality and, as previously discussed, tends to take an issue out of its proper context—a technological context—or is ideological compensation for the disappearance of a traditional morality. Hence much of the current discussion of morality is beside the point, as our earlier discussion of the teaching of ethics in school indicated.

The second confusion about morality is between moral custom and lived morality. Moral custom is the lived morality of the past that survives into the present. It is only effective when it does not

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[38] Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[39] Jacques Ellul, *To Will and To Do*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969).

contradict the dominant lived morality of the present. Today both Judaic-Christian and humanistic moralities have been relegated to the status of moral custom. They still operate at times in personal relationships not fully subject to the technical and aesthetical norms of the pseudo morality. Even then, it takes almost heroic strength and acute insight to live within the fading image of moral custom.

Let us take parental love of children as an example. Aesthetical love—that is, love that is based upon attraction and pleasure, and that is interesting and immediately fulfilling—has gradually supplanted ethical love based upon a sense of obligation to and even sacrifice of one's interests for the other. Martha Wolfenstein analyzed American governmental brochures provided to new parents over a number of decades. She discovered that later documents much more than the earlier ones emphasized the pleasure the child brought the mother. Wolfenstein discusses this in the context of what she terms fun morality: We have an obligation to have fun.[40] The second example is from Beatrice Gottlieb's analysis of medieval parental love. She observes that love was an element of moral discipline for Christian parents, one of whose chief obligations was the formation of the child's character.[41] Much later in the nineteenth and especially twentieth centuries, love and discipline became separated to a great extent so that love became the giving or receiving of affection, and discipline became a punitive form of control. Parents may need to employ both love and discipline, but the two have now become distinct so that love could be aestheticized.

The third example of moral confusion is the tendency of modern parents to live vicariously through their children's accomplishments, to need their children's affection too desperately, and to wish to become friends with their children before they are even adults. The child is thus turned into an emotional commodity. Despite the fact that parental love is markedly different today from what it was in the Middle Ages, the same word "love" is used in both instances. Therefore parents may readily miss the transfor-

Sentimental replaces ethical love.

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[40] Martha Wolfenstein, "The Emergence of Fun Morality," *Journal of Social Issues* 7 (1951), 15-25.
[41] Beatrice Gottlieb, *The Family in the Western World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

mation of ethical love into a sentimental love that is primarily if not exclusively an aesthetic experience.

Another problem parents face in living out traditional morality in relation to their children is the diminution of parental responsibility. The state and human services experts have taken over many of the parents' responsibilities. Governmental regulations about child-rearing and services for families as well as expert advice on child-rearing reduce parental responsibility to the level of making the best consumer choice on behalf of the child. This is minimal moral responsibility.

My point is that the confusion between moral custom and lived morality and between theoretical morality and lived morality means that many will remain unaware that traditional morality is rapidly disappearing. Current discussion of morality only compounds the problem.

Emile Durkheim was correct about normlessness or what he called "anomie" as a condition of modern life, although it is clear now that anomie was in its infancy when he made this observation. But he was wrong about it in a way that he could never have anticipated: an anti-morality would replace traditional morality. And it is this pseudo-morality that reinforces the meaninglessness of modern life. As this pseudo-morality radically individualizes us, technology and its ally global capitalism can more easily bring us under their dominion.