Imposing Opinions

A Critique on the Demand for Moral Conformity in Postmodern Society

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Spring / Summer 2015
Word count: 14882

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Foreword

In this thesis project, I seek to deconstruct and – in a sense – undermine the postmodern approach to morality and moral discussion that so heavily influences contemporary society. This may seem strange; have I myself not grown up in that same society? Certainly I have – hence, the writing of this thesis calls for a measure of self-reflexivity. I value postmodern society for the wide range of possibilities it offers each and every individual: in terms of personal development; the possibility to pursue any career one wishes; and the freedom to construct one's own social network and broaden one's world. Nonetheless, I believe contemporary society is not as free as we are led to believe. Some beliefs, decisions or opinions seem to fall outside of the scope of the possible, even though in principle anything should be possible within the boundaries of the law. People holding these convictions grow into outcasts, or at least come to feel that way. Their choice is simple: conform or be damned.

Throughout this thesis project, I will examine the space of contestation where minority opinions diverge from the majority conviction. I am mainly interested in how this clash of opinions plays out, as well as what spawns it – how could postmodern society ever grow narrow? To emphasize my argument, I will employ some examples of situations where a minority opinion was shut down without getting a chance to be expressed – that is, situations where postmodern society proved to be harrowingly narrow-minded and failed to hold true to its founding values. I do not wish to imply my preference for either side of the argument over the other in any of the examples provided. If such seems to be the case, this should be considered unintentional and the reading of the argument should steer clear of any interpretation that imposes such a meaning on it.

Finally, I would like to thank dr. Francesco Maiolo for his supervision of my project: his comments and suggestions for further improvement were incredibly helpful during the writing process and before, when constructing my argument. Furthermore, a thank-you is in order to drs. Sem de Maagt for similarly providing feedback on my text and highlighting parts that needed improvement or expansion.

Introduction

Writing in the British magazine *The Spectator* in November 2014, journalist Brendan O'Neill expressed his concerns over the modern-day student body in the United Kingdom, dominated as they are by so-called "Stepford students". They are hard to identify at first, according to O'Neill, since "[t]hey look like students, dress like students, smell like students. (…) To the untrained eye, they seem like your average book-devouring, ideas-discussing, H&M-adorned youth" (O'Neill 2014). What gives away their position, however, is their universal interest in "[s]hutting debate down [rather] than opening it up" (O'Neill 2014).

O'Neill is protesting against a wide-spread refusal in student bodies to engage in honest, open-minded discussions without feeling offended by diverging opinions and shutting them down immediately to prevent them from being expressed. 'Stepford students' prefer the "right to be comfortable" (O'Neill 2014) – which is to say they prefer to remain unchallenged in their beliefs and opinions. O'Neill describes several occasions in which he was cut off by students before even being able to open up a discussion. An example of this is when he was about to take part in a panel on abortion at Oxford University together with journalist Timothy Stanley. The two never made it to the stage, since a group of students protested with the University board against the fact that "[t]wo human beings 'who do not have uteruses' should get to hold forth on abortion" (O'Neill 2014). The students' claim that this debate would threaten mental health on-campus led the University board to succumb to the protests and cancel the event altogether[1].

Only last month did the student Multicultural Affairs Advisory Board at Columbia University publish an article on the teaching of works from the Western canon that claimed:

> Ovid's "Metamorphoses" is a fixture of Lit Hum, but like so many texts in the Western canon, it contains triggering and offensive material that marginalizes student identities in the classroom. These texts, wrought with histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression, can be difficult to read and discuss as a survivor, a person of color, or a student from a low-income background. (Johnson et al 2015)

The students go on to argue that both these texts and the related class discussions "[c]an disregard the impacts that the Western canon has had and continues to have on marginalized groups" (Johnson et al 2015) and suggest that trigger warnings should be put in place for people that may feel traumatized by their engagement with the works of literature under discussion (Johnson et al 2015). We might initially be hard pressed to see a connection between O'Neill's experiences and the Columbia students' call for trigger warnings on works from the Western canon. Banning someone from a debate on abortion based on their gender is clearly logically incoherent – for should we be aliens to form an opinion on extraterrestrial life? Must we be cats and dogs to join a discussion on animal rights? -, while it seems fair enough to warn students for potentially harmful content. Ovid's descriptions of sexual assault *are* vivid and may be uncomfortable to the reader. Nonetheless, the Columbia students' rally against Ovid should remind us of the claim to comfort that is lamented by O'Neill. Trigger warnings are rather innocent, but are the first step on a very slippery slope, suggests Judith Shulevitz in the *New York Times*. She lists several instances where students' claims to comfort have led to the banning of potentially controversial opinions from university campuses in the United States and Great Britain, including the debate O'Neill was to take part in (Shulevitz 2015). Trigger warnings are just a single step down from the creation of "safe spaces", she argues:

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[1] It is worth noting that O'Neill was to argue 'pro-choice' in this debate, while Stanley would argue 'pro-life'. Both of them were denied a chance to speak, however (O'Neill 2014).

> Safe spaces are an expression of the conviction, increasingly prevalent among college students, that their schools should keep them from being "bombarded" by discomfiting or distressing viewpoints. Think of the safe space as the live-action version of the better-known trigger warning, a notice put on top of a syllabus or an assigned reading to alert students to the presence of potentially disturbing material. (Shulevitz 2015)

Such safe spaces are problematic, Shulevitz argues, because "[o]nce you designate some spaces as safe, you imply that the rest are unsafe. It follows that they should be made safer" (Shulevitz 2015). We arrive here at the core of the problem, already referred to by O'Neill in his article: modern-day student bodies prefer to remain within their comfort zone rather than having to engage with opinions they do not share, or with material that might challenge them in some way. And even worse: they know how to get their point across to university boards across the world. According to Shulevitz, university boards in the United States can do little but comply with calls for making their campuses 'safer', which often involves shutting down some debate or other kind of public event:

> Universities are in a double bind. They're required by two civil-rights statutes, Title VII and Title IX, to ensure that their campuses don't create a "hostile environment" for women and other groups subject to harassment. (…) [I]f officials don't censure or don't prevent speech that may inflict psychological damage on a member of a protected class, they risk fostering a hostile environment and prompting an

> investigation. As a result, students who say they feel unsafe are more likely to be heard than students who demand censorship on other grounds. (Shulevitz 2015)

Though students may feel ‘safer’ with heavy censorship in place at universities around the world, this has also led to a stifling learning environment. Shulevitz cites one student as saying that this development has led to “[a] safe-space mentality (…) infiltrating the classrooms, (…) making both professors and students loath to say anything that might hurt someone’s feelings” (qtd. in Shulevitz 2015). If almost anything they say can be held against a student or professor, they may prefer not to say anything at all – hence, the ‘safe space mentality’ is indeed shutting debate down rather than opening it up.

I. A straightjacket of moral conformity

Both O'Neill's and Shulevitz' articles paint a bleak picture of freedom of speech on today's university campuses. This is an odd observation, since it counters the widespread conviction today that every individual in society is free to determine his own path and value system (Lock 2001: 8). The two authors provide useful first-hand accounts of a group's or individual's collision with the condemnation of their diverging opinion. The condemnation of these opinions may not come from a majority; but as we find in all of the examples provided by both O'Neill and Shulevitz, those who feel their 'comfort zone' invaded by diverging opinions seem to know how to get their point across and taken up.

The examples discussed earlier all pertained to university campuses and not to society as a whole; furthermore, they are based on the observations of only a few individual journalists. However, O'Neill and Shulevitz are not alone in arguing that the postmodern attitude can be a straightjacket of moral conformity. Their claims are reinforced by the research of contemporary sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1925-), who wrote extensively on postmodern society and its citizenry in his works *Liquid Modernity* and *Postmodern Ethics*. Bauman observes that today's communities – university campuses, but also the public sphere as a whole - are postulated rather than naturally developed (Bauman 1993: 44). Comprised of individuals with a strong claim to personal authenticity, these communities are often a bad fit for the group they encompass and can therefore only be kept alive by artificial means - through almost binding decrees that may limit the freedom of individual members:

> On the one hand, there is the expression of the individualization of difference, of new moral autonomy; on the other, there are disguised yet determined attempts to collectivize the difference anew and devise a new heteronomy - though both on a level different from before.
>
> Confronted in the past with the condensed power of legal/moral 'universality' defined and enforced by the nation-state, individuals are now exposed to a cacophony of social pressures and/or instances of quasi-ethical blackmail, each aiming to expropriate the individual's right to moral choice. (Bauman 1993: 45)

If a clash occurs between different interest levels – that is, between the individual and 'his group', which may also be society as a whole – the group expects the individual to opt for the bigger whole and surrender his personal interests or opinions; this is to be done in service of the shared interest[2] (Bauman 1993: 46). Strikingly, already in 1993, Bauman foresaw and described that the most stifling claims to conformity occurring in today's society often refer to human rights:

> The most ruthless and murderous suppression of individual autonomy happens to be perpetrated today in the name of 'human rights', expropriated and collectivized as 'rights of a minority' (but always a minority desiring to be the majority, or at least desiring the right to behave like one). The refusal to accept the enforced interpretation of 'situatedness' is condemned as the act of subversion and treason; let the traitors expect no mercy. (Bauman 1993: 47)

Today's society has a self-professed character of anti-dogmatism, rejecting out of hand any kind of dogma imposed on anyone in society (Lock 1999: 27-29). Strangely enough, this fails to account for the experience of O'Neill and others in expressing diverging opinions, or for Bauman's observation that claims to conformity are widespread and can be immensely stifling to the individual members of a group. In this thesis project, I will further examine this trend in postmodern society[3]: that in many discussions some opinions appear unacceptable *in any form*, despite any argumentation they may be backed up with, while other opinions are chief among society and deemed worthy of widespread promotion. The former sort of opinions may often still be voiced in some way, but are never considered legitimate substantive claims on morality or any other matter; in a sense, they are not *taken seriously* anymore.

I will therefore argue that there is no such thing as anti-dogmatism, building on the argument that any value system must necessarily have a dogmatic nature; this is a rule that applies even to a system that rejects all value systems. The core claim, then, will be that anti-dogmatism is in and of itself highly dogmatic: that it is a system that consistently promotes some values and discourages others. Building on this claim, I will examine anti-dogmatism's impact on shared morality in society and the way this is mediated between people. My aim is, finally, to arrive at a conclusion on the relationship between today's self-professed anti-dogmatism and interpersonal relationships in the liberal-democratic state. The argument will be grounded in observations on the postmodern individual and his moral values and will then be further developed to apply to postmodern society as a whole. Throughout the thesis project, I intend to match the theory against practical examples such as were discussed in the introduction to this thesis project. This will serve to both elucidate the scholarly material and to highlight the relevance of a discussion of this topic. To construct my argument, I will build on the writings of scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman, Axel Honneth, Grahame Lock and Charles Taylor.

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[2] The 'struggle for recognition' taking place between the individual and the collective is discussed extensively by Axel Honneth in his works *The Struggle for Recognition* and *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*. The former of these works will be discussed in chapter VI of this thesis project.

[3] 'Postmodern society' is of course a highly problematic concept, since it is fragmentary by its very nature (cf. Taylor 2007: 11) and as such far from simplistic. I will problematize the notion of a simplistic image of contemporary society throughout this project, but here retain use of the term to introduce the problem at hand.

II. The postmodern individual: true to himself

The first question that arises when examining students' call for the 'right to be comfortable' is why they believe such a claim can be sustained in the first place. What grants every individual the right to design their own life from scratch and to weed out the potentially uncomfortable aspects? Though this claim seems common enough, embedded in contemporary society as it is, it expresses more than meets the eye.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1931-) wrote an informative work on this titled *The Ethics of Authenticity*, or *The Malaise of Modernity* in Canada and the United States. He argues that these individual rights are embedded in postmodern society's claim to individual authenticity. In his book, he outlines his view on the aspects of the ideal of authenticity in the life of the postmodern individual, as well as how this ideal has become perverted in a number of ways in past decades (Taylor 1992). The essence of the ideal of authenticity is as follows, Taylor says:

> Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. (Taylor 1992: 29)

Taylor's words here may remind the reader of Aristotle's insistence on the teleology of human life – the nature of man that drives him to develop in a certain way, towards a certain goal. Whereas Aristotle may have had a more general idea of this goal that applied to mankind as a whole, Taylor insists that today's authenticity is highly personal and particular to the individual. No two individuals share the same teleology, so to say. The high level of individualism in contemporary society is both a victory and a pitfall, Taylor argues: it created the space for each individual to develop him- or herself the way they want to but it similarly tore the individual from the higher order of community (Taylor 1992: 2-3). Many perceive this latter development as a great loss (Taylor 1992: 2-3). Interestingly so, perhaps: Taylor notes that many feel the world has become 'disenchanted' because of individualization, yet meanwhile they refuse to give up on the romantic dream of authentic individual life (Taylor 1992: 2-4).

However, Taylor insists that a pure ideal of authenticity is nowhere to be found in today's society. Instead, we are left with perverted forms of authenticity, the main of which is a kind of narcissism: a focus on the individual so intent that it shuts out any demands originating from the 'outside' (Taylor 1992: 40). The individual is so focused on himself that he regards being able to *choose* the most important thing in life:

> In a flattened world, where the horizons of meaning become fainter, the ideal of self-determining freedom comes to exercise a more powerful attraction. It seems that significance can be conferred by *choice*, by making my life an exercise in freedom, even when all other sources fail. Self-determining freedom is in part the default solution of the culture of authenticity, while at the same time it is its bane, since it further intensifies anthropocentrism. This sets up a vicious circle that heads us towards a point where our major remaining value is choice itself. But this (…) deeply subverts both the ideal of authenticity and the associated ethic of recognizing difference. (Taylor 1992: 69)

Linking this back to the 'right to feel comfortable' suggests that any individual is free to make those choices that allow him to avoid potentially harmful experiences, including shocking speech and insulting opinions by others. The individual can thus choose not to *allow* others to leave an imprint on his life; but this can extend to more than just shocking speech and may well also block out productive debate. The individual who makes a claim to total control over his own life by pursuing the value of choice surely will not admit that other lives and opinions can or should shake his own. This has a clear impact on the nature of moral debate between such individuals.

This topic was taken up by Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-) in his work *After Virtue*, which was first published in 1981 and is still immensely relevant in contemporary debate on moral philosophy. When MacIntyre argues in the beginning of his book that "[any] moral philosophy (…) characteristically presupposes a sociology" (MacIntyre 2013: 27), we find that his own explanation of the sociology of contemporary moral philosophy is eerily similar to Taylor's description of the state of modernity. MacIntyre describes a state he calls *emotivism*, and defines it as "[t]he doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character" (MacIntyre 2013: 13). Its sociological roots – and here we are reminded of Taylor – are found in the fact that the postmodern self can adopt any viewpoint he wishes, since his core characteristic is that he has no ultimate goal, no teleology – in other words, that he has no ultimate value but choice itself (MacIntyre 2013: 37-40).

MacIntyre is more pessimistic than Taylor when it comes to a solution for the problem of near-absolute moral arbitrariness. Taylor believes a work of retrieval can be done to restore authenticity to its rightful place in postmodern society (cf. Taylor 1992: 107); MacIntyre instead argues that we ought to abandon contemporary moral philosophy and retrace our steps to Aristotle and Aquinas (MacIntyre 2013). Postmodernity cannot sustain morality for MacIntyre, since it has cast off all teleology – which is the kind of thinking he believes should be at the core of a moral system, in order to avoid arbitrariness or the worship of choice as core value (MacIntyre 2013).

We have yet to take a closer look at the *kind* of moral discourse that is shunned by both Taylor and MacIntyre. Taylor reminds us that no individual life can play out in a vacuum – that there is no such thing as true individualism, since everyone plays out their lives in close contact with others. A claim to the ideal of individualism should therefore also offer a moral system that accounts for contact with others (Taylor 1992: 45). Similarly, MacIntyre argues that emotivism has led to a certain kind of moral discourse (MacIntyre 2013: 7). Clearly, both believe that there is *some kind* of moral discourse in place, driven by the arbitrariness of individuals' lives and their reverence of 'choice'. Let us examine this moral discourse now, to gain a deeper understanding of interpersonal relationships between individuals that are in essence led by arbitrariness. We will trace MacIntyre's description of the current-day engagement with morality for this.

In line with the earlier description of emotivism and its accompanying feature of purely arbitrary position-determination, MacIntyre argues that "[t]he most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character" (MacIntyre 2013: 7). This is indeed only to be expected when every individual is free to decide whatever is valuable to him on a day-to-day or case-by-case basis; when, indeed, every individual is given a claim to moral agency (MacIntyre 2013: 37). According to MacIntyre, this leads to debates with incommensurable opinions, which nonetheless share the following characteristics:

I. They are logically valid, but the premises are wildly different, allowing us no way to evaluate the claims of the one against the claims of the other simply because they lack a contact zone (MacIntyre 2013: 9).
II. They are presented as objective, detached and rational arguments; which indeed stands in stark contrast to the previous trait (MacIntyre 2013: 10).
III. They build on, yet simultaneously seem detached from, larger historical traditions of moral thought (MacIntyre 2013: 11-12).

Judging by this, we may safely conclude that contemporary moral discussion has lost sight of what it ought to be employed for: finding measures for acting in such-and-such way rather than so-and-so. If the defining feature of moral debate today is one of disagreement –

as MacIntyre argues –, it will achieve little and serve only as confirmation of the wildly different identities of individuals engaging in such a debate.

The individual citizen in today's society appears to be under hardly any binding obligation; he bears responsibility first and foremost for his own life and actions and does not have to be concerned with others' lives. Considering Taylor's grim description of the perversion of the claim to authenticity, many of us apparently lean towards a high degree of complete self-centeredness. No obligation ties us down, save perhaps for the law – but even that is often taken lightly and is easily broken if one can get away with it. Essentially, the victory of individual choice has meant the downfall of community and hierarchy (cf. Taylor 1992: 2-4). Perhaps this is the root of MacIntyre's emotivism: when community is lost and the individual is free to choose whatever he wills without obligation to the other, this *must necessarily* lead to endless disagreement. If all fight for their own rights, moral debate becomes a free-for-all; and as such, it becomes almost useless. I argued in the introduction that diverging opinions are not held to be substantive – we may also consider the possibility that no claim whatsoever is today allowed to be substantive and that any opinion is just that: an opinion, held by the individual and *only valuable to that individual.*

Is there any possible definition of such a moral system, considering MacIntyre's description of total arbitrariness and empty debate? It appears the state of moral action today is best described by the system of David Hume (1711-1776), who argued that "[r]eason is and ought to be only the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (qtd. in Cottingham 2008: 500). This is in line with the reverence of the arbitrary today, which lies counter to the rational. Perhaps Hume's philosophy – and that of his intellectual descendants – is then fairly accurately descriptive of the ruling moral in today's society. The next chapter will therefore offer an overview of Humean moral philosophy in conjunction with an analysis of how a similar approach to morality may be found in the postmodern individual. It would be nearly impossible to *prove* that Humean moral philosophy is prevalent in contemporary society. This means we here operate on the assumption that such is the case, or at least that the postmodern moral mindset shares characteristics with Humean moral philosophy. However, in a brief interlude following the next chapter, a second option will be explored in order to see how different moral systems may sometimes arrive at similar conclusions – especially in the case at hand.

III. Being true to oneself as a moral project

The moral system we will now examine was proposed by David Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* and further developed by a group of philosophers that call themselves Humeans, among whom the American scholar Harry Frankfurt (1929-). The writings of both David Hume and Harry Frankfurt will be discussed, mainly in order to examine the kind of moral system that can sustain a strong claim to individuality and the incommensurable moral debate prevalent in postmodern society as described by Alasdair MacIntyre.

We may take the statement by Hume offered earlier as our vantage point in the discussion of his moral philosophy. Hume famously argued that any motivation for moral action is driven by emotion and that this can never be achieved by rational thought; hence his claim that reason can only serve 'the passions', rather than vice versa (Cottingham 2008: 500-501). Moral decisions, then, are primarily geared towards the pursuit of actions whose ends "[m]ust be some way agreeable to us, and take hold of some natural affection. [They] must please, either from considerations of self-interest, or from more generous motives and regards" (Hume 2008: 501).

We must immediately surrender that emotion-based decision-making can lead to chance outcomes, in particular those which benefit the individual. Hume foresaw this criticism, however, and took care to circumvent total selfishness in individual moral decision-making. He offered that "[a]s every man has a strong connection with society, and perceives the impossibility of his solitary subsistence, he becomes, on that account, favourable to all those habits or principles which promote order in society" (Hume 2008: 501). A most famous example provided by Hume to back up his argument here is the following:

> Would any man, who is walking along, tread as willingly on another's gouty toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement? (Hume 2008: 503)

Under normal conditions, none of us would answer this question positively - hence, Hume argues, we cannot lodge arguments of extreme selfishness against his theory (Hume 2008: 502-503). No matter how selfish the individual, he must necessarily feel drawn to the good of mankind rather than the bad; and if either outcome is equal to him, he will always choose to benefit mankind rather than harm it (Hume 2008: 502-503). Hume arrives at the conclusion of *benevolence*, which "[h]owever small, [must be] infused into our bosom" (Hume 2008: 504).

We will not refuse Hume this one small step towards the greater good, a shared concern for humanity; but we must question its reach, considering the state of human morality as outlined by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. Agreed, it is rather unlikely that anyone would derive sheer pleasure from hurting another person without reason (e.g. Hume's example of the gouty toes) – but this may be mere custom, or the lingering influence of religious upbringing[4].

In order to uncover a space of conflict in Hume's concept of benevolence, we may appreciate a more sweeping case. Would an individual, driven by the passions, choose to save the lives of several complete strangers over that of a single loved one – all other conditions being equal? Rationally speaking, he would have to – but on emotional terms, some reserve is in order. Would anyone cast off his or her loved ones lightly? Hume is aware of this when he allows that "[s]ympathy (…) is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous" (Hume 2008: 503). Despite this acknowledgement Hume still derives a strong conclusion from the 'gouty toes' example: he allows that a minimal concern with others' well-being proves the universal presence of benevolence in people's hearts.

The issue ultimately remains unresolved in his further writing; though Hume repeatedly makes an appeal to extend human sympathy past the sphere of the personal, he unsurprisingly fails to make it obligatory in any way; or for that matter to explain why it is likely that society grows to mean as much to the individual as his near friends and family. The individual remains central and vital to his moral philosophy and is in no way forced to extend his care beyond his own person. This gap in his moral philosophy creates a space for the postmodern individual to justify a strong concern with his own person and preserve at all times a space for the value of choice; in other words, Humean philosophy can serve as a means to justify complete moral arbitrariness.

A leading figure among Hume's intellectual descendants is Harry Frankfurt, whose most recent book is called *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right*. This work outlines a view on morality highly compatible with that of David Hume. On the essence of man's interest in morality, Frankfurt states this:

> The basic concern of morality is with how to conduct ourselves in our relations with other people. Now why should *that* be, always and in all circumstances, the most important thing in our lives? No doubt it is important; but so far as I am aware, there is no convincing argument that it must invariably override everything else. (…) What a person really needs to know, in order to know how to live, is what to care about and how to measure the relative importance to him of the various things about which he

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[4] Cf. *The Holy Bible. New International Version,* Luke 6:31, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." This is an instance of the 'golden rule', an indication for moral action that can be found in religions all over the world and is not limited to Christianity alone.

> cares. These are the deepest, as well as the most immediate, normative concerns of our active lives. (Frankfurt 2006: 28)

Frankfurt's remarks here leave an astonishing amount of space for the individual who absolutely refuses to have any external moral judgment imposed on him. Frankfurt is well aware of this and offers a solution – *love*, which should immediately remind us of Hume's insistence on *benevolence.* Frankfurt defines his concept of love as follows:

> As I construe it, love is a particular mode of caring. It is an involuntary, nonutilitarian, rigidly focused, and – as is any mode of caring – self-affirming concern for the existence and the good of what is loved. The object of love can be almost anything – a life, a quality of experience, a person, a group, a moral ideal, a nonmoral ideal, a tradition, whatever. The lover's concern is rigidly focused in that there can be no equivalent substitute for its object, which he loves in its sheer particularity and not as an exemplar of some general type. His concern is nonutilitarian in that he cares about his beloved for its own sake, rather than only as a means to some other goal. (Frankfurt 2006: 40)

Frankfurt constructs a framework just like Hume's, in order to provide an incentive to the individual for extending his moral cares beyond his own person. Like Hume, however, he refuses to make such acts obligatory – likely since this is not in line with the completely egocentric and voluntary nature of his moral system. Thus far, Frankfurt's moral philosophy is nearly identical to that of Hume. However, he also considers the question of the rationality of others' moral universes. Particularly interesting are his remarks on the kinds of moral universe that we have trouble relating to.

Frankfurt does not suggest the possibility of a debate between two different camps, even though this could take place in spite of the apparent incommensurability of their wildly diverging opinions. Rather, he argues that the other must necessarily be "volitionally irrational" (Frankfurt 2008: 30). Therefore, attempts to convince them of a different moral system serve no purpose, since "[t]hose whom we seek to convince must be volitionally rational as well" (Frankfurt 2008: 39-40). Instead, "[w]e can (…) do no more with them than to express the bewilderment and revulsion that are inspired in us by the grotesque ends and ideals that they love" (Frankfurt 2008: 40). Frankfurt employs strong language to condemn the irrational other; he is "crazy", "lunatic" and "inhuman" (Frankfurt 2008: 29) and his transgression of the boundaries of the will is plain "unthinkable" (Frankfurt 2008: 31). At great length, Frankfurt proves that the moral universe of such an other is not just ill favored, but frankly impossible: “Rationality does not permit us to be open-minded and judicious about everything. It requires that certain choices be utterly out of the question” (Frankfurt 2008: 31).

The attentive reader will notice that we have now almost come full circle and are returning to the claim to comfort that was put forward by the Columbia students’ board article on the teaching of the Western canon in Humanities literature classes, and that was criticized by Brendan O’Neill in his piece on ‘Stepford Students’. Harry Frankfurt proposes a way of dealing with conflicting moral systems that refuses a level debate between opposing camps; rather than opening up a space for discussion, Frankfurt says that one can only “express bewilderment and revulsion” (Frankfurt 2008: 40) when confronted with an unlikely moral conclusion. At first glance, this seems plausible; anyone can agree with Frankfurt that there are moral decisions made by some that we utterly fail to understand or relate to; decisions that indeed inspire revulsion in us. However, it is paramount to realize that Frankfurt’s suggestion is a slippery slope – for where does one draw the line? Who decides which opinions are merely different and can be related to in some way, and which ones are utterly out of the question? When do we engage in discussion and when do we declare the other a ‘lunatic’ – at least with regard to this or that particular opinion of theirs?

Of course, Frankfurt’s system in principle aims for a positive engagement between individuals, based on a shared interest or mutual love. It first and foremost aims to provide the individual with an authentic source of motivation to help others; that is to say, a drive to help others that emanates from the self. We must however be aware that Frankfurt’s approach to moral discussion can allow for the creation of a ‘comfort zone’ by blocking out any – even remotely - uncomfortable opinion. This is bad enough in an individual case, but it becomes a serious threat to the freedom of speech in society when exercised by a major group of people. The moral system described by Hume and Frankfurt provides the individual with the ever-present possibility of saying, “*I don’t care*, hence *I will not do this*”. Their aim is to prevent the individual from being coerced into actions he does not wish to take because they do not contribute to his personal projects, as well as from being so distracted by obligations towards others that he simply does not have the time to fulfill his own needs and wishes. Be that as it may, the downside of such a moral system is that it caters for the complete disregard of others’ moral systems and their needs and wishes – especially if the individual bears no *love* (to use Frankfurt’s terminology) towards them. Even worse, by declaring some opinions *volitionally irrational*, Frankfurt allows for the creation of a watershed between groups in society – groups composed of people who love each other’s goals and blandly disregard those of people in other groups. In a sense, Humean moral philosophy can head us on a track towards moral war rather than moral debate; towards a situation where differences define, rather than spark mutual interest and engagement.

The next chapter will discuss society's claim to anti-dogmatism – supposedly the exact opposite of the problem described above – and construct an argument for its hypocrisy. We will then see why the attitude of anti-dogmatism in society fails to counter this problem of extreme moral disagreement – how in fact it caters for it. Before we delve into this next subject, however, we will briefly examine a different moral philosophy than has been discussed in this chapter – one that is not grounded in Humean views but comes from a different background entirely. This moral philosophy is that of John Rawls, whose views are chief among moral philosophers today. The reason for this brief interlude is that it allows us to look beyond Humean philosophy – which has so far been held to be accurately descriptive of morality today – and find what other philosophers have to offer on interpersonal morality. More precisely, we will examine Rawls' suggested approach to anomaly opinions within the state.

Interlude: different backgrounds, similar conclusions

John Rawls (1921-2002) became famous with his work *A Theory of Justice*, in which he constructed a system of justice for the constitutional liberal democracy. A well-known notion from his work is the 'original position', which assumes that universally applicable moral judgments can be made by covering oneself with a layer of anonymity – the idea being that by taking a 'view from nowhere' approach, one can prevent his personal preferences and projects from impeding a sound judgment call (Rawls 1999). In a later book, *Political Liberalism*, Rawls further elaborated on some of the questions posed in his earlier work, and also addressed a range of new issues he had realized were not properly dealt with in *A Theory of Justice* (Dreben 2002: 316-317).

One of the questions he deals with in *Political Liberalism* is closely related to the subject of this thesis project: how does one deal with the moral and social pluralism inherent to a constitutional liberal democracy? Burton Dreben (1927-1999), a Rawlsian scholar who elaborates on Rawls' approach to this problem in an essay called *On Rawls and Political Liberalism*, cites his intellectual predecessor:

> [A] basic feature of constitutional liberal democracy is the fact of reasonable pluralism – the fact that a plurality of conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious, philosophical, and moral, is the normal result of its culture of free institutions. (qtd. in Dreben 2002: 324)

Dreben explains that there is no hope for general agreement on most issues in contemporary political society. There is simply no way that a general 'truth' can ever be achieved, prompting Rawls (and Dreben) to argue instead for a measure of "reasonableness" (Dreben 2002: 324). Aiming for such a solution is the only way to preserve the constitutional liberal democracy, Dreben argues, "[t]he point being that any zealous demand for the whole truth as the basis of justification of legitimate law, or of public action, will of course lead to chaos" (Dreben 2002: 324). The alternative solution for the preservation of a general consensus on public and political matters would be the forcible use of state power – but this would surrender the liberal democratic ideal and is therefore no feasible option (Dreben 2002: 318).

The appeal to reasonableness offered by Dreben and Rawls to solve the problem at hand is governed by the following principle:

> It is absolutely essential for Rawls that public reason, one of the basic components of political liberalism, *political* liberalism, be neutral with regard to various

> comprehensive doctrines, various religious doctrines, and so forth. It is not a secular position, if you mean by a secular position something which is a comprehensive doctrine. In no way is what Rawls [is] doing supposed to be part of the so-called Enlightenment project. He is very clear about that; otherwise, the whole enterprise would break down. (Dreben 2002: 326; his emphasis)

So far, Rawls' project seems reasonable enough. It is also decidedly different from the Humean philosophy discussed earlier, which is firmly rooted in the Enlightenment project scorned by Dreben in the above excerpt. In order to avoid endless, irresolvable debate on the most basic moral and political questions, Rawls' plan is to construct a new layer between citizens and the state: one of reasonableness. This layer disregards the "background culture" of the citizens involved in the process and aims for a measure of public understanding, where the decisions taken can be related to by all, at least to some extent (Dreben 2002: 324-326). The layer of reasonableness appears rather similar to the 'original position' mentioned earlier, from Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*.

There is a flaw in his argument, however, which lies in the *assumption of the liberal democratic state* as basis for the argument, as well as in the *boundaries of that state*. Dreben defends the choice for the liberal democratic state as vantage point by saying that Rawls is not concerned with what could be, but rather with what is already prevalent in society: "We take for granted that today only a fool would not want to live in [a liberal democratic society]" (Dreben 2002: 328). Nonetheless, what this liberal democratic state *can* and *cannot* include remains vague. Consider the following statement:

> The whole point of political liberalism is to be as neutral as possible to all comprehensive doctrines. The only comprehensive doctrines it is not neutral toward are those which are unreasonable. A reasonable comprehensive doctrine by no means has to be a liberal comprehensive doctrine. A reasonable comprehensive doctrine can be irrational – you can be like Tertullian and say, "I believe because it is absurd." All a comprehensive doctrine has to do to be reasonable is to endorse a liberal political conception. (Dreben 2002: 326)

Any comprehensive doctrine that fails to adhere to a liberal political conception is useless to Dreben and Rawls – in fact, Dreben adamantly refuses to even *consider* such an option:

> I do not spend my time or energy arguing against it; I dismiss it. Because it is irrational; it is irrational and unreasonable to want to live in such a society. (…)
>
> If one cannot see the benefits of living in a liberal constitutional democracy, if one does not see the virtue of that ideal, then I do not know how to convince him. To be perfectly blunt, sometimes I am asked, when I go around speaking for Rawls, What do you say to an Adolf Hitler? The answer is [nothing.] You shoot him. You do not try to reason with him. Reason has no bearing on that question. So I do not want to discuss it. (Dreben 2002: 328-329)

Dreben makes a bold statement here, yet it is a claim that anyone living in a Western country can relate to – but only because we live in a liberal democratic society already and are generally satisfied with that[5]. We are hardly willing to implement – or even explore – other forms of government, save for those scholars engaged in the philosophical enterprise that *is* willing to look beyond its own borders[6]. This enterprise is dismissed by Dreben however on the grounds that "[w]e feel we have enough problems" (Dreben 2002: 328). As with Frankfurt, we find ourselves lured into a 'common sense' argument that is very much a slippery slope. Dreben, like Frankfurt, dismisses other possible political systems without argument because they are 'irrational'; in fact, he *literally* states that he refuses to take any effort to prove this.

In conclusion, we find here that even though Frankfurt and Dreben come from rather different philosophical backgrounds, they arrive at a similar conclusion on how to deal with anomaly opinions or systems: they are to be refused out of hand, without further argument. Perhaps neither Frankfurt nor Dreben considers the problem under discussion in this thesis project a pressing one. I believe such a position, considering the material discussed thus far, can no longer be sustained. The problem of moral conformity as described in this thesis project is as real as can be; we must therefore consider its implications.

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[5] I assume no further argument is needed to make this claim: looking out the window right now, I find no rioting crowd fighting the liberal democratic state. Western society seems generally satisfied with its governing structure.

[6] Marxists, for example, or more recently Thomas Piketty in his *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

IV. The false pretense of anti-dogmatism

A society comprised of individuals that make a consistent claim to individual authenticity and therefore generally refuse to have opinions or morals forced unto them proves to be a puzzle when trying to determine its ideological character. For can any ideology – defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as being "[t]he integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program" ("Ideology") – be responsive to a claim to having no ideology at all? The closest we can come, so argues Grahame Lock in a series of articles[7], is society's claim to anti-dogmatism: the refusal of any ideological system whatsoever (Lock 2010: 4). To better understand the notion of anti-dogmatism, it might be worthwhile to establish an idea of what it seeks to reject: of dogmatism itself. In most of the Western world, dogma is considered equivalent to the teachings of Christianity; to the rules and values laid out by the church, whether Catholic or Protestant. In his well-known book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that for centuries, Western society was dominated by the principles of Christian thought:

> If we go back a few centuries in our civilization, we see that God was present (…) in a whole host of social practices—not just the political— and at all levels of society: for instance, when the functioning mode of local government was the parish, and the parish was still primarily a community of prayer; or when guilds maintained a ritual life that was more than pro forma; or when the only modes in which the society in all its components could display itself to itself were religious feasts, like, for instance, the Corpus Christi procession. In those societies, you couldn't engage in any kind of public activity without "encountering God" in the above sense. (Taylor 2007: 1-2)

Clearly, dogma is not necessarily restricted to Christianity: any religion will set out a system of values for its believers to uphold – if these are institutionalized, they become mandatory for all who live in that particular society. Taylor provides the example of early societies, where religion "[w]as interwoven with everything else, and in no sense constituted a separate "sphere" of its own" (Taylor 2007: 2).

We can hardly imagine such a situation today. Aside from Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries, Western countries have strictly separated state and religion – and even in the former, the influence of religion on political matters is marginal at most (Taylor 2007: 1). Society has detached itself from God, and "[t]he norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs"

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[7] e.g. *Ringing the Changes* and *Dogma, Heresy and Voluntary Servitude*; see works cited list for more information.

(Taylor 2007:2). We now act based on rational considerations, deciding our path in light of what we deem the best course of actions for this particular stage of our lives and considering the particular goals we have set for ourselves (Taylor 2007: 2). In a sense, society today is governed by completely different rules than a few centuries ago:

> [Public space today stands] in striking contrast to earlier periods, when Christian faith laid down authoritative prescriptions, often through the mouths of the clergy, which could not be easily ignored in any of these domains, such as the ban on usury, or the obligation to enforce orthodoxy. (Taylor 2007: 2)

Considering the long-term widespread influence of Christianity on Western societies, we may consider this our leading example of a dogmatic system: Western society as governed by the Biblical principles, that is to say in its pre-Enlightenment state (cf. Lock 2010: 4). Ever since the Enlightenment, society has shifted away from this particular dogmatic disposition. Lock therefore includes the rise of anti-dogmatism[8] among the various aspects of the unfolding of the liberal-democratic idea. He defines the total as follows:

> The package of ideas on offer is in principle a simple one. It combines an appeal to (scientific) rationality and to (individual and often group) liberties. The latter are standardly translated into as (sic) a set of legal and political rights. At the same time it usually makes a legitimating appeal to a decision-making (sic) procedural decision-making structure of some indirect or representative democratic type. We might give the package as a whole the general name of advanced or neo-liberalism. (…)
>
> Advanced or neo-liberalism – in this respect an heir to the Enlightenment tradition, and true to its attachment to the principles of human freedom and of reason – recognizes no dogma or orthodoxy. (Lock 2010: 4)

Though we supposedly find ourselves in a society that refuses to recognize any dogma, this can in fact never be the case. As Lock explains, there can be no such thing as consistent anti-dogmatism (Lock 2010: 2). This is because any such system makes claims on dogma and is thus dogmatic itself (Lock 2010: 2). Anti-dogmatism may fervently reject Christianity – or any other religious influence –, but it will never do to remove the values of the past without putting new ones in place. This line of argument runs analog to an often-heard claim on the nature of atheism in the religion debate; that atheism, too, is a religion in the sense that it makes truth-claims that must be believed in (cf. Keller 2009: 8-9). In a similar vein, anti-dogmatism is a highly dogmatic system, though it adamantly refuses to admit this itself:

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[8] Which we may here understand as the shift away from the dogmatics of a society governed by Christian principles.

> In reality, it is not that we have moved into an era of consistent anti-dogmatism, but rather that we have substituted new dogmas for old. This truth is however relatively difficult to register: for one of the characteristics of the organizing core of these new dogmas is, oddly or not, its (explicitly) anti-dogmatic pretension. (Lock 2010: 2)

This particular trait of anti-dogmatism in society is highly problematic, since it forms a barrier to proper self-reflection and as such ultimately restrains the anti-dogmatic ambition from reaching its full potential (Lock 2010: 4-5). The ideal notion of anti-dogmatism – which, sadly, is never achieved because of a lack of self-reflexivity and the logical inconsistency inherent to imposing a value system that rejects all values – appears on some levels to overlap with our notion of modernity. Earlier, when discussing Taylor and MacIntyre, we found that ‘choice’ itself is revered as the highest possible value by the postmodern individual; here, we find that the original idea of anti-dogmatism aims to cater for the same. Society’s anti-dogmatism thus informs the postmodern individual’s moral condition.

Recall, however, Taylor’s argument that today’s claim to authenticity has become perverted; that it has degenerated into a form of narcissism, a claim to personal development that shuts out any influence coming from the outside. Similarly, we have found that the original ideal of anti-dogmatism is an illusion. Anti-dogmatism is an inconsistent ideal in itself: for how can anti-dogmatism reject the values of old while similarly promoting the value of ‘choice’? Surely it would then be possible to hold conservative ideas and still be an active and engaged member of society. This seems to not be the case. Even if one were to argue that all anti-dogmatism has set out to do is prevent the *enforcement* of the values of old, this does not match with its essential role in the unfolding of the neoliberal ideal at large (Lock 2010: 5) – an ideal which itself promotes certain values to a great extent, such as rationalization (Lock 2010: 5).

To summarize, it appears that today’s understanding of modernity overlaps to a great extent with the promotion of anti-dogmatism: both are in the service of ‘choice’ as the highest ideal. True anti-dogmatism however, like the true claim to individual authenticity, does not exist: instead society embraces a perverted version of this ideal, which can at times lead to a severe clash between individual freedoms[9]. The clash is fed by society's anti-dogmatist pretension rather than cut off by it: hence, anti-dogmatism achieves the very opposite of what it set out to do. To understand the nature of this clash – essentially, to construct a bridge between the individual and the whole of society; to connect the previous chapters to the current and those to come – we must look at the culture of narcissism that is discussed by both Taylor and Lock and considered by the latter to be the driving force behind the push for anti-dogmatism (cf. Lock 2010: 7).

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[9] For instance, when different members of society uphold different values, based on the same claim to anti-dogmatism – but subsequently find themselves in disagreement or even discomfort because of the other's opinions (e.g. the Stepford Students).

V. On the culture of narcissism

Building on the writings of the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) – most notably his *Totem and Taboo* –, Christopher Lasch (1932-1994) – in *The Culture of Narcissism* – and Pierre Legendre (1946-), Grahame Lock argues that the institutions of postmodern neoliberal society have encouraged narcissism to flower and spread among its individual members (Lock 2010: 7). With Lasch, he argues that the neoliberal ideology is "[a] system [that] fosters dispositional states in which narcissistic challenges to authority (of a particular – in essence nihilistic – kind) are more likely to occur" (Lock 2010: 7). We will now first examine the roots of narcissism itself through the work of Sigmund Freud. In doing so, we will primarily be concerned with discovering how narcissism – originally a stage in early human development – has become politicized and has come to be an acceptable political stance to the grown-up individual participating in society. This will eventually bring us to the writings of Christopher Lasch and Pierre Legendre on the encouragement of the state of narcissism by neoliberal institutions. The goal of examining the work of these three authors is to gain further insight into the relationship between the postmodern individual and his disposition and the society he lives in.

Freud has written extensively on the subject of narcissism. He recognizes it first and foremost as a stage in the development of any human being, where "[t]he subject behaves as though he were in love with himself; his egoistic instincts and his libidinal wishes are not yet separable under our analysis" (Freud 1953: 89). This stage is overcome, Freud argues, as soon as the child *is* able to separate his instincts and wishes; that is, when he learns to project his libido outside of himself (Freud 1953: 89). The existence of the narcissistic stage is largely fostered by the parents' treatment of their child:

> [The parents] are under compulsion to ascribe every perfection to the child – which sober observation would find no occasion to do – and to conceal and forget all his shortcomings. (…) Moreover, they are inclined to suspend in the child's favour the operation of all the cultural acquisitions which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves. The child shall have a better time than his parents; he shall not be subject to the necessities which they have recognized as paramount in life. Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his favour; he shall once more really be the centre and core of creation – 'His Majesty the Baby', as we once fancied ourselves. (Freud 1957: 91)

As the center of the universe, the baby logically experiences – or at the very least seeks to experience – no restriction whatsoever of his wants, needs or actions. Whatever he desires he will get, most likely by aid of his parents. Pleasure is the driving force behind his actions and desires, its immediate fulfillment being the one goal he pursues (Freud 1953: 90). Yet the child develops and eventually achieves maturity. Now he grows to adapt to the external world, leading him to give up his claim to immediate pleasure fulfillment and also to learn how to be respective of others' needs instead of only taking care of his own (Freud 1953: 90).

Does this mean that narcissism is only a temporary stage in human life? If so, then why are we here so concerned with tracing its influence in adult life? It would make little sense to examine narcissism in adult members of society if it only occured in developing children. However, Freud is keen to observe that narcissism may retreat to some extent as the child grows into adulthood, but never disappears entirely:

> [W]e suspect already that [the] narcissistic organization is never wholly abandoned. A human being remains to some extent narcissistic even after he has found external objects for his libido. The cathexes of objects which he effects are as it were emanations of the libido that still remain in his ego and can be drawn back into it once more. (Freud 1953: 89)

We come here to a most important observation made by Freud on the *nature* of narcissism in adulthood – the distinction between two stages of narcissism, namely between its *primary* and its *secondary* kind. The former, Freud argues, is a healthy kind of narcissism: it is "[t]he libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature" (Freud 1957: 73-74). Elsewhere, Freud refers to this primary narcissism as the 'normal' kind, providing us with a clear value judgment when comparing it to the secondary stage of narcissism. Secondary narcissism is characterized by megalomania (Freud 1957: 74-75). Freud employs the example of primitive peoples and children, who would be unable to distinguish between primary and secondary narcissism and therefore display the following behavior:

> [A]n overestimation of the power of their wishes and mental acts, the 'omnipotence of thoughts', a belief in the thaumaturgic of words, and a technique for dealing with the external world – 'magic' – which appears to be a logical application of these grandiose premises. (Freud 1957: 75)

Freud distinguishes between primary – or 'normal' – and secondary narcissism in terms of what it sets out to achieve. The former is a means of self-preservation, while the latter extends the value of the individual too far and beyond the self (Freud 1957: 73-76). We find here a way towards the exertion of a politics based on narcissism; or at the very least towards the demonstration of excessively narcissistic behavior – that is, of the secondary kind – in adults in postmodern society.

The subject of the relationship between individual narcissism and postmodern political institutions was taken up by Christopher Lasch in his *The Culture of Narcissism*, a work of cultural history on American society that traces the development of narcissist behavior and the narcissist outlook on life after the decline of group identification in the 1970s (Lasch 1991: xiii-xviii). In line with Freud, Lasch argues that the individual and the collective – in this case, society – are heavily intertwined, that indeed the latter influences the former to a great extent:

> Every society reproduces its culture – its norms, its underlying assumptions, its modes of organizing experience – in the individual, in the form of personality. As Durkheim said, personality is the individual socialized. The process of socialization, carried out by the family and secondarily by the school and other agencies of character formation, modifies human nature to conform to the prevailing social norms. Each society tries to solve the universal crises of childhood – the trauma of separation from the mother, the fear of abandonment, the pain of competing with others for the mothers' love – in its own way, and the manner in which it deals with these psychic events produces a characteristic form of personality. (Lasch 1991: 34)

Lasch's claims here may be overly forceful, as they appear to undermine the possibility of personal character development almost entirely. Especially the postmodern citizen, building on his claim to authenticity, wishes to believe that such individual development is possible – and so do I. Nonetheless, we all find ourselves born into some kind of ideological system: as Lock argues, each of us "[i]s "recruited" at an early age by some dogmatic system or systems" (Lock 2010: 9). For the postmodern individual, this system would be the – highly dogmatic, as we found earlier – neoliberal ideology of anti-dogmatism (cf. Lock 2010: 7). We may now begin to suspect that the postmodern individual's attitude – which is marked by narcissism, as Lasch seeks to prove throughout his *Culture of Narcissism* – is motivated by the institutions of neoliberal society. This makes it a much more resilient trait of the time than if it had been reversed: that is, if the individual attitudes of narcissism were bundled to form a culture of the time that is decidedly narcissistic. The culture of narcissism is much more resilient when feeding from society into individuals, because culture then dictates (at least part of) the personality of any individual growing up in neoliberal society. Had it been a collective of opinions dictating the culture of our time, a dissident group could have tried to rally others to their cause; now, it is rather hard to escape the system of narcissism, since we all grow up in it and are shaped by it. In a sense, the system precedes and therefore impedes an objective and critical attitude.

This is confirmed by Pierre Legendre, another Freudian scholar who suggests, "it is "contemporary contractualist ideology" which encourages generalized social regression to such narcissism" (Lock 2010: 8). His argument refers to the notion of contractualism, an approach to morality that is grounded in an "[a]ppeal to the idea of a social contract (…) [which] attempts to derive the content of morality (…) from the notion of an agreement between all those in the moral domain" (Ashford and Mulgan 2012). In its "contemporary" form, which Legendre refers to, this is marked by narcissism and a strong claim to having one's own projects and values respected by others (Lock 2010: 8). It therefore fits perfectly with the theories discussed earlier, by Taylor, MacIntyre, Hume and Frankfurt. We find this confirmed when Lock, in line with Legendre's argument, expatiates:

> [I]s not each of us repeatedly told, by the mass media and by the commercial advertising industry, by educational institutions and even by government, that he or she is the legitimate source and origin of all his "preferences" or "choices", on the basis of course of his own freely adopted "values"? Thus no allegiance is demanded of the individual to anything outside himself. In present-day contractualist society, each of us is a little monarch. That is why each is free to embrace – or even to invent – his own "value system". (Lock 2010: 8)

Experience tells us that Lock's observations here are spot-on. A political campaign today – say, for the US presidency – is often marked by individual personal engagement between candidate and voter: the former seeks out the latter to 'lend an ear' and promise his allegiance in exchange for a vote. Regardless of the futility of such an approach considering the size of the US electorate, we find Lock's claim reinforced: the individual in postmodern society is continuously reminded of his power position and his right to an authentic life.

Once again, we have come full circle. The individual is encouraged by the state to consider himself the "legitimate source and origin" (see above) of all his moral judgments and actions – indeed, the state confirms and promotes the search for personal authenticity through a Humean moral mindset[10]. This uncovers a link between the individual's mindset as described by Taylor and MacIntyre, and the greater whole of neoliberal society and its institutions. They are closely tied and appear to mutually reinforce one another; the state indirectly promotes narcissism by constantly reminding the individual of his autonomous position; and the individual readily takes up this attitude in his life, including in his engagement with others in society[11].

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[10] i.e. by attributing the highest value to one's life projects.

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[11] This is reinforced by Lasch’s treatment of the ‘cult of authenticity’ in *The Culture of Narcissism* – see pp. 166-168.

VI. Imposing opinions in liberal democracy

Thus far in this thesis project, we have examined at length the postmodern individual and his personal morality. We have found that he bases his personal development on a claim to authenticity and operates with a personal set of morals that allow complete regression to the self: namely Humean morality, which is first and foremost concerned with the personal projects of an individual and not with the world around him. The postmodern individual lives in a society with a strong claim to anti-dogmatism, which, nevertheless, is based on a logical inconsistency. This society fosters the individual's self-confidence by repeatedly reminding him of his position of power: by teasing him back toward the childhood stage of "his Majesty, the Baby" (Freud 1957: 91). This may happen to the point where the individual becomes so convinced of his own truth – that is, the validity of his personally designed moral universe – that he takes it upon himself to extend it unto others. In other words, primary narcissism devolves into secondary narcissism and the individual is no longer content with ruling over just his own life – his projects have become *so important* and *so true* that they need to be taken up by others.

What remains to be done is an exploration of the possible consequences of a society comprised of individuals regressing into secondary narcissism. A single individual attempting to force his morality unto others is perhaps only slightly problematic – but on the off chance that a group of like-minded individuals meet and unite (for the time being) under the same banner, we may be more worried about their impact on society. Let us recall some of the examples in Judith Shulevitz' *New York Times* article, where minority groups on university campuses manage to heavily influence the student body as a whole, usually by claiming to feel unsafe – which as Shulevitz demonstrates works particularly well in shutting down debates (Shulevitz 2015). Minority groups seem to know how to make things work for them, so too argues Zygmunt Bauman, who like Shulevitz was mentioned in the introduction to this thesis project. He argued that these minority groups tend to have a wish to influence or even dominate the majority opinion (Bauman 1993: 47).

More recently published than his work on the postmodern moral condition is Bauman's book *Liquid Modernity*. Here, he remarks the dangers of a minority ruling over the majority by referring to the dystopic societies of Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* (Bauman 2000: 53-54). He then cuts right to the core of the problem by taking up the work of philosophy's foremost writer on this particular subject: Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859). This French political thinker wrote the influential *Democracy in America*, which explores the perks and pitfalls of the newly emerged democratic state in America in the mid-nineteenth century. The work is famous for, among other things, the explicit warnings against the *tyranny of the majority*, where a majority opinion is forced on all of society (cf.

Tocqueville 2002: 114; 217-218). Naturally, democracy fosters this instead of preventing it: after all, it is essentially nothing but the rule of the majority that is the governing principle of the democratic state.

Bauman, however, seems more concerned with a different – though related – problem noted by Tocqueville:

> And so there is another snag as well: as de Tocqueville long suspected, setting people free may make them *indifferent*. The individual is the citizen's worst enemy, de Tocqueville suggested. The 'citizen' is a person inclined to seek her or his own welfare through the well-being of the city – while the individual tends to be lukewarm, sceptical or wary about 'common cause', 'common good', 'good society' or 'just society' (sic) What is the sense of 'common interests' except letting each individual satisfy her or his own? Whatever individuals may do when they come together, and whatever other benefits their shared labours may bring, portends constraint on their freedom to pursue what they see fit for each separately, and will not help such pursuit anyway. (Bauman 2000: 36)

Bauman is worried that individuals will neglect to take up their role – perhaps even their responsibility – as a citizen in the political society. Tocqueville warns that this may lead to a kind of soft despotism: a democracy where the *demos* is not actually concerned with governing the state, meaning that in the end a selective group of people ends up in power and governs all of the *demos* as it wills, with the latter offering no resistance whatsoever (Tocqueville 2002: 771-773). But is not the complete opposite the case in contemporary society? Are we not plagued by the widest array of small political movements, single-issue parties and groups that press as hard as possible to impose their point of interest on society as a whole – often resting on a claim to human rights (recall Bauman's earlier argument)? Perhaps Bauman is right in asserting – if he is – that the majority remains passive in the process, exactly by allowing these opinions to be impressed on it. In that respect, he is spot-on and we find that Tocqueville's two separate arguments – the one being that majority rule can be tyrannical, the other that a minority's rule may lead to soft despotism – inform and reinforce each other in the case of postmodern society.

What does this leave us with? Judging by the arguments of Bauman, Lock and Tocqueville, roughly three groups[12] can be distinguished in postmodern society. First there is the wide range of political activists: minorities that bargain, lobby, protest, rally, lambast and debate to get their particular point across. This brings us to the second and largest group: the majority, defined by Bauman and Tocqueville as rather impassive, or “lukewarm, sceptical” (Bauman 2000: 36) with regard to the common cause and their dedication to the truth. The majority is impressionable and the lack of active citizenship on their part – which so contrasts them with the first group – allows for a soft despotism to be exercised in the democratic state. Finally, there is another minor group, one that has yet to be discussed: that of the heretics. They are the people who are cast off as ‘lunatics’, since they are governed by an ‘inhuman, unimaginable morality’ (recall Frankfurt’s words); they are the social outcasts condemned by the majority opinion, which is so heavily steered by the political activism of the first group. Who these heretics are and what constitutes their role is subject to discussion in the next chapter.

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[12] 'Group' is here employed as a catchall term, meaning the individual elements of a group are not necessarily much alike save for the kind of general behavior that defines them.

VII. Railing against dogma: the heretic

In order to allow a proper discussion of the heretic, his role in society and the personal struggle his opinions and beliefs can bring about, a viable working definition is paramount. Grahame Lock provides such a definition, and since I intend to build on his words for the chapter to come, I will recall it here:

> [H]eresy, in the general sense, has two forms which must be carefully distinguished. First, there is rebellion against a particular dogma, orthodoxy or taboo. (…) Second, however, there is rebellion whose aim is to defy authority as such. A heretical ideological position may be assumed in order to justify such dissension, but as an *ex post facto* rationalization. (Lock 2010: 6-7)

We are here not concerned with both kinds of heresy, but rather only with the first: the heretics who put down a particular rather than a general challenge. Perhaps it seems counter-intuitive to discuss the notion of heresy in postmodern, anti-dogmatist society. If there is no dogma to rail against, how can there be a heretic proper? However, as was said earlier, anti-dogmatism is in itself highly dogmatic – and the existence of heretics further strengthens this claim:

> If (…) the state of human affairs at the opening of the third millennium is indeed to have abandoned most of the dogmas, religious and otherwise, characteristic of earlier epochs, there would seem *a contrario* to be little reason or incentive to develop or to attempt to promote anti-dogmatic, heretical views or to organize heretical movements. Heresy proper is of interest only where there is an influential dogmatics to reject. (Lock 2010: 1-2)

I do not believe it is necessary to *prove* the existence of 'heretics' in postmodern society. The observations of O'Neill and Shulevitz serve that purpose, reinforced by the wider sociological approach of Zygmunt Bauman. All of them perceive a similar trend, worded in different ways. Practically all of the experiences O'Neill recounts in his article found him referred to a corner of society, as someone who has "[s]ought to contaminate [the Stepford students'] campuses and their fragile grey matter with offensive ideas" (O'Neill 2014). Shulevitz recounts several incidents where speakers invited to give a lecture were cancelled on because of their particular opinions, since students would "[w]orry whether [these] acts of speech or pieces of writing may put them in emotional peril" (Shulevitz 2015). And let us not forget Bauman's warning that "[t]he refusal to accept the enforced interpretation of ‘situatedness’ is condemned as the act of subversion and treason; let the traitors expect no mercy” (Bauman 1993: 47). Heretics exist, we may safely assert; hence, some strong dogmatic system *must necessarily be in place*, no matter how strange this may seem.

What does this do to society? It becomes fragmented. Perhaps the true effect of society’s self-proclaimed anti-dogmatism is part of the reason it has become so fragmentary in nature. This is a strong claim however, and I cannot further sustain it here. I will leave it for the reader to consider. That the branding of groups, opinions or beliefs as ‘heretical’[13] chips away in some way or another at unanimity in society requires no further argument, however. Lock argues: “[a] community is united in self-love, but only when the bilateral relations between its members are cemented by an identification with the sacrosanct leader or idea: that is to say, with a dogma” (Lock 2010: 10).

In order to understand what it means to become a social outcast or be branded a heretic in society, we may take a look at the work of philosopher Axel Honneth, who wrote several influential works on a theory of recognition. His theory outlines the way interpersonal relationships mutually reinforce self-development in individuals – as well as what happens when social acknowledgement skids to a halt. Honneth argues the following regarding the effects of recognition and its opposite, disrespect, on the individual:

> Because the normative self-image of each and every individual human being – his or her ‘me’, as Mead put it – is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others, the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse. (Honneth 1995: 131-132)

Social recognition is clearly of paramount importance to the self-image of any individual, to the point where a lack of it may shake the very core of a person. This ‘disrespect’, or lack of recognition, can manifest itself in various ways, Honneth argues: it can be physical, moral, or social (Honneth 1995: 133). We are here not concerned with the physical aspect of disrespect (i.e. physical abuse such as slavery, rape or imprisonment). Rather, this thesis project is mostly engaged with more subtle forms of disrespect – ones that are harder to detect and therefore perhaps even more deserving of attention. We find this in the other two forms of disrespect, which mutually reinforce one another (Honneth 1995: 134): moral and social disrespect. The former, Honneth argues, “[r]efers to those forms of personal disrespect to which an individual is subjected by being structurally excluded from the possession of certain rights within a society" (Honneth 1995: 133). This seems irrelevant with regard to the cases that have been discussed thus far. However, Honneth explains in further detail what this moral disrespect entails:

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[13] Obviously this particular vocabulary is not employed; rather than calling anomaly opinions ‘heretical’, they would sooner be called ‘irrational’, ‘extremist’, ‘traditional’, et cetera. Consider for instance a recent speech on family planning by US presidency candidate Hillary Clinton, who argued that “[d]eep-seated cultural codes, religious beliefs and structural biases have to be changed” to accommodate future changes (qtd. in John 2015).

> What is specific to such forms of disrespect, as exemplified by the denial of rights *or by social ostracism*, (…) lies not just in the forcible restriction of personal autonomy but also in the combination with the feeling of not enjoying the status of a full-fledged partner to interaction, equally endowed with moral rights. For the individual, *having socially valid rights-claims denied signifies a violation of the intersubjective expectation to be recognized as a subject capable of forming moral judgements*. To this extent, the experience of this type of disrespect typically brings with it a loss of self-respect, of the ability to relate to oneself as a legally equal interaction partner with all human partners. (Honneth 1995: 133-134; my emphases)

This aspect of moral disrespect touches upon the essence of the third kind of disrespect, namely social, which is defined by Honneth as an "evaluative [form] of disrespect" (Honneth 1995: 134). If an individual's actions are judged – that is, evaluated – to be inferior to other kinds of moral or social action, this essentially becomes a form of disrespect. As we saw earlier, being disrespected in such a way means to experience a direct threat to personal integrity, since this is heavily dependent on social recognition (Honneth 1995: 134-135).

Having lost his status in the social arena, the heretic thus ends up in a downward spiral of negativity. His very identity is at stake. Honneth argues that the psychological effects of this experience lead to an array of negative emotions – i.e. anger and shame (Honneth 1995: 136) – which can serve as a motivation to take action:

> As both psychoanalytical and phenomenological approaches have shown, the emotional content of shame consists, to begin with, in a kind of lowering of one's own feeling of self-worth. Ashamed of oneself as a result of having one's action rejected, one experiences oneself as being of lower social value than one had previously assumed. (…)
>
> In the context of the emotional responses associated with shame, the experience of being disrespected can become the motivational impetus for a struggle for recognition. For it is only by regaining the possibility of active conduct that

> individuals can dispel the state of emotional tension into which they are forced as a result of humiliation. (Honneth 1995: 137-138)

This seems to imply that action always follows the negative spiral of emotions. However, such is not necessarily always the case: as Honneth explains, whether or not the drive for action is taken up by the individual depends heavily on his environment: "[o]nly if the means of articulation of a social movement are available can the experience of disrespect become a motivation for acts of political resistance" (Honneth 1995: 139). This means several things. First of all, it shows that a single individual judged to have an anomaly opinion has little means to fight his condemnation – to actively fight the lack of respect he receives from society at large. On the other hand, a group can do much more; it can, according to Honneth, react to the disrespect by forming a political movement. Recalling the earlier division of society in three groups (politicized minority – passive majority – heretics), this may lead to a shift from being a group of heretics to becoming a forerunner of some new political motive to be taken up by the majority. Otherwise, it may just as well be that the group of heretics remains stuck in a perpetual struggle for recognition – there is never any guarantee that their motive is taken up and accepted by the majority. Hence, we may conclude that in fact, a very thin line divides heretics and politicized minorities.

In conclusion, we find that the heretic does not remain unaffected by society's rejection; in fact, he depends on interpersonal relationships for his personal identity to sustain itself. We also find that heretics and politicized minorities are not so different; though they are on very different sides of the power struggle, the only factual difference is that the one group finds their opinion rejected, while the other finds it assumed at large by the majority. This calls for a measure of prudence when being particularly concerned with either heretics or politicized minorities; both require self-reflexivity on the part of their individual members. That such self-reflexive behavior is hard to come by nowadays is perhaps best exemplified by the following example provided by Lock in one of his articles:

> It happens that I ask my students, in class, what they think about the fact, as much commentary apparently sees it nowadays, that they are the first generation - the first ever in the history of mankind! – to have been raised not in subservience to some body of orthodox doctrine, whether religious or political, but in nearly optimal spiritual freedom and in a society operating on a principle of unfettered rationality. They are unsurprised: sometimes you get that kind of luck in life. (Lock 2010: 4)

Lock provides no further commentary on the students' response to his own highly sarcastic remark; hopefully, none is needed here either. Even such a simple example as this provides reason for concern: anti-dogmatism's refusal to acknowledge its own position as a highly ideological system poses a threat to human liberty and freedom of speech that is not to be underestimated (cf. Lock 2010: 9). By posing such a strong claim on human freedom as the highest possible value, it effectively eliminates the very possibility of such a society, in which anyone can *truly* express his or her opinion freely. In this society, disagreement could arise, but would then provide space for discussion rather than regressing into declarations of heresy or irrationality.

Conclusion

Postmodern society's rejection of all taboos seems the ideal environment for individuals' lives and ambitions to blossom. A lack of taboos implies that there is no condemnation, and that there are no value judgments on which positions and beliefs are better than others. Traditional backgrounds and convictions can exist peacefully alongside the most radical ways of life. The ideal of neoliberal democratic society calls to mind the Biblical paradise, where wolf and lamb lie together in harmony (Isaiah 11:6). Substitute the wolf and the lamb for tradition and progress and the comparison is complete: neoliberal society is as close to paradise as we will get, at least in terms of individual personal development.

Sadly, all this is an illusion. The perfect neoliberal society does not exist; it is grounded in unattainable ideals and logical inconsistencies. Its pretension of anti-dogmatism has in fact spawned one of the most dogmatic systems of all time, though it will never admit to this. Postmodern society's claim to personal authenticity has regressed into a form of narcissism, prompting the individual citizen to believe that his personally designed moral system is *so true* that it should apply to others as well. This turns society into a straightjacket of moral conformity rather than a playground for moral debate.

Unlike Taylor, I do not believe a work of retrieval can be performed to return to a pure form of authenticity. As I have tried to show throughout this thesis project, the postmodern condition is fragmented and inconsistent. Such a society seeks to allow all of its citizens to develop themselves the way they wish, but fails to realize that granting such freedom includes the possibility of taking away others' freedom, whether that is done physically, morally or socially. In this thesis project, I have mostly focused on the two latter options. Whereas physical restraint is already publicly condemned, I believe this is not the case for moral and social restraint. These are like the proverbial thief in the night: subtle, powerful and above all incredibly terrifying. A society that imposes opinions without being aware of it seems to me the opposite of the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and rationality; may this essay provide the reader with caution against its further development.

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