PHILOSOPHIZE DIRECT

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Preface to the Second Edition

Welcome to Philosophise Direct, an online peer-reviewed journal inviting high school and college students to be introduced to the world of philosophy.

Having succeeded in the launch of our first edition which discussed the nature of good and evil, we are heartened by the interest and critical reflection articulated by both our writers and readers. The debate that our first issue has generated has reminded us of our mission: to offer a platform for young minds to engage with deep philosophical questions.

We are particularly proud of the diversity of voices and themes in this volume, which stretch across political theory, religious symbolism, digital epistemology, and the ethics of AI. Astha Tyagi explores the evolving nature of justice, tracing its roots from classical philosophy to contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter and Dalit activism. Rhea Hiremath reflects on the disintegration of collective meaning in the digital age, drawing from Plato, Arendt, and Foucault to examine how social media and algorithmic influence challenge epistemic authority. Smriti R. Sharma examines religion as a symbolic system, offering an anthropological perspective grounded in the works of Geertz, Turner, and Asad. Finally, Rai Mukhopadhyay investigates the ethics of AI-generated creativity through the lens of the Studio Ghibli art trend, engaging with ideas of autonomy, authorship, and moral responsibility.

Through these writings, *Philosophize Direct* continues to be a space for thoughtful inquiry and vibrant conversation.

Welcome again to this path of reflection

Warm regards.

The Editorial Team - Philosophise Direct

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The Nature of Justice: A Philosophical and Practical Exploration

Astha Tyagi
Lady Shri Ram College

Abstract

Justice, a concept, has influenced human society from ancient mythologies to contemporary legal structures. Originating from philosophical roots yet being continuously revised by social movements and legal reforms, justice is an ideal and practical criterion for structuring societies. This article traces justice from ancient moral and legal codes to social and global justice theories in the contemporary period. Based on the views of philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Rawls, and Sen, the article outlines important arguments about fairness, equality, and freedom. Global movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, and environmental justice movements are employed to demonstrate the ongoing salience and disputability of justice in practice. This paper tries to offer a critical but reader-friendly framework to guide young readers to realize justice not only as theory, but also as a call to action.

Keywords: Justice, Equality, Liberty, Activism, Globalism

Introduction

Justice is a long-standing issue in human history. Through different times and spaces, cultures have to deal with living justly, governing justly, and being with others justly. Thinkers have hypothesized about justice as the ultimate virtue, and political systems have codified laws in the name of its ideals. In global society today, calls for justice are heard in courts, streets, and social media. This article follows the concept of justice from a historical, philosophical, and social perspective. It starts with ancient understanding of justice and moves through classical philosophy and contemporary thought, and concludes with justice in present movements and new world challenges. So, it aims to provide a general sense of justice and its significance as a human guide to morality.

Justice in Ancient Civilizations

Discussions about justice started in the ancient civilizations. In ancient India, justice had been established in the form of *Dharma*, a concept with multi-faceted meaning like law, moral obligation, and cosmic order. The epic texts like the Mahabharata offered ideals of ethical governance, directed towards social living. In ancient China, Confucian virtues of virtue and harmony existed alongside Legalist doctrines of application, presenting differing but

complementary visions of social order. Islamic thought viewed justice through the mechanism of *Sharia*, where human understanding and divine revelation blended religious ethics with legal practice. Ancient Greek society tried out democracy and trial-by-jury, where citizens could argue and debate justice. In spite of cultural variations, these societies constructed foundations which integrated divine, moral, and legal principles so that justice became a foundational pillar of human life.

Classical Thinkers on Justice

Philosophy formalized the idea of justice as virtue, law, and social structure. Plato saw justice as concord between the soul and society. He designed an idea*l polis* in The Republic where justice resulted from each class doing its proper job—a hierarchical but harmonious system. His pupil, Aristotle, provided a more practical explanation. Aristotle claimed, justice ought to treat things alike and unequal things in proportion to their differences. His classification between distributive and corrective justice established foundations of legal and political justice. Centuries later, Kant, diverted the emphasis from societal role to human dignity. His categorical imperative supported the treatment of everyone as an end, never as a means. Justice, according to him, is an affair of universal moral law. Hume, in a skeptical manner opined that justice does not issue from innate thought but from societal usefulness and habit. Marx famously rejected liberal legalism by holding that actual justice can only be achieved in a classless, stateless society. These different visions still shape the manner of how justice is discussed and pursued.

Modern and Contemporary Thinkers

Modern theories of justice attempt to ground philosophical abstractions with the realities of real social injustices. John Rawls proposed the concept "veil of ignorance", where people construct principles of justice without knowing their own social status, to provide equality and maximum concern for the underprivileged. This balanced liberal democratic theory by prioritizing equality over liberty. On the other hand, Robert Nozick offered a libertarian critique, arguing that justice is simply alignment with individual rights and property holdings, regardless of consequences or redistributions of social goods. Amartya Sen responded to Rawls' model by focusing on actual human capabilities, what people can actually do and be. He argues that justice must go beyond fair rules to include actual freedoms and possibilities. Jürgen Habermas added a communicative element. He proposed that justice demands open and free debate where all the affected people can take part in structuring norms and law. These philosophers together reworked justice from an absolute ideal to an active practice involving fairness, human freedom, decent opportunity, and democratic participation. Justice today calls for continuous thought and action.

Justice, Law, and Society

Law is the most public expression of justice, but both of them do not necessarily walk together in harmony. Legal systems establish themselves as authoritative through procedural justice but can produce decisions that run against the spirit of substantive justice, or moral justice. Colonial law, for example, was legal but not just. These contradictions are reflected in equality vs. equity debates. Treating all equal (equality) ignores past discrimination or structural inequalities, but equity attends to difference and tries to arrive at fairness in effect. Policies such as affirmative action violate our dominant sensibilities: they look unequal, yet must make up for system disparity. In the same way, judicial decisions more and more manifest a move towards justice or all. The Indian Supreme Court's legalised homosexuality and transgender rights like in many other countries. Real justice is more than legality, requiring not only obedience to rules but vision, compassion, and critical reflection on norms.

Justice in Action: Real-World Movements

Justice is achieved through the struggle of people who fight against oppression and inequality. The United States Civil Rights Movement, under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., revolutionized justice by means of nonviolence and civil disobedience. King's vision of America as a race-neutral society was as much a spiritual assertion of human dignity. Its heritage has left its mark on others around the world, from South Africa's anti-apartheid movement to Latin American protests for democracies.

In the present times, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has reactivated the controversies about systemic racism, policing, and social justice. BLM is not only fighting police brutality but the underlying economic, legal, cultural conditions that allow racial injustice. The slogan "No Justice, No Peace" is not a threat but a warning: peace cannot be achieved where justice is absent.

The Dalit movement in India still continues fighting against the oppression of caste. Following the footsteps of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit activists have demanded land rights, access to education, and political representation. Justice here is not a theoretical concept; it is dignity, equality, and the right to live without fear.

Globally, green justice movements have highlighted the ways in which environmental degradation most harshly impacts severely marginalized groups of people. From the Flint, Michigan, water crisis to Indigenous land dispossession, these causes connect green sustainability with racial and economic justice. Youth-led campaigns like Fridays for Future not only demand carbon reductions, but also justice for future generations and for vulnerable communities today.

Through these examples, justice is not theory—it is living experience, a struggle by actual people against actual oppression.

Emerging Issues in Global Justice

With the increasingly globalized world, justice is no longer a national issue—it has to be reimagined as a universal ethics. Climate justice raises the question of who is responsible for the degradation of the environment. The Global North, having developed by consuming fossil fuels, carries the historical burden for much of the carbon footprint, with the Global South paying the price. The idea of differentiated but mutual responsibilities, which is at the heart of the Paris Agreement, captures this asymmetry. However, it is problematic in application.

Another immediate concern is algorithmic justice. As AI governs credit, policing, hiring, and even medical treatment, discriminatory data can reproduce and magnify structural injustices. Facial recognition algorithms, for example, have already been demonstrated to misidentify individuals of colour, as studies show.

The case of uprooted people is a matter of refugee and migration justice. Conflict, persecution, and natural catastrophes have displaced millions of people across borders. Asylum policies are often dictated by nationalist anxieties instead of humanitarian responsibilities. International reactions to flows of refugees are proof of the moral weakness of international commitments to justice.

Global economic justice questions whether money, employment, and trade regulations are just. Wealthy countries and corporations take advantage of tax havens, low-paid jobs, and contractionary money policies that trap poor individuals into poverty. Global financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank are repeatedly blamed for protecting the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Justice today has to deal with borderless issues that go beyond state law and personal morality. As crises increases, the idea of justice has to transform into a project of global and shared moral responsibility.

Conclusion

Justice is not an abstract construction but a continual journey. It goes from Plato's idealism to Rawls' justice, from civil rights movements to anti-climate change movements, justice adapts with our civilization. It demands not only rationality but also moral courage. As the world becomes more interconnected and complicated, the concept of justice is both more likely to cause disagreement. In an era of rising inequality, climate emergency, technological development, justice is not only a focus of philosophers, it is the challenge of our times. It challenges us to think, to question, and most importantly, to act.

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Notes on Postmodern 'Reality': A Book Review of *Simulacra and Simulations* by Jean Baudrillard

Kaushiki Ishwar
Miranda House, University of Delhi

The simulacrum never conceals the truth; rather, it conceals the absence of truth. The simulacrum is true.

— Jean Baudrillard

Simulacra and Simulation (1981) by Jean Baudrillard is a sophisticated and intriguing look at reality, representation, and the impact of media, culture, and technology on contemporary society. The book, widely recognized as one of the most influential works in postmodern philosophy, delves into the limits between the real and the artificial, challenging traditional concepts of truth, authenticity, and meaning. By presenting the idea of the simulacrum—a representation that does not reference the original—Baudrillard reveals a universe in which reality is overshadowed by hyperreality, a realm of images, symbols, and signals that shape our perception of life. Baudrillard's theory is especially timely in today's digital age, when virtual worlds, social media, and advertising have blurred the distinction between reality and simulation. His critique goes beyond academic theory, providing a perspective on celebrity culture, consumerism, and technology's ubiquitous effect. The book's primary argument, that simulation has superseded reality as the dominating factor affecting human experience, provides a framework for dealing with modernity's existential concerns. The framework of *Simulacra and Simulation* is as fractured and complex as its subject matter, with pieces on topics ranging from Disneyland to conflict, religion to the hyperreal in arts and media. Baudrillard's writing style is thick and frequently obscure, demanding readers to engage fully with his ideas; nonetheless, his conceptual contributions are transforming. *Simulacra and Simulation* emerges as a must-read for anybody looking to manage the intricacies of a world increasingly mediated by pictures and simulation.

Hyperreality: What is it?

Hyperreality is the prevailing state of postmodernity, in which simulations supersede reality itself. Baudrillard takes Disneyland as an example, claiming that it serves as a simulation to conceal the fact that the "real" America is a created hyperreality. "Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland" (p. 12). This insight demonstrates how hyperreality undermines authenticity by generating an infinite circle of self-referential indicators.

This book attempts to make its readers realize that today, abstraction is no longer synonymous with the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept like before. Simulation no

longer refers to a location, a reference entity, or a material. Models create a hyperreal world with no origin or reality. Territories no longer predate or survive the map. Stories depict territory's fragments gradually rotting throughout the map. Regions are created by the map; the author calls it as simulacra precession.

Orders of Simulacra

Baudrillard identifies three historical orders of simulacra which are foundational to the text.

1. First Order: Representations that accurately reflect reality such as maps that relate to physical topography).
2. Second Order: Representations that distort or mask reality, such as propaganda or mass media, that influence the truth.
3. Third Order: Simulacra that have no relation to reality and exist solely as simulations. According to Baudrillard, at this level, the "real" no longer exists and is completely replaced by hyperreality. He makes a bold statement: " The map is what creates the region."

The Death of the Real

Baudrillard defines the "death of the real" as a state in which the differences between genuine and false, original and copy, dissolve. In the hyperreal, visuals no longer serve as mirrors of reality but rather generate their own. This is obvious in consumer culture, where corporations sell ideals and lifestyles rather than items, creating cravings unrelated to material requirements. In a hyperreal world, authority becomes a spectacle devoid of any substantive foundation. Baudrillard criticizes modern institutions, including politics and the military, for indulging in simulations that maintain the illusion of control. For example, he examines the Gulf War and famously states, "The Gulf War did not take place" (p. 81). This phrase is not literal, but rather a critique of how media representations of the war transformed it into a hyperreal event, divorced from its harsh realities. Baudrillard's thesis calls into question established conceptions of reality, truth, and authenticity, as well as the Enlightenment principles of reason and objective knowledge. By claiming that simulations have overshadowed the real, he joins other postmodern theorists such as Derrida's deconstruction of truth and Foucault's critique of power-knowledge systems. Baudrillard's approach challenges readers to consider how much of their experiences are mediated by artificial constructs. Although written in 1981, Baudrillard's observations seem hauntingly predictive in the context of digital society. The rise of social media, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence-generated material has increased hyperreality's dominance. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok demonstrate the notion that representations (managed online personas) may outperform and modify the reality of individual identities.

Baudrillard's analysis of consumer culture is similar to Marxist critiques of capitalism, but his emphasis changes from labour and production to signs and consumption. The monetization of experience, as observed in phenomena such as influencer marketing, supports his claim that "objects are no longer defined by their use or exchange value, but by their sign value" (p.89). The theory that power operates through simulation has far-reaching consequences for understanding modern geopolitics. Televised political campaigns and international summits are frequently viewed as spectacles rather than substantive governing exercises. Baudrillard's concept of simulation as a method of disguising reality is significant in analysing media-driven narratives in global politics.

Criticism and Denouement

While Baudrillard's theories are appealing, critiques claim that his view of hyperreality is unduly deterministic and pessimistic. His assertion that the real has completely vanished risks neglecting material and experiential realities that exist outside of media and simulations. Furthermore, his complex prose can turn off reading experience, restricting the accessibility of the themes he wants to convey. *Simulacra and Simulation* is a powerful plea of how modern culture creates and consumes reality. Baudrillard's conceptions of simulacra, hyperreality, and the death of the real call into question traditional notions of truth and authenticity, offering a prism through which we can comprehend the complexities of a media-saturated world. Despite its abstract nature, the book's findings are becoming increasingly relevant in the digital era, as simulations continue to push the frontiers of reality. Baudrillard prompts readers to confront the disquieting idea that in the postmodern state, the map has completely supplanted the territory, allowing us to navigate a world in which the real is merely a vanishing point in an infinite play of signs.

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The Disintegration of the Noble Lie: Epistemic Democratization and the Fragility of Modern Civilization

Rhea Hiremath
The Cathedral and John Connon School

Abstract

This essay explores the fragility of modern civilization through the disintegration of what Plato termed the "noble lie"—a foundational myth that sustains political legitimacy and social cohesion. It argues that the epistemic democratization enabled by digital technologies, particularly social media, has destabilized these symbolic frameworks by exposing the contingent and constructed nature of truth. Drawing on the political thought of Foucault, Arendt, Habermas, Nietzsche, and Baudrillard, the essay situates the collapse of the noble lie within a broader crisis of authority, meaning, and civic trust. Rather than yielding a more rational or egalitarian public sphere, the erosion of shared narratives has led to epistemic fragmentation, ideological polarization, and the emergence of hyperreal discourse. The analysis concludes by suggesting that sustaining democratic life requires not merely the exposure of myth, but the deliberate reconstruction of new symbolic orders capable of anchoring meaning, belonging, and collective agency in an age of informational excess.

Keywords: Noble lie, Epistemic Crisis, Digital Media, Symbolic Legitimacy, Democracy, Civilization

Introduction

Compare 8 billion people on Earth to tiny gas particles trapped inside a glass jar; over time, the collisions (or tensions) between these gas particles (people) increase, catalysing entropy, which leads only to destruction. Civilizations collapse when there is too much friction among people, which historically has been caused by inequity, social injustice, and an inability to adapt to changing circumstances on a grassroots level. Modern-day democracy is axiomatically linked with the assumption that people in power strive to work for the beneficence of the common people; however, it can be observed that the rise of social media challenges this very idea. The unravelling of noble lies holding modern democratic institutions in place due to the democratization of information could possibly threaten civilization. Thus, this essay will analyse the effect of social media, in particular the democratization of information, and other factors in relation to the downfall of humanity.

Unravelling the ‘noble lie’

The idea of the "noble lie" was first presented in Plato's *The Republic* as a myth or lie propagated by an elite to preserve social harmony. Consequently, Plato hypothesized that civilizations are built around a few central myths or lies, but these very misconceptions have the potential to become destructive, leading to civilization’s eventual demise.

A well-known example of a noble lie mentioned in the Republic is the "Myth of the Metals." The city residents were told that they were descendants of the ground and that different kinds of metals could be found in their souls. The merchant group consisted of bronze or iron, the auxiliary group silver, and the rulers, gold. This myth encouraged people to accept their place in society by justifying the social hierarchy and providing them with a sense of purpose. Since then, the question that has bothered people’s minds for centuries is whether deception should be practiced for the greater good, and this idea has evidently remained intact in modern-day democracy. Modern-day democracies preserve the appearance of equality and group decision-making mostly by monopolizing and polarizing media agencies. However, social media is now seen as a powerful tool to uncover the underlying power structures and disparities to a great extent.

The democratization of information caused by social media made it possible for the common public to express their unfiltered opinions and truths, further allowing them to highlight the fallacies of society and uncover the noble lie that is democracy. This could, in turn, catalyse the demise of civilization by undermining the basic trust that keeps democratic institutions afloat. There would be widespread skepticism if people started to think that the concepts of equality, justice, and freedom were only illusions intended to appease and exert control over others. This could subsequently cause a rise in polarization and societal fragmentation, as well as a simultaneous decrease in civic engagement. The social contract that holds society together could deteriorate as a ripple effect of citizens losing faith in their government and its promises, opening the door for anarchy and societal collapse.

Social media has been crucial in dispelling myths and exposing alternate narratives in the field of international politics, especially in crises like the one involving Israel and Palestine. For many years, the mainstream media valorised Israel, justifying their lethal attacks on the Palestinian people as warranted and necessary to curb terrorism in the region. However, the democratization of information via social media has made it possible to disseminate first-hand information, pictures, and videos that show an alternative perspective, one where innocent Palestinian civilian are victims of hospital bombings and home raids, therefore inevitably changing the entire narrative. This democratisation of information is thought to increase reliance

on social media as an accountable source. In fact, many even alarmingly consider social media sites such as Instagram and X (Twitter) as their primary and only source of information.

Even though such platforms can be used for the exchange of factual information, they can also be used to spread propaganda and misinformation, affecting billions. Information and communication are key to evolving as a civilization, and now the most popular way to access this is through social media, which is becoming more powerful by the minute. It is changing the core beliefs of people, as their algorithms frequently provide content that supports users' preconceived notions. In ancient times, societies used to witness talks and meetings at a grassroots level; however, anonymity has transformed most online discourse into a mudslinging match. This, in turn, creates echo chambers, which leads to more polarisation and widening of social divisions as people get more firmly committed to their ideals, thus increasing 'friction' between one another. Societal stagnation is a very serious threat, and as consensus grows rarer, it becomes harder to maintain democratic processes and institutions when there is a lack of common ground.

The Philosophical Collapse of Truth and Authority

The collapse of the noble lie through epistemic democratization must also be understood through the lens of political philosophy, which reveals that truth itself has always functioned as an instrument of power rather than a neutral ideal. Michel Foucault's theory of power-knowledge asserts that every society's regime of truth is produced by institutions that benefit from its preservation, suggesting that what citizens accept as 'truth' is a function of authority rather than objectivity. In this sense, the noble lie described by Plato can be interpreted not as an exception but as a paradigm: all political systems rely, to varying degrees, on curated myths that sustain legitimacy. What Jürgen Habermas once celebrated as the 'public sphere' (a rational space for democratic deliberation) has been replaced by fragmented, algorithmically tailored pseudo-publics. Instead of fostering collective reasoning, these echo chambers deepen ideological divisions and erode trust in shared institutions. This transformation leads to what Hannah Arendt called the "crisis of authority," wherein citizens lose faith not only in political leaders but in the symbolic systems that once gave structure to reality. The disintegration of these epistemic and symbolic frameworks does not automatically yield a more enlightened society; instead, it opens a vacuum that can be filled by nihilism, populism, or mass disorientation. Hence, the unmasking of the noble lie, while ostensibly liberatory, may in fact intensify the fragility of modern civilization by unravelling the tacit foundations of civic trust.

The Collapse of Meaning in a Post-Mythical Age

Beyond political legitimacy and institutional authority, civilizations also depend on shared myths to construct meaning, a psychological and cultural foundation without which social

cohesion begins to dissolve. Friedrich Nietzsche warned of this condition in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), where he argued that the modern world's overreliance on rationality and empirical truth comes at the expense of mythos, the symbolic and emotional lifeblood of communal existence. For Nietzsche, myth was not falsehood, it was a necessary illusion that gave shape to human suffering and purpose to collective identity. In the digital age, as the noble lie is exposed and deconstructed, what we are witnessing is not merely a crisis of authority but a deeper, existential crisis of meaning. Jean Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality" captures this condition: a society where signs and simulations no longer refer to any grounded reality, and where the mythic structure of truth is replaced by an endless circulation of images and information. Social media, in this sense, does not just democratize information; it destabilizes the very symbols through which civilization understands itself. When every narrative is questioned and every truth is relative, individuals are left not with freedom, but with disorientation. Thus, the epistemic democratization celebrated by technological optimists may in fact accelerate civilizational decline, not through violence or environmental collapse, but through the quiet erosion of meaning, myth, and the collective imagination.

The natural selection of civilizations

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, and Herbert Spencer's 'survival of the fittest,' can be paralleled to the rise and fall of civilizations. Just as species adapt to their environments, civilizations must evolve to meet the challenges they face. Societies with greater resilience tend to surpass or decline from those that are unable to adapt efficiently. Similar to natural selection, this dynamic process ensures that the "fittest" civilizations, those best able to deal with both internal and external pressures, survive and prosper, while the others may become extinct. Over the years, historians have seen a continuous thread amongst extinct civilizations; all of them had a series of problems towards the end that were interconnected and so created a ripple effect. The combination of climate change, natural disasters, and scarcity of essential resources certainly did not help the empires fight back against their respective unwavering enemies. It made it easier for the 'fitter' empire to take over, forcing the weaker one to surrender.

The biggest contrast between ancient civilizations and ours is that in the case of the former multiple civilizations existed at the same time and continued to exist even after one fell into extinction, however, our world is extremely interconnected through a vast series of networks. In our day and age, it is simply impossible to hold any power without connecting with other countries. Therefore, this connection between 'empires' acts as a threat, for if one falls, the rest will too, like a series of dominoes. It will have global repercussions, and life as we know it will cease to exist. There would be no successor to our civilization after its demise, unless, of course, one entertained the possibility of an extra-terrestrial race.

Conclusion

The collapse of civilization in the modern era may not be pointed at by environmental catastrophe or geopolitical conflict alone, but rather by the erosion of the symbolic, epistemological, and civic structures that once underpinned collective life. This paper has argued that the disintegration of the noble lie, exposed through the epistemic democratization enabled by social media, marks not a linear progression toward liberation but a destabilizing force that threatens the cohesion of democratic society. When foundational myths are deconstructed without the concurrent construction of shared symbolic frameworks, what remains is not clarity but disorientation. The very ideals that once sustained civilizational legitimacy and values such as truth, justice, freedom, etc. are increasingly perceived as instruments of control, rendering the social contract fragile and susceptible to collapse.

From a critical standpoint, this suggests an urgent need not to return to comforting falsehoods, but to deliberately reimagine the symbolic foundations of our collective life. Epistemic transparency must be tempered by cultural and philosophical responsibility. The task of sustaining civilization in an age of fragmented narratives and ideological polarization lies in our capacity to reconstruct shared meaning through civic deliberation, ethical imagination, and democratic engagement. Civilizations do not endure solely by technological innovation or economic strength, but by the integrity of their myths and the resilience of their discourse. If this project of reconstruction fails, if society continues to expose without rebuilding, critique without creation, the true danger is not collapse in the physical sense, but the quiet implosion of meaning, belonging, and purpose. This, more than any external threat, may prove to be the defining fragility of modern civilization.

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Understanding Religion through and as a System of Symbols

Smriti R. Sharma
Aawaaz Foundation

Abstract

Religion has, in theory and practice, been acknowledged as a system of various symbols and doctrines represented or promoted by symbols. The kinds or varying natures of such symbols have been studied by several anthropologists, each of whom has drawn a distinct understanding of their significance and impact on the human social order. In this analysis, varying definitions of what constitutes a symbol, or what, in fact, may be considered a religion, have also surfaced. This paper will examine the observations and claims made by Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Evans Pritchard, and Talal Asad concerning the relationship of symbols with religion as a social structure.

Keywords: Religious Symbolism, Anthropology of Religion, Cultural Interpretation, Ritual and Meaning, Power and Representation

Introduction

Religion has been studied not as a repository of beliefs and dogma alone but as a system deeply inscribed in symbolic representations which confer meaning on social practice. Anthropologists Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Evans-Pritchard, and Talal Asad have explained the relationship between symbols and religion from a range of theoretical perspectives, illustrating functional as well as critical approaches. This paper explores how these philosophers define and describe religious symbols, what role such symbols have in building and upholding social order, and how the wider implications of symbolic systems shed light on what religion is. Their work informs a rich anthropological exchange regarding the intersection of meaning, ritual, and power.

Clifford Geertz: The Interpretation of Cultures

Clifford Geertz raises several questions regarding the approach taken in the academic discourse of social anthropologists. One of the most pertinent concerns he raises is the inherent redundancy at the heart of the discipline, and a disappointing habit of academicism, with writers only sticking to the ideas and concepts put forth by Durkheim, Malinowski, Weber, and so on (Geertz, 1973). According to Geertz, it is a need for anthropologists to analyse the “cultural dimensions” of religion, which is manifested in a system of “symbols” with specific, inherited

meanings and conceptions that allow individuals to communicate and develop their understanding and perception of life. For him, religion is constructed as a cultural system of such symbols that prescribe a certain ethos or way of life for people. Such symbols, he claims, determine both the actual reality as well as how such a reality must be constructed. They promote the application of certain specific morals and ethics of living, simply as common sense (Geertz, 1973, 90). He notes that "Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other." (Geertz, 1973, 90).

He defines religion, therefore, as a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Let us analyse these components of the definition, as distinguished by Geertz himself:

1. Clifford Geertz defines symbols as any object, act, event, quality, or relation that embodies or represents a certain conception, that conception being the symbol's meaning (Geertz, 1973, 91). These symbols are "extrinsic sources of information" in that they are external to the individual organism (Geertz, 1973, 92). Geertz claims that cultural patterns are a set of symbols, which are a "model of" and "model for" reality. They are a model "of" insofar as they represent or draw parallel to the pre-established non-symbolic structure, while being a model "for" means that they shape or influence such pre-established non-symbolic structures to assert a desirable reality (Geertz, 1973, 93). This means that cultural patterns serve a dual purpose; they represent the social and psychological reality by both moulding themselves to it and by moulding the reality to themselves (Geertz, 1973, 93).
2. Such symbols shape the world's climate by "forging a conscience" or, in Geertz's words, by inducing certain moods and motivations as a set of dispositions that affect or drive an individual's experience of living. While Geertz defines motivations as a persisting tendency or liability to perform certain acts or indulge in a certain feeling, moods are in and of themselves a feeling or attitude, like melancholy, pity, etc. The major difference noted here is that while moods are scalar, motivations are vectorial qualities (Geertz, 1973, 97). Interestingly, Geertz's notions about symbols inducing specific attitudes, moods, or motivations enable us to draw a general understanding of how religious structures manage to sustain themselves among the masses over a long period of time through the symbols in which they manifest.
3. Geertz claims that sacred symbols induce dispositions to perpetuate or promote a general order of existence or worldview in that they "affirm something" (Geertz, 1973, 99). One

may, of course, question how and why an individual must give in to the various meanings and conceptions that such symbols may achieve to affirm. Here, Clifford Geertz points out the general tendency of humans to seek “meaning” or “answers” to inexplicable questions or justification for inexplicable phenomena. It is this “quest for lucidity” (Geertz, 1973, 101) that drives individuals to apply the religious dogma to the strange and inexplicable forces that govern life and the environment. This is where the religious doctrine comes into function. Not only does it allow a seemingly plausible explanation to phenomena that are hitherto unaccounted for, it also, through such explanations, allows the establishment of a general doctrine for how the ideal world should be. Here, Geertz’s distinction between organized and traditional religion comes into focus. The tendency for certain religions to be structured and ordered into doctrine came from the need to answer certain universal questions about good, bad, suffering, pain, etc (Geertz, 1973).

There is, as Geertz puts it, a metaphysical concern which renders an individual in constant wariness of their surroundings and the multiple aspects and properties of nature, themselves, and society. One major point of discomfort or concern is the problem of suffering – the inexplicability of human suffering and adversity that overtakes lives (Geertz, 1973, 103). Supporting Malinowski’s proposition that religion allows one to bear with emotional stress through faith in the supernatural, Geertz notes that religion doesn’t simply promise to resolve the problem of suffering. It, in fact, offers an answer on how to suffer — or how to pull through the acute emotional and mental stress life causes (Geertz, 1973, 104). It is the inevitability, as Geertz puts it, of suffering that religion acknowledges and propagates. Through various rituals and symbols, therefore, an individual is encouraged to cope with the inevitable suffering life has to offer (Geertz, 1973, 105).

The significance of the symbol, therefore, lies in “its ability to give the stricken person a vocabulary in terms of which to grasp the nature of his distress and relate it to the wider world.” The individual is stimulated to put faith in a cosmic framework where faith in an unaccounted source of power, i.e., God, provides explanation for and protection from this inevitable suffering (Geertz, 1973, 106).

The problem of suffering and the problem of evil, as Geertz addresses them, provide a basis for ritual symbols to govern an appropriate life and to allow one to make “sound moral judgments” to lead said life, respectively. Faith in the religious system not only requires one to live a certain way to avoid "undisciplined squads of emotion” but also provides hope and protection from “evil” forces that may prevent such a way of living (Geertz, 1973, 106).

Geertz’s analyses of the Balinese people and their religion put several of his points into perspective. One specific ritual, as described by him, is the ritual combat fought between Rangda, an old prostitute, widow, and child-eater, and Barong, a peculiar hybrid of a Chinese dragon, a bear, and a dog. The hideous figure of Rangda is portrayed

by two men, and her physical appearance is sharply highlighted to emphasize her ugly aspects as well as induce anxiety and fear among the audience (Geertz, 1973, 114). The Barong, Geertz observes, represents the human tendencies of strength and weakness, but is especially portrayed as a comical character. This ritual is described as a highly intensive and nerve-wracking event, what with several audience members being physically and mentally impacted and induced into "trances" (Geertz, 1973, 114-115). Such emotions and thoughts are, of course, stimulated through the various symbolic representations involved in the ritual. Rangda is represented through symbols — red tongue, dead white hands, and so on, and is in herself a symbol of death, fear, and horror (Geertz, 1973, 114). Of course, such heavily inducing symbols then successfully stimulate a consciousness that governs the individual's life, even outside of the practice or engagement with those symbols.

4. Geertz distinguishes the "religious perspective" from three other perspectives, namely, scientific, common sense, and aesthetic. While the common-sense perspective requires one to simply "see" and absorb the tangible and most reliable facts and experiences without question, the religious perspective requires one to move beyond and transcend the boundaries of tangibility into the metaphysical (Geertz, 1973, 111). The scientific perspective, Geertz mentions, challenges and questions every observation and experience and engages in systematic inquiry; the religious perspective, in contrast, demands a certain "givenness" and faith in "non-hypothetical truths". Furthermore, Geertz distinguishes the aesthetic perspective from the religious by claiming that the latter promotes a certain "actuality" as opposed to the former, which manufactures an "air of semblance and illusion" (Geertz, 1973, 111-112).

   Symbols or religious structures, according to the author, in and of themselves do not influence a certain experience, but it is the prior acceptance of authority or "belief" in such a structure or symbol that impacts an experience. Therefore, Geertz claims that the axiomatic principle in the religious perspective is that one must first believe (Geertz, 1973, 109-110).

   Geertz asserts that religious action is the pervasion of a set of symbols with a persuasive authority. Through rituals, the conviction and faith in the validity of religious ideas and axioms are manifested (Geertz, 1973, 112). Therefore, every religion relies on a set of symbols to produce a fusion of "ethos" – how life should be, and worldview – how life actually is, and thereby forge a spiritual consciousness in the people (Geertz, 1973, 112-113).

   Addressing the concept of religion as having authority, Geertz uses the example of the Rangda-Barong ritual combat and claims that enactment of such demanding and physically and mentally engaging, almost disturbing, rituals is in itself an embodiment of the acceptance of authority of the religious perspective (Geertz, 1973, 114-118).

Therefore, one can understand from his point that rituals not only exert authority but are themselves an expression of said authority of the larger religious structure.

5. Geertz concludes the extensive analysis of his definition of religion by testifying that even as an individual, during the enactment or conduct of a specific ritual, is physically, mentally and/or emotionally impacted both by that ritual and the doctrine it exudes, it is majorly the life the individual lives outside the boundaries of such rituals and religious practices that is affected by such practice. The rituals, therefore, "colour" the individual's worldview (Geertz, 1973, 119).

   The social order, according to Geertz, is not simply described but is actually shaped by the religious perspective, thereby making religion an important sociological concern. Furthermore, he proposes that the religious perspective may actually alter the common-sense perspective by making the moods and motivations it induces seem so natural and practical that they resonate as common sense. It is the ability to skew the "common sense" that makes religion so powerful (Geertz, 1973, 119-22).

   Geertz's emphasis on religion being a set of symbols can further be explored by his analyses of the Balinese people and their gradual evolution and adaptation to the ever-changing socio-political landscape of Indonesia. The Hindus of Bali are a small people who have hitherto confined themselves to a traditional religious structure manifest in elaborate rituals. For them, as Geertz calls it, the world is still enchanted, recalling Weber's famous reference to rationalized religion as one where the world is "disenchanted" (Geertz, 1973, 175).

   The Balinese people, despite not having a particularly methodical order, still have a highly distinctive set of rituals and symbols that command authority and demand commitment from each follower. Geertz observes that the emphasis in Bali is not on orthodoxy but orthopraxy, such that the completion of a said ritual must be achieved unequivocally and without any discrepancy for fear of a community member suddenly being seized by trance and demanding the failure to be remitted immediately. Moreover, this extremely rigid commitment to the enactment of a ritual stands in stark contrast to the nonchalance over actual faith and belief in the said ritual (Geertz, 1973, 177). However, the Balinese are a very religiously conscious people in that their Hindu identity is synonymous with the Balinese identity, and they collectively, as Geertz claims, stand against the clear threat to their religious identity for being a minority in a predominantly Muslim nation. (Geertz, 1973).

   Geertz carefully describes and analyses the various symbols that govern the Balinese culture and religion and observes how their newfound commitment to such symbols stands as a reaction to the openly hostile attitude towards their minority community. The Balinese religion is marked by three very important rituals: 1) the temple system which engages the ordinary Balinese into a constant practice or rituals that have been absorbed into their daily life 2) the sanctification of social inequality which still

provides some legitimacy to the ancient Balinese political order of aristocracy, and 3) the cult of death and witches ritual represented in the previously mentioned Rangda-Barong ritual combat (Geertz, 1973).

Geertz goes on to draw a comprehensive outline of how the Balinese are gradually shifting from traditional, non-doctrinal religion to a more rationalized and politicized religious structure. Geertz notes that the emergence of the unitary republic in Indonesia, modern education, and modern forms of political organization have shaken up the Balinese social order. So, the Balinese, as a response, are also organizing themselves in a more rationalized structure, as was the case with the people in Greece and China; a disenchantment of the world has occurred (Geertz, 1973, 170-189).

Geertz notes that this has given way to a more rationalized order or "Bali-ism" which finds itself manifested through systematized ritual praxis, political assertion, usage of doctrine and literature, and so on. In face of the political isolation caused by the Ministry of Religion in Indonesia (which is majorly governed by Muslims) and the absence of recognition as a religious minority, the Balinese youth is reorganizing itself by establishing its own locally funded Ministry of Religion, setting up schools and institutions that teach Balinese literature and doctrine to children, and by reappointing of Brahman priests based on regularized qualifications (Geertz, 1973, 170-189).

Furthermore, the peculiar dissociation from ritual that Geertz noted in the practice of temple rituals is now discarded in favour of a more fervent and emotionally committed way of practicing rituals, he claims. Young men find themselves ardently praying in temples, now engaging all family members and invoking religious sentiments among elders, children, and peers (Geertz, 1973, 184). The use of the holy water, an important ritualistic symbol for the Balinese, is again highlighted as re-energizing the Balinese identity. Moreover, young men, Geertz notes, are now engaged in the mass production of hitherto inaccessible Brahman Balinese literature to perpetuate more awareness and consciousness around the identity of being Hindu, of being Balinese (Geertz, 1973). Clifford Geertz, through extensive analysis of the Javanese and Balinese peoples and their customs and rituals, drew an elaborate understanding of religion as a system of symbols that both represent as well as prescribe a certain social order.

Victor Turner: The Forest of Symbols

Victor Turner begins his analysis of ritual symbols by identifying rituals as "prescribed behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers" and describing Symbol as the "ultimate unit" of ritual. Here, he supports the theory that religion is manifest in externalized rituals, which in turn find expression in specific symbols. Turner puts forth his study of the various rituals prevalent in the Ndembu tribe in Zambia. With the help of descriptive accounts of several such rituals, Turner creates an

account of what constitutes a symbol, the multiple forms of such symbols, and what is the relationship with or influence of such symbols on human social interaction (Turner, 1967).

Turner at length defines the concept of a symbol by recounting the definition offered by the Concise Oxford Dictionary for symbol as a thing which is generally referred to as a representation or expression of an association, thought, or situation (Turner, 1967, 19). He even draws a reference to Carl Jung's distinction between a sign — something that represents a known fact, and a symbol — something that expresses a relatively unknown but otherwise recognized or postulated fact (Turner, 1967).

Turner elaborates on the Nkang'a ritual of the Ndembu tribe, which is a celebration of a girl reaching the age of puberty. The central symbol of this ritual is the Mudyi tree, which Turner refers to exclusively as the "milk tree" for its tendency to release a white latex when scratched on the bark. Turner describes this tree as the "senior" or "dominant" symbol, asserting that most rituals tend to have a specific dominant symbol that represents both an ideological meaning as well as a sensory meaning. The ideological or abstract meaning of the milk tree may as well refer to the relationship of the nurturing between the mother and daughter and by that extension the larger principle of matriliny which govern the Ndembu social order while the more obvious or sensory meaning would denote that the milk tree represents "breast milk" (the development of the adolescent girl's breasts as being the sign of puberty that is celebrated in said ritual) (Turner, 1967). Here, Turner asserts that since such dominant symbols have multiple meanings and concepts attached to their significance, the meanings of such symbols themselves become symbols insofar as that in its widest context, the "milk tree" is a manifestation of the unity and continuity of Ndembu society (Turner, 1967).

Symbols, according to Turner, also instigate action in that groups and communities mobilize around them and conduct other, more extensive rituals, making a system of symbols and 'composite shrines.' Such a tendency to interact around and with symbols also induces individuals and groups to surpass their differences or social categorizing in secular life and collectivize in another, ritualistic/religious social category. Turner claims that symbols also allow the identification of specific social groups that are subjects of the specific ritual and, by extension, the principles it represents. For example, the milk tree ritual specifically involves women and sets them out as a separate social group against the men around them (Turner, 1967). Turner's identification of this characteristic of the symbol as one that distinguishes among individuals or groups may well fall in line with the larger description of religion that demands identification with a community or group.

Three properties of ritual symbols have been noted by Turner: a) ritual symbols tend to "condense" several actions and interpretations in a single form; b) that they unify multiple and

diverse “analogous qualities” or “disparate significate” that are sometimes randomly interconnected and sometimes not; c) that these symbols polarize meaning, i.e. they have both an ideological (social normative) meaning and a sensory (external) meaning (Turner, 1967, 28).

Turner recalls the general anthropological understanding of symbols as those that stimulate emotions in humans. Citing Sapir’s distinction between “referential” symbols, which have the simple purpose of reference (for example, flag, speech, writing, etc.), and “condensation,” symbols which are “saturated with emotional quality,” Turner asserts that ritual symbols are both referential and condensation at the same time. They express both the physically manifested and the socially structured. According to him, the dominant symbols’ emotional stimulus has the capacity to transform “obligatory social norms into the desirable.” (Turner, 1967, 30).

Two forms of symbols are identified by Turner. According to him, the first is the dominant symbol, which is the focus of a specific ritual and provides the meaning or significance to that ritual. These symbols, he claims, have a higher consistency about the meaning they represent, as well as are autonomous from the aims of the rituals. Turner defines them as “eternal objects” insofar as the passage of time does not alter their meaning. An example of such symbols can be the “milk tree” in Nkang’a. There is then the instrumental symbol, which functions as a means to the performance of the ritual (for example, the use of a certain plant to induce fertility in women) and is to be studied in the wider context of the total system of symbols (Turner, 1967).

Turner denotes two different types of contexts for analyses of symbols. The first is the action field context, which he has explained as the immediate referential context to the ritual it is a part of. The second is the cultural context, which attaches abstract meanings to the symbols (Turner, 1967). An interesting observation made by Turner helps us put into context the importance ritual symbols have in the establishment of religion as a social and cultural entity. He claims that dominant ritual symbols incorporate the major dimensions of human social life into their meaning and therefore come to represent “human society” itself. According to him, symbols manifest a specific principle of social organization by “submerging” other contradictory principles and therefore establish a dogma or doctrine. He cites the example of the Nkula ritual, which requires the female subject to pose like a male hunter dressed in animal skins and equipped with a bow and arrow, donning a red feather that is customary for hunters and man-slayers. This ritual Turner describes denotes that the woman is behaving as a hunter since she is not giving birth but is instead “wasting” her menstrual blood, thereby forgoing her natural role as a “nourisher” (Turner, 1967). This ritual, therefore, as Turner points out, objectively imposes a gendered social norm on the female community by identifying the woman as a

child-bearer and subduing other norms or behaviours that are considered characteristic of men (Turner, 1967).

Behavioural meaning, therefore, Turner supposes, is highly relevant in the analyses of symbols as a unit of religious ritual. Furthermore, Turner affirms that social norms perpetuate unnatural distinctions of what constitutes normal or abnormal and that such axiomatic norms may change from time to time, defining diverse social aspects of life. Therefore, he claims, it becomes crucial for rituals to be identified in a uniform and harmonious system of symbols that have dogmatic and symbolic emphasis to sustain their validity (Turner, 1967).

Talal Asad

Asad points out that, as Geertz views culture as a concept that enables communication among people and allows them to formulate an attitude "towards" life, he does not identify a relationship of culture to life itself or speak about knowledge and attitude "about" life. In this regard, Asad claims, religion is focused on only as an aspect of consciousness, ruling out the chance of investigating how such "attitudes" or "knowledge" are related to material and social conditions of existence (Asad, 1983).

Dissecting Geertz's conceptualization of "symbols," Asad puts forth several interesting concerns. Geertz recognizes symbols as any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception — the conception is the symbol's "meaning." In response to this, Asad points out that anything or almost everything pertaining to social interaction may be deemed as a symbol, so how can specific symbols be interpreted as being crucial to anthropological analysis of religion? He insists that the formulation of what constitutes a symbol and what does not is simply governed by social relations and the contexts of an individual. This makes it necessary to investigate which symbols are socially constructed and which are deemed as natural or authoritative in comparison to others (Asad, 1983). Asad asserts that symbols represent the products of social practice or "life" (Asad, 1983).

Asad also questions Geertz's attribution of religious symbols as "inducing in a worshipper a certain distinctive set of dispositions." Here, Asad argues that categorizing a certain set of distinctive characteristics or dispositions to specific religious systems would essentially imply that such symbols are set against certain behaviours and mental states, which is, in his words, a "dubious" proposition. For how could a Christian man be identified solely based on specific characteristics or dispositions? An individual's nature or disposition is governed by several social and economic conditions and cannot be solely identified as depending on religious attachment or exposure to religious symbols (Asad, 1983).

Asad then offers his own conception of how, if at all, religious symbols can induce a certain disposition or "moods and motivations," as Geertz puts it, in an individual. Recalling Augustine's description of Christian teaching based on "disciplina," Asad affirms that it is not simply religious symbols, but "power" that affects a certain behaviour in an individual. Such power can be exercised through laws, disciplinary actions by institutions, and other such sanctions (Asad, 1983). It is, in essence, a social manifestation, but assumes a religious form for its association with "God" as a source of legitimacy (Asad, 1983).

Therefore, a careful and authoritative process is undertaken, one that involves the inclusion of specific discourses and the exclusion of others, to establish the "truth" that a religion affirms. It is the power that governs such a process of creating a religion, thereby establishing an authorized practice and doctrine (Asad, 1983). Asad points out that the attempt to define religion as a system of ordered ideas and universal functions is itself derived from the historical development of Christianity, which was marked by establishing a single unified authority of truth and distinguishing such truth from falsehood (Asad, 1983).

Asad then dissects Geertz's "problem of belief" and asserts that, unlike what Geertz claims, 'belief' cannot be independent of the worldly conditions and the emotions they produce, like fear, pain, grief, and so on. For him, changes in the object of belief will cause a change in the belief itself, which means that beliefs change as the world changes (Asad, 1983). On the subject of how, if at all, religious symbols induce a sense of faith or religious attachment, Asad asks how or why the will to engage with such religious symbols will arise in the first place. According to him, therefore, the usage or indulgence of religious symbols must be preceded by the ability and will to adopt a religious worldview, which means that "ritual cannot be the place where 'religious faith' is attained, but where it is (literally) played out and confirmed." In this manner, religion is established through a set of symbols and rituals which then perpetuate greater attachment and faith in the religious structure (Asad, 1983).

Asad also argues that religious symbols are a representation of social life and sway over to the dominant power, and must not be analysed independently of their relationship with non-religious symbols. The authoritative status of symbols flows from the social and historical disciplines and practices that help enforce the "truth" that such symbols seem to affirm (Asad, 1983). Conclusively, Asad points out a "hiatus" in Geertz's work, between what he terms the "cultural system" and "social reality" (Asad, 1983).

Evans-Pritchard: Nuer Religion

In his work *The Nuer* (1940), Professor Evans-Pritchard carefully analyses the ways in which the Nuer conception of "spirit" or "Kwoth" and the larger religious framework is

embodied in material forms, i.e., ‘symbols.’ Pritchard notes that among the Nuer, certain elements that are of common interest, such as rain, lightning, or other natural forms, are said ‘to be’ God (Pritchard, 1956). God is also conceived in association with natural elements or phenomena that are significant but are not induced or caused by humans, such as death, thunder, rain, etc. Therefore, Pritchard notes that events that have a wide impact in terms of causing “fortune or misfortune” but are governed by some strangeness or inexplicability are conceptualized as actions of God. He also notes that even as such phenomena or elements may be counted as representations of God, God as a concept in itself cannot be reduced to such elements or phenomena (Pritchard, 1956).

He takes the example of the crocodile, which stands as a symbol for the Spirit for some Nuer people. The symbol may not itself be what it symbolizes — the crocodile is known not to be the Spirit — but is a totemic creature and symbolizes the Spirit (Pritchard, 1956, 133). He also notes that even as various material symbols may mean or represent the same thing, those symbols in and of themselves may have a varied relationship with the representation (Pritchard, 1956). Citing the study of the sacrifice of the cattle, a prominent ritual among the Nuer, Pritchard notes that a symbolic equivalence is drawn between cattle and men. This, however, does not simplistically mean that men are considered cattle or vice versa (Pritchard, 1956). Such an equivalence can only be drawn, Pritchard claims, in a context wherein both the cattle and men can be perceived to be of the same order, and in that respect, be substitutable, and such a context is only their relationship with God (Pritchard, 1956).

Another interesting observation made by Pritchard is that cattle, as a sacrificial symbolic entity, are considered sacred. Herein, he notes that the cattle are not sacrificed because they’re sacred, but they’re sacred because they are used for sacrificial ceremonies (Pritchard, 1956). This essentially implies that symbols in and of themselves may only be reduced to material forms and therefore derive their significance from the purpose for which they’re employed or the meaning that they seem to represent in a given ritualistic context. Professor Pritchard, in his work, has also contested the generally accepted notion among anthropologists that symbols or religious conceptions represent the human social order. Instead, he offers the conclusion that the cultural and material symbols studied by him are a representation of the relationship between man and God.

Conclusion

There are, as is evident, several contradictions and differences between what certain anthropologists consider symbols to be, as well as what impact they have on human social interaction. While Geertz proposes the need to define religion as a cultural system of symbols, Asad highlights the interplay of factors other than culture, i.e., economic and socio-political

conditions of existence, as equally important influencers in the establishment of religions as a dominant social structure. On the other hand, Turner emphasises the importance of behavioural meaning, not simply a referential meaning attached to symbols to infer their importance. This is in contrast to Geertz's notion of symbols representing certain "meanings" and "conceptions," which in turn represent specific ideas and notions. A similarity can be found in Pritchard and Geertz's observations (as is also addressed by Geertz, who has referred to Pritchard's work in his essays) in that both assert that the attachment of significance to religion or religious symbols comes from the need to explain the inexplicable phenomena. Even as it may be tricky to assert which of these contradictions must be accepted or rejected, the overview of all points offered can conclusively provide an uninhibited significance to the creation and employment of symbols in the establishment as well as functioning of a religious, whether rationalized or traditional, structure.

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Freedom & Responsibility in the Age of AI: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Studio Ghibli Trend

Rai Mukhopadhyay
Jawaharlal Nehru University

Abstract
The AI Studio Ghibli trend flooded social media with millions of AI-generated images, transforming ordinary photographs into scenes of dreamlike realism. While celebrated as a democratization of creativity, the trend sparked ethical concerns about the commodification of artistic labour, environmental costs, and the broader cultural shift toward disposable algorithmic creativity. Against this backdrop, this paper addresses the question: Should we exercise every freedom available to us, or should our actions be bound by ethical responsibilities toward others and society? Using a normative, conceptual methodology, the paper draws on the works of classical as well as contemporary philosophers to critically examine freedom, autonomy, and responsibility in digital environments. Through application to the AI Studio Ghibli trend, the analysis reveals that true freedom demands critical reflection, resilience against algorithmic manipulation, and relational awareness of the consequences of our actions.

Keywords: Autonomy, Algorithmic Influence, Moral Responsibility, Digital Creativity, Ethical Reflection

Introduction

In early 2025, a gamut of social media platforms across the globe got flooded with millions of AI-generated images in the signature Studio Ghibli style created by the legendary artist and visionary mind, Hayao Miyazaki, co-founder and lead artist of Studio Ghibli. This trend allowed to transform everyday run-of-the-mill pictures into Studio Ghibli's characteristic dreamlike realism art style with earthy, warm tones, rich natural detail, emotional subtlety, and whimsical imagination. It transcended race and borders by giving you a glimpse of how you would look if you were Studio Ghibli characters with soft, rounded features such as big, expressive eyes, simple noses, and small mouths, no matter what your physical appearance was. While people's feeds and for-you pages were overtaken by this whirlwind of a trend, in the background a thoroughly divisive debate was forming on the ethics of AI generated art, recreational AI use and its devastating implications and how it reflected a broader cultural shift toward disposable, algorithmic creativity at the expense of traditional artistry putting commissioning artists slowly out of work. On the other side of the debate, people argued that the trend was a celebration of everyday magic, propagated the Studio Ghibli fame and multiplied it

by several degrees, spreading it all across the globe, emanating Miyazaki's vision of rural Japan to the world. This raises the question: Should we do something just because we have the freedom to do it, or should we be tied to societal ideas such as responsibility? This question can be reframed into several different forms: Does freedom entail license? Are we ethically bound by notions of duty, consequence, and social good? Should we exercise every freedom available to us, or are we morally bound by responsibilities to others and society when deciding to act? Does having the freedom to act justify action, or must our freedom be limited by ethical responsibilities?

Literature Review

The relationship between freedom and responsibility is one of the oldest and most contentious topics in philosophy. From classical thinkers concerned with political liberty to contemporary ethicists analysing responsibility in the context of determinism, moral luck, and social interdependence, a rich and diverse body of literature has examined whether freedom justifies action or whether deeper ethical constraints ought to shape our choices. This literature review explores the philosophical tension between freedom of action and moral responsibility, particularly in the context of contemporary digital creativity. The review draws from classical and modern philosophical accounts of freedom and responsibility.

The concept of freedom has long been central to political and moral philosophy. And several competing definitions inform this inquiry. A good place to start is Isaiah Berlin's influential distinction between negative and positive liberty. In his seminal lecture, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958), Berlin defines negative liberty as freedom from external constraints, while positive liberty refers to the freedom to act according to one's rational will or higher self. Rooted in thinkers such as Plato, Rousseau, and Kant, Berlin split the self into two: A lower or empirical self, which is full of desires, habits, temptations, and a higher or rational self, which acts on reason, morality, and long-term goals. Since Berlin posits that negative liberty alone is insufficient for moral reasoning, it raises a foundational concern: even if users are free from interference in using AI tools, are they exercising their freedom responsibly? Berlin's framework is foundational for this paper's analysis of digital creativity, wherein users of AI art tools enjoy negative liberty, but the ethical value of their actions depends on whether they reflect a meaningful form of positive liberty that is acting reflectively and autonomously rather than mindlessly following a trend.

Where freedom provides the capacity to act, responsibility introduces moral boundaries to such action. Immanuel Kant, in *Groundwork for Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), proposes the Categorical Imperative: one should act only according to maxims that can be universalized. Kant's deontological ethics imposes an intrinsic moral duty to respect others as ends in

themselves. Applying this to the Studio Ghibli trend, one might ask: *Can a maxim that permits appropriation of another's artistic style without consent be universalized?* If not, then Kant would consider such acts morally impermissible, regardless of legality or public enthusiasm.
Ayer in *Freedom and Necessity* (1954) defends compatibilism, the view that freedom and determinism are compatible. He argues that a person is free if they are not coerced, even if their actions are causally determined. In digital contexts, Ayer's view supports the notion that users of AI art tools act freely if they choose to participate voluntarily. However, it opens further questions: Are users truly autonomous, or are they coerced in subtler ways – by algorithms, peer trends, or their For-you pages across social media platforms?

In her essay *The Moral of Moral Responsibility* (2001), Susan Wolf introduces the concept of "Sane Deep Self View," which posits that moral responsibility depends not only on freedom of will but on the agent's capacity to appreciate moral reasons and act accordingly. People have the freedom to use AI tools, but are they morally responsible for the broader consequences (such as impact on human artists, dilution of artistic culture, and environmental impacts of recreational AI use)? Are users 'sane' (meaning can they reflect critically and rationally on their values and actions, or are they disconnected from moral reality according to Wolf), that is, morally aware? If users are mindlessly following a trend without considering any broader implications, that is, their actions don't reflect a 'deep self' (acting from values, desires, and commitments that reflect who they really are).

Thus, Susan Wolf's "Sane Deep Self View" offers a helpful lens for assessing individual moral responsibility in the age of AI-generated art. While users may act freely, they are only morally responsible if their actions stem from a reflective, value-sensitive self. In the case of the AI Studio Ghibli trend, this means understanding the artistic and ethical implications of one's choices. However, on the flipside, mere participation in a popular aesthetic does not absolve one from responsibility, unless one is genuinely unaware or unable to grasp the moral stakes. Susan Wolf's framework helps distinguish between users who casually follow trends (potentially with diminished responsibility) and those who act with knowledge and intentionality. The Ghibli AI trend may involve a spectrum of responsibility based on whether users act from reflective endorsement or passive imitation.

Classical theories were not built for a world where automated creativity can mimic human output with near-instant ease. They do not fully address how freedom of access to tools intersects with the invisible labour and loss that such tools impose on human creators. This paper aims to use classical theories to reframe AI-generated art not just as freedom of expression, but as a site of ethical contestation. Across the extensive body of work we have analysed, we see a persistent philosophical tension: freedom enables action, but the moral quality of that action depends on intentionality, reflection, and social awareness. The multi-dimensional framework

built across the literature review will now inform the normative analysis and evaluation of the AI Studio Ghibli trend.

Critical Examination

Jean-Paul Sartre argues for 'radical existential freedom' in *Being and Nothingness* (2003) wherein humans are "condemned to be free" and are responsible for the values they enact through their choices. There is no external moral authority; meaning is created through action. This view entails a heavy burden: one's actions are not isolated, but shape the world and humanity. Sartre's view, when applied to AI-generated Ghibli art, posits that users are not just passively "using a tool," they are actively contributing to cultural values and perceptions of artistic integrity and ethics surrounding art creation, or art generation, as is more appropriate for the current case at hand. Thus, they are morally responsible for what they endorse, replicate, or trivialize through those actions.

As discussed in the literature review, according to Ayer's views, a user who voluntarily generates AI art would typically be acting freely, as freedom does not require metaphysical indeterminacy (not causally determined by prior events) but simply the absence of overt compulsion. However, the situation becomes more complicated when considering the digital architectures of modern life. The environments in which users make decisions today are not neutral, but carefully engineered ecosystems — governed by algorithms that curate "For You" pages, trend rankings, personalized aesthetic feeds, and dopamine-driven engagement loops. Social media platforms incentivize certain behaviours through visibility rewards, peer validation, and attention economies that subtly guide user preferences.

Thus, the question arises: Are users truly autonomous if their aesthetic choices are shaped by algorithmic suggestions and societal pressure? If a user's decision to participate in the AI Studio Ghibli trend emerges not from a critical reflection but from exposure to viral content engineered for maximum emotional appeal, then the voluntary nature of the act is compromised, not through physical force, but through informational manipulation. This leads to a broader critique of Ayer's framework: while his definition of coercion captures obvious, physical forms of compulsion, it may miss more sophisticated, psychological forms of constraint prevalent in digital contexts. Modern platforms exploit cognitive vulnerabilities, herding effects, and social mimicry to influence behaviour subtly but powerfully.

From this perspective, freedom in digital environments must be reconceptualized. Genuine autonomy would require not just an absence of force but a resilience against engineered manipulation: a capacity for critical distance from algorithmically amplified trends. In the context of the AI Studio Ghibli trend, this means that while users may appear to act voluntarily,

their freedom may be diminished by the systemic pressures and invisible nudges embedded in the platforms they inhabit. Thus, moral responsibility must be assessed not only at the level of individual volition but also at the level of the informational environment that structures choices.

Nagel in *Moral Luck* (1979) argues that responsibility is limited by luck — factors outside one's control that nevertheless shape actions and outcomes. Even in cases where we seem to act freely, our decisions are filtered through variables like temperament, socialization, and chance. In the AI Studio Ghibli trend, moral luck might apply to users who stumble into the trend via algorithmic suggestion or who lack knowledge about its consequences. Nagel's work supports a graded view of responsibility that takes moral ignorance and circumstantial influence into account.

Galen Strawson in *The Impossibility of Ultimate Moral Responsibility* (1994) famously argues that ultimate moral responsibility is incoherent because it requires one to be the cause of oneself, which is impossible. All actions stem from prior causes (genetic, social, psychological); so, we are never fully responsible for the way we are. In the context of this paper, Strawson offers a radical challenge: if no one is ultimately responsible for their character, how can we blame people for aesthetic choices that result from cultural exposure or technological seduction? While his view is controversial, it provides a deep skeptical grounding that complicates moral judgment in digital life. Following Strawson's argument, users participating in the AI Studio Ghibli trend cannot be held ultimately morally responsible for their actions, as their aesthetic preferences and digital behaviours are shaped by factors outside their control. While this complicates direct blame, it does not eliminate the need for ethical reflection. Rather, it suggests that moral discourse around AI-generated art should prioritize cultivating critical awareness and designing environments that support reflective agency, rather than focusing solely on assigning blame.

If we use Susan Wolf's framework, users who are genuinely unaware of the ethical stakes, either due to the novelty of the technology or the invisibility of its exploitative aspects, may bear diminished responsibility. However, as awareness grows through public discourse and as criticisms of generative AI practices become more mainstream, users are increasingly expected to reflect critically on their participation. In such a shifting informational environment, moral responsibility becomes dynamic rather than static, depending not merely on volition but on the evolving epistemic and moral environment in which choices are made.

Erin Kelly's argument in *Doing Without Desert* (2009) similarly strengthens this critique. Kelly rejects the traditional model of moral desert: the idea that people deserve blame or praise simply because they chose freely. Instead, she proposes a forward-looking ethical model focused on harm reduction, restoration, and moral improvement. Applied here, Kelly's view suggests that

rather than retroactively condemning users who engaged with the Ghibli AI trend, ethical focus should be placed on building systems, educational interventions, and community norms that help future users make more responsible choices. The objective is not to punish, but to transform the informational and cultural environments in which digital actions occur.

This leads to an important reconceptualization of responsibility in networked spaces, drawing insight from David Thunder's relational ethics. In *Am I My Brother's Keeper? Grounding and motivating an ethos of social responsibility in a free society* (2009), Thunder critiques the liberal notion of morality as confined to private intentions, emphasizing instead that individuals are co-constructors of social spaces. Every aesthetic choice, even when seemingly minor or individual, participates in the shaping of collective cultural environments. In the case of AI-generated art, even casual participation feeds into broader processes that normalize the automation of creative labour, the devaluation of artistic intention, and the commodification of cultural traditions. Thus, freedom exercised without relational awareness becomes an act of subtle ethical negligence — not because each individual intends harm, but because of the cumulative effects of countless "small" choices aggregated by platform economies.

While thinkers like Strawson and Nagel rightly caution against simplistic attributions of blame in conditions of moral luck and causal determination, a deeper investigation reveals that the conditions of autonomy themselves are fragile and socially constructed. Responsibility, therefore, cannot be exclusively located in individual volition; it must also be understood as an ethical relation to the structures, systems, and collective meanings in which one acts. Thus, the critical examination of the AI Studio Ghibli trend does not call for blanket condemnation of its participants. It calls for a graduated, context-sensitive ethical framework, one that recognizes the fragility of autonomy in manipulated digital environments, the influence of moral luck and inherited preferences, the dynamic evolution of moral awareness as knowledge of harm increases, and the relational duty to uphold shared cultural values and protect artistic integrity.
Freedom, in this reconceptualization, is not the mere absence of external constraint, nor is responsibility an all-or-nothing judgment based solely on individual will. Instead, both freedom and responsibility emerge as ongoing ethical projects, deeply intertwined with how we navigate and sometimes resist the invisible architectures of modern digital life.

Conclusion

The AI Studio Ghibli trend, while seemingly a feeling aesthetic phenomenon, is a philosophical litmus test for how we interpret freedom and moral responsibility in the age of digital immediacy and algorithmic creativity. What began as a seemingly harmless trend, turning photos into whimsical AI illustrations, exposes a deeper ethical tension: whether our ability to do something justifies its execution or whether moral reflection must guide freedom's expression. It

showcases how technological advancements amplify the reach of individual choices while simultaneously entangling them within architectures of influence that complicate traditional notions of autonomy.

Drawing from Sartre's radical existentialism, Ayer's compatibilism, Nagel's and Strawson's skepticism about moral responsibility, and Wolf's, Kelly's, and Thunder's nuanced frameworks of ethical reflection and social embeddedness, this paper has argued that freedom without responsibility is ethically incomplete. Users participating in the trend are not merely isolated agents exercising aesthetic freedom; they are contributors to a broader cultural and ethical ecosystem. Their choices endorse, replicate, or trivialize certain values surrounding artistic integrity, labour, and creativity.

While factors such as algorithmic manipulation, social mimicry, and moral luck temper the harshness of individual blame, as Strawson and Nagel rightly suggest, they do not erase the need for ethical reflection. Instead, they demand a reconceptualization of responsibility: not as a binary of guilt or innocence, but as a dynamic, relational, and context-sensitive practice. Freedom, therefore, cannot be reduced to the absence of compulsion. It must involve resilience against informational manipulation, critical distance from engineered trends, and a relational awareness of the impact of our actions on cultural, social, and aesthetic life.

In this light, ethical action in the digital age requires more than exercising available freedoms; it demands the active cultivation of reflective agency and the ethical stewardship of communal spaces, even, and perhaps especially, in acts as seemingly simple as participating in viral artistic trends. Thus, true freedom is realized not in the uncritical exercise of choice but in the ongoing project of navigating, questioning, and resisting the subtle forces that shape our desires, affirming responsibility not as a limit upon liberty but as its most profound expression.

Postscript

However, if a person, barely making ends meet comes home after a hard day at work, opens his "For You" page flooded with AI Studio Ghibli images and decides to generate one for himself: in minutes and for free, without the need of ever commissioning an artist just to post it on social media for a moment of happiness in his dreary day to get lost in the mystical world that Miyazaki created all the way back in 1985 based on the sights and wonders of rural Japan, who are we to impose the heft of this philosophical burden of freedom and responsibility on this poor man?

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