On Ethics & Religion

Mencius Moldbug

What if there's no such thing as chaotic good?

There are some people who as teenagers were normal. Then there are some who were so socially maladjusted, so personally pathetic, and so lame in any way they can conceivably now imagine as adults, that they played D&D. Then there are some who were actually even more maladjusted, pathetic, and lame than that, and so were too socially inept to even get it together to play D&D, except on a computer which does not, I'm told, count.

Since I was in group C, I am lame enough that I know a little, but not a lot, about D&D. I suppose I could probably look it all up on La Wik, but I have some dignity.

At least as I remember it, there were two major versions of D&D. There was the original one that came in the box and the second one that was sold as books. Or something like that. I'm sure they have real names. Because you, the reader, also have some dignity, I'll just call them "1.0" and "2.0."

In both 1.0 and 2.0, your character had to have an alignment. This was one of several values — if you were a programmer, you'd call it an "enumerated type" — which basically said what kind of a guy (or elf, or dwarf, or my favorite, half-orc) you were.

It's my recollection (I swear I am writing entirely from memory — any kind of research, on any subject, is really beneath the honor of Unqualified Reservations) that in D&D 1.0, alignment was one of three values: *lawful*, *neutral*, *chaotic*.

By D&D 2.0, however, Gygax and/or his henchmen had realized that this didn't really span the plane of desires with which their customer base might conceivably identify. So they added another dimension: *good*, *neutral*, *evil*. And you could have one of nine alignments, from *lawful good* to *chaotic evil*.

Typically, of course, your average roleplayer went straight for chaotic good. At least this is my recollection. I have no numbers. (And if I did, I would delete them immediately.)

I do not have a little altar with a pewter figure of Gandalf on it. Nor am I a major consumer of incense. But I do still kind of think of myself as a lawful neutral.

(Of course, if chaotic good is the most popular alignment, lawful neutral has to be the least. This probably has something to do with my preference for it. It's an unfortunate fact that genuine unpopularity is always somehow intentional.)

As a lawful neutral, my suspicion is that it's actually not the D&D 2.0 alignment system that's a better reflection of the real world. Actually, I think, the 1.0 system may be more accurate.

Suppose there's actually no such thing as "chaotic good"? Suppose that it's just that law is good, and chaos is evil?

Let's call the D&D 1.0 alignment system (as remembered by me), and as applied not to elves and dwarves, but to the real world and the people in it, who are certainly not identical but must at least be regarded as a single species, the "linear model." Let's call the D&D 2.0 alignment system the "planar model."

Obviously, the linear model is a dimension-reduced subset of the planar model. If you believe the linear model is more accurate, therefore, you can only do so by believing the extra dimension of information added by the planar model is somehow meaningless, that it is noise, that its only effect is confusion.

How could the linear model be sufficient? How could there be no such thing as chaotic good or lawful evil?

Well, one possibility is that "chaotic good" just maps to evil, which maps right back to "chaos." That is, the only practical definition of evil is that evil is the same thing as chaos.

Since good is the opposite of evil, as chaos is the opposite of law, this answer also says that good is identical with law. Thus, "lawful good" and "chaotic evil" are tautological.

Under this hypothesis, the reason that there is actually evil in the world is just that evil consists entirely of the actions of those who consider themselves "chaotic good." These presumably regard their enemies as "lawful evil," when in fact they are just plain lawful — that is, good.

Here is the "linearist" narrative:

Evil is not the same thing as malevolence. Nor is good the same thing as benevolence. Evil and good are results, not volitions. There are people who actively pursue evil — psychopaths — but psychopaths, as an almost invariable rule, act alone. Most people spend most of their time pursuing good, and all large organizations are organized around some concept of good.

Since most of the large-scale phenomena in recent history which most of us would consider "evil" have been the result of actions of people acting within organizations, "evil" must be the result of actions which someone considered "good."

By conflating evil with malevolence, planarism derives the logical result that evil can be extinguished by eradicating malevolence. So planarists strive everywhere and at all times to think good thoughts, and to persuade others to do the same.

When planarists read and write history, they spend far too much time on the landscape of emotional attachments and airy mystical beliefs, and not enough on practical cause and effect. As in the case of religion, our sense of classification is being fed superfluous information which is meaningless and

disorienting.

In our planarist society, every kind of human action has become shrouded in a vast cloud of something called "ethics," which no one can define, but no one is allowed to question. An actual holy book would be a serious improvement. Planarists these days think they've abandoned religion in favor of reason. In fact, in their endless jihad against malevolence, they have become fanatical, moralizing prigs, and their actions often do more to promote evil than to dissuade it.

Anyway. This is blatant linearist propaganda. I apologize, folks, for including this stuff. If you find it offensive, just head up to the top of the page and click "Flag This Blog."

As planarists, we have simply moved beyond linearism. The 20th was, first and foremost, the century in which man triumphed over man. Self-government was ubiquitous in this era, in which science and the arts achieved their apex and went up from there, and diversity showed every sign of becoming universal.

Progress was also seen in the word "justice," which acquired a new, more correct meaning. This word, derived originally from the Latin word for gravy, "jus," had been perverted by medieval despots, Jesuit pedophiles and serial serf-abusers, until it had come to mean something like "accurate application of all official rules." As though people were, like, robots, or something.

We have restored the word by replacing it with a new concept, which has been fully rebuilt to its exact original meaning. Sometimes to differentiate the two we call it "social justice." Social justice is about making sure the gravy all goes around, which is, of course, the original Roman meaning. Note that Rome survives to this day.

For example, our leading philosophical treatise is a book called "A Theory of Justice." This august tome does not countenance the medieval corruption in which "justice" was held to mean no more than "accurate application of the law." By "justice" its author means "social justice" and nothing else. And this usage is now general in the English language. Which is fortunate in that it can express this critical concept in such a mellifluous and succinct way. It certainly has no need for its predecessor — which never made much sense, anyway.

Social justice, of course, is the same thing as "chaotic good." So anyone who's against chaotic good must be against social justice. Which is just justice, so linearists are enemies of justice. Clearly we should be on the alert for these people...

Anyway. Obviously, I am a damned linearist. I am probably going to hell. If you are a planarist, I promise to stop trying to yank your chain. It is not polite of me.

Because the planarists *are* benevolent. Most people want to be chaotic good, not chaotic evil, because they are benevolent, not malevolent.

The problem is that the relationships between benevolence and good, and that between malevolence and evil, are not strong. So by using the words "good" and "evil" to mean "benevolent" and "malevolent," planarists distract themselves from real problems and real solutions.

In the UK between 1900 and 1989, as the concept of social justice moved from being the program of a political faction to a universally shared ideal, the crime rate (number of offenses known to the police, per capita) rose by a factor of 46. That is, it's not that crime, per capita, went up by 46%. It's that it went up by 4600%. (The number is now back down to 37.)

No one intended this result. No one in 1900 was saying: follow our program, build the New Jerusalem, and wonderful things will happen. Oh, except that crime will increase by a factor of 46.

I am not a big fan of statistics. History provides no controlled experiments, and expecting data from an uncontrolled experiment to tell you something is the epistemic equivalent of barebacking. But I suspect the trend in crime has something to do with with the parallel bull-market in planarism. Chaos, after all, is chaos.

Two kinds of repeaters

Saturday, May 5, 2007 at 5:56 PM

A [little while ago](#) I noted that beliefs about the paranormal world can't directly motivate actions in the physical world. The proximate motivation of any physical action must be some belief about the real world, because (pace [Mises](#)) any action implies some attempt to change the world's state to one the actor considers preferable. So real-world principles which depend on the paranormal, such as "separation of church and state," are suboptimal by definition. Any real-world problems they could prevent could be also caused by a nonparanormal belief system, against which such a rule is no defense.

For example, if two movements A and B propagate the same beliefs about the real world, but A includes a paranormal plane whereas B does not, "separation of church and state" will protect us against A but not B. This is what in my line of work we call a "security hole."

The general approach when you find a security hole is to (a) fix it, and (b) figure out what-all has crawled through the hole. This is going to require more than one blog post, but we might as well start on (a).

The only way (that I know of) to repair such a mental lacuna is to rebuild the language we use to think about the problem. As long as we have to change linguistic gears to compare paranormal and nonparanormal belief systems, we will have a vulnerability, because this irrelevant categorization constantly tempts us to craft overspecified tests which a mutating attacker can evade.

(For example, a rule that tells us to "keep Mithra out of the schools" is overspecified, unless you think Mithra in specific is the great danger to impressionable young minds. If we keep Mithra out of the schools but we say nothing about Baal, Baal will outcompete Mithra and our children will grow up as Baalist bots. Of course, if Baal is real and all the bad news we read in the paper is caused by our failure to sacrifice to him, this is ideal.)

So I [suggested](#) the terms "kernel" and "repeater," defining a kernel as a set of factual and ethical assertions about the real world, and a repeater as an institution that propagates such assertions. A religion is a kernel and a church is a repeater. But not all kernels are religions, nor repeaters churches.

Let's extend the "kernel" concept slightly, to also include metaphysical assertions. A metaphysical assertion is any statement that makes no factual or ethical claim (Hume's "is" or "ought") about the real world. This includes beliefs about paranormal entities, such as gods, but it also includes hermetic philosophical concepts such as those in Neoplatonism, Buddhism, Hegelism, etc, etc.

By definition, metaphysics does not directly affect reality. But since metaphysical assertions are often sources of conflict, and since they can motivate beliefs about the real world, it can be useful to track

them — as long as we remember that they are pathologically neutral, and eliminating metaphysics, while it may be desirable, cannot by itself eliminate factual errors or ethical disagreements.

Your kernel is the set of assertions you agree with. In theory, since no one can physically stop you from thinking for yourself, everyone could have a different kernel. But in practice, people are social animals, they get most of their assertions from others, and their kernels cluster.

Therefore, we can speak of "prototype" kernels, implying patterns of agreement across social groups. Methodism, for example, is a "prototype" under this definition. Not all Methodists agree on all assertions factual, ethical, or metaphysical, but there is clearly a general pattern of consensus.

These patterns correspond to the networks by which assertions are transmitted between individuals. Let's call a assertion in transmission a "packet." If you "accept" the packet, it means you agree with the assertion. If you "reject" it, you don't.

(There's another word that means "transmitted belief." I've made up my mind about this word: I don't like it. Mainly because it makes me sound like a dork. The mere auditory tone of the word, its mouth-feel, is awful, and its various declensions (such as "memeplex") are even worse. But "meme" also implies a sort of scientistic pretense that I find unwholesome, an attempt to intimidate the reader through the bogus authority of jargon. I prefer to borrow words from the computer business specifically because I think of programming as a trade, not a science.)

So a "repeater" is an institution which sends packets. A "church," in the Christian sense of the word, is a repeater because the point of going to church is that the minister, or other religious official, tells you what he or she is thinking — with the implication that you should share these thoughts. If you are a churchgoer and you find yourself frequently rejecting the church's packets, you're likely to switch churches.

We can call the people who generally accept the packets produced by some repeater its "clients." There is obviously a trust relationship from client to repeater. If you feel the need to evaluate every packet you receive from scratch, you have no need for a repeater.

Another example of a repeater is Wikipedia. I certainly don't trust Wikipedia absolutely, any more than I think most churchgoers trust their ministers absolutely. However, I do assign more credibility to articles produced by the Wikipedia editing process than to, say, some random blog.

Finally, to finish off this terminology-fest, we need to wade into the deep end of the swamp and come up with some way of defining "good" or "bad" assertions, and hence packets — so that we can actually turn our firewall back on.

Metaphysical assertions, again, are neither bad nor good, as they do not reflect on the real world. This leaves us with only factual and ethical assertions. Let's say that an assertion is good unless it's bad. This

leaves us with the problem of defining bad facts and bad ethics. The word "bad" is a little coarse for my taste, so let's say "toxic" instead.

A toxic factual assertion is a *misperception of reality*. For example, I think Holocaust revisionism is a toxic assertion, because the Holocaust strikes me as pretty well-documented. But I prefer to avoid the word "lie," because I don't and can't know the motives of those who repeat this (or any other) packet.

A toxic ethical assertion is an *internal inconsistency*. For example, in the American South from the 1830s to the 1860s, the idea developed that enslaving Africans was compatible with Christianity. This assertion would have struck even the grandparents of those who held it as toxic, because human equality has always been a central concern of Christianity. At the time of the Revolution those who accepted slavery generally thought of it as an inescapable evil. (Slavery is mentioned in the Bible, but the system of slavery in the classical world was very different from that practiced in the South, nor were Southerners unaware of this.) If Southerners had rejected Christianity in favor of some more Nietzschean ethical kernel, as at least some National Socialists did, they could have avoided inconsistency. Their ethics would not have been compatible with mine, or probably with yours, but they would not be "toxic" by this definition.

Toxic packets (which carry toxic assertions) are really not that hard to detect. Epistemology and ethics are not rocket science. Given that we live in the 21st century and we generally seem pretty good about getting our rockets into orbit, the persistence of toxic assertions is hard to explain.

But persist they do. The clients of Daily Kos and Free Republic — to name a couple of the Internet's more egregious repeaters — can't possibly both be right. Their ethics could differ without toxicity, but my guess is that if you polled readers of each for a statement of general ethical principles, what you would get on both sides would be pretty familiar, and probably more or less compatible with the broad tradition of Christianity. Certainly, either or both of the prototype kernels these sites offer must contain ethical inconsistencies and/or misperceptions of reality.

So toxic packets are flying all around us. Why?

This one is already getting long. But there's one way to classify repeaters that may provide one clue. We can divide repeaters into "disinterested" and "concerned" classes.

A disinterested repeater has no organizational motivation to repeat anything but what its clients want to hear. It has the same relationship to them as any business to its customers. If its clients want the truth, it will try to give them the truth. If they prefer nonsense and illusion, that's what they'll get. The success of a disinterested repeater depends only on the popularity of the prototype kernel it delivers its clients, not on the actual content.

A concerned repeater has some reason to care what its clients think. It has ulterior motives. The success of a concerned repeater will depend on the nature of the assertions it makes. There is some external

force, not related to the preferences of its clients, that rewards the repeater for propagating certain assertions and/or deters it from propagating others.

Which is better? And why? Hm...

Idealism is not great

Monday, May 14, 2007 at 10:14 PM

I have a standing offer of a bottle of Laphroaig for anyone who can supply me with an objective and nontrivial explanation of any distinction between the nouns *idealist* and *ideologue* as used in the contemporary English language.

Explaining that *conservative ideologues* are a dime a dozen, as are *progressive idealists,* but there are somewhat fewer *progressive ideologues* and it is almost impossible to find a *conservative idealist* even when you really need one, will not get you the whisky.

However, there's another meaning of *idealist* in English — a historical one. *Idealism* is actually a philosophical school. Or rather a number of philosophical schools. I find the term most useful as it pertains to the line from [Plato](#) to [Hegel](#) to [Emerson](#) to [Dewey](#). (It sometimes helps if you think of them as evil kung-fu masters.)

Let's capitalize the word Idealist in this sense, so that we know we don't just mean a nice person who thinks the world could be improved.

An Idealist is a person who believes that *universals exist independently*. Specifically, in the modern sense, your Idealist believes in concepts such as *Democracy*, the *Environment*, *Peace*, *Freedom*, *Human Rights*, *Equality*, *Justice*, etc, etc.

What do these concepts have in common? One, they have universally positive associations. In fact they have no meaning without these associations. A statement such as "the *Environment* is evil" or "we must work together against the *Environment*" is simply not well-formed. It is the equivalent of Chomsky's "colorful green ideas sleep furiously."

Two, they are impossible to define precisely. It's fairly clear that they have no meaning at all.

For example, John Rawls wrote a whole book called [A Theory Of Justice](#) which purports to be a rigorous rational derivation of the New Deal regime. The fact that this work appeared in the 1970s, whereas the coup it exists to excuse occurred in the 1930s, should clue you in to the difficulty of Rawls' masterful performance. Of course, the *Justice* that Rawls so elaborately elucidates has nothing at all to do with the original English meaning of the word *justice* or its Latin basis, that is, the accurate application of the law. Rawls' ideal is probably best given in pre-Rawlsian English as *Righteousness*.

But it would be rather hard to call a book *A Theory Of Righteousness* without provoking at least a snicker or two. We all know there is no objective definition of *Righteousness*. And in fact, if anyone can go

through the Federal Register with a red pen and explain which of these wonderful regulations are and are not *Just*, according to Rawls' "theory," he or she may earn that bottle of Laphroaig after all. (Just a page or two will do — to demonstrate the method.)

The case of the *Environment* is similar. We all know sort of what the *Environment* is supposed to be. But as with *Justice*, we don't have anything like a precise, objectively applicable rule for defining whether some action is *good* or *bad* for the *Environment*. For example, if we sell Golden Gate Park to Halliburton, as a combination condo subdivision and oil-services theme park, and give the resulting ninety billion dollars to the Wilderness Society so they can buy the entire island of Borneo and preserve it as orangutan habitat forever, is this *good* or *bad* for the *Environment*? Discuss.

This bizarre system of thought, which I hear may actually earn a mention in the DSM-V, is also entirely incapable of advising us on what to do when these ideals *conflict*. For example, suppose some action improves the *Environment*, but diminishes *Justice*? Or vice versa? Is this a good action, or a bad action? Discuss.

Idealists also recognize what might be called *anti-ideals*. These are just like the above ideals, except that instead of being good, they are actually bad. They have names like *Violence, Inequality, Racism*, and so on. One interesting quirk of Idealistic thinking, is that while ideals are typically used only as objects in the strange sentences these people form — such as "we must preserve the *Environment*" — the anti-ideals can be subjects, such as "*Violence* killed thirteen people in Iraq on Sunday." Apparently this sort of universal not only exists independently, but buys explosives and plants them in dead goats — a remarkable feat for any concept.

A little while ago I explained that *religion*, if we define it as a system of belief involving anthropomorphic paranormal entities, cannot directly affect reality. A belief about the paranormal world can be the ultimate motivation for an action in the real world, but it cannot be the proximate motivation for an action in the real world.

A long string of recent books, by very distinguished thinkers such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett, have informed us that *religion* is, basically, evil. That is, that the optimal level of *religion* in society is like the optimal level of mercury in your milk: zero. Since I have no beliefs about the paranormal plane myself, I am naturally quite sympathetic to these volumes.

However, consider the form of such a book. Typically it is a list of great historical crimes, together with explanations of how *religion* was the ultimate cause of such and such a crime.

Naturally after reading such a book, one feels slightly jaundiced toward *religion*. But of course an argument of this sort, even if all of its history is perfectly correct (which it usually is), goes nowhere at all toward convincing any reasonable person that *religion* is some unique peril.

For example, one could assemble a similar book consisting entirely of crimes committed by Jews. Or

Norwegians, or Inuit, or Buddhists, or brown-haired people, or any nontrivial set of humans past and present. Even if such a text made no connection at all between the Inuit upbringing of the criminals it rightly condemned, and the fact that their victims were so often found with gaping harpoon wounds, the reader would probably infer one, and come to the conclusion that these Inuit criminals should have their children confiscated and sent to special educational centers where they learn only love for the walrus and for the whale.

The inductive method, in other words, is simply not applicable to the task of discovering essential criminality in philosophies or traditions.

But since philosophies and traditions, whatever their criminal or non-criminal nature, do seem to have a suspicious involvement in the tremendous mayhem of history, perhaps it's worth looking around for another culprit.

My hypothesis, which any brave commenter is welcome to take a whack at, is that whether or not *religion* is the ultimate cause, the proximate cause of mayhem is generally Idealism. That is, when there is a problem with *religion*, in general the way the problem happens is that *religion* leads to Idealism, and Idealism leads to mayhem.

But since Idealism is perfectly capable of existing without *religion* — since, for example, most of your recent mayhem has been the result of nontheistic Idealist movements such as National Socialism and Marxist-Leninism — perhaps Messrs. Dawkins, Hitchens, etc, with all due respect, are chasing the tail and ignoring the dog.

In fact, if the type of Idealism that is caused by *religion* is actually milder and less murderous than the nontheistic variants — a hypothesis that's not at all improbable, considering modern history — attenuating *religion* may actually *promote* mayhem.

(Obviously this is a desperate plea for Andrew Sullivan to link to me again.)

Perhaps this week we'll look a little more closely at some of these murderous Idealisms...

Five ways to classify belief systems

Monday, May 28, 2007 at 8:47 PM

I use the word *kernel* to mean "belief system." Kernels, like Gaul, are divided into three parts: assertions about the real world (Hume's "is"), moral judgments about the real world (Hume's "ought"), and paranormal or other metaphysical propositions (such as David Stove's wonderful ruminations on the [number 3](#)).

Everyone, no matter how smart or stupid, has exactly one kernel. However, kernels are not assigned randomly, as if in some weird Buddhist boot process. For example, your kernel is likely to show similarities to that of your parents, friends, teachers, karate masters, favorite anchormen, etc, etc.

Let's call a kernel pattern which many people share a *prototype.* Methodism, environmentalism, firearms practice, snake handling and Burning Man attendance are all prototypes. While there are few Methodist environmentalists who are also snake-handling marksmen and never miss a burn, various subcombinations are not uncommon.

In general we are most interested in *complete* prototypes, that is, kernel patterns that are broad enough to serve as identities. It is common to describe someone as "a Methodist," or (not quite in the same way) as "an environmentalist." People who match the other prototypes above may use nouns for themselves, but they're must less likely to be described or introduced as such. An incomplete prototype simply says less about you. For example, many snake handlers are also committed peace activists who drive Range Rovers and shop at Pottery Barn.

Two common examples of a complete prototype are *religions*, which involve convictions about one or more anthropomorphic paranormal entities, and *idealisms*, which involve convictions about one or more undefined universals, or *ideals*.

Many people consider the distinction between religion and idealism important and/or interesting, but here at UR we don't much care for it, since only metaphysical propositions can distinguish the two. You can go from religion to idealism and back simply by adding and subtracting gods, angels, demons, saints, ghosts, etc. I personally have slain many ghosts and quite a few demons, and I once kidnapped an angel and forced her at swordpoint to lead me to the altar of Thoth, where I sacrificed her for 20,000 experience points, permanent immunity to fire, and an alignment change to chaotic evil. However, this was not in real life. And even in D&D, I've never had the misfortune to encounter a god.

Therefore, we'll just use the word *prototype* to mean either religion or idealism. Of course one can study either forever. In fact, most scholars in history have spent most of their time investigating the twisty little passages, all alike, of one single prototype. However, since here at UR we are generalists, not Irish

monks, Talmudic scribes or Koranic talibs, we will try and work a little more broadly.

Before you can really think about prototypes, you have to be able to name and classify them. One obvious analogy is the study of languages, which are transmitted from person to person in a vaguely similar way. Prototype transmission really has nothing in common with language transmission, but the metaproblems are the same: what does it mean to say, "X descends from Y?" Is a classification tree a tree, or a directed acyclic graph? Is variation continuous, or discrete? Etc, etc, etc.

Probably readers can add a few, but I can think of five ways to classify prototypes: *nominalist*, *typological*, *morphological*, *cladistic*, and *adaptive*.

As our example for each, let's use the movement generally known as the [Enlightenment](). There is no noun for people whose kernels match the Enlightenment prototype, but there should be, because this noun arguably applies to almost everyone on earth. Let's call these suspicious characters *Luminists*. Their sinister views can be described as *Luminism*.

A *nominalist* classification simply accepts the prototype's classification of itself. Luminists, for example, believe there is no such thing as Luminism. (This is very common.) Rather, they are simply people who have seen the light of reason. It just so happened that they all saw more or less the same light at more or less the same time. But since by definition there's only one such thing as reason, this explanation is not inherently implausible.

A *typological* classification distinguishes prototypes according to specific features. For example, when you distinguish between religions and idealisms — as between Christianity and Luminism — you are performing an act of typology. The flaws in this approach can be seen by the fact that a typological classification of languages tells us Old Saxon is a dialect of Early Apache, since they both have arbitrary word order and long, incomprehensible sentences. Meanwhile, a vampire bat is a grinning, hairy owl, IHOP and Domino's both serve round food, Congress is considering a new O visa for ostriches, Burmese tribeswomen and other long-necked bipeds, and Luminism is a kind of Confucian Sufi-Buddhism.

A *morphological* classification is like a typological classification with a clue. It attempts to construct a historical descent tree by looking at multiple points of similarity. Morphological classification tells us that Luminism is actually a sect of Christianity, because Luminists share a wide range of kernel features with many Christians, and there are even intermediate forms which can reasonably be described as Christian Luminists or Luminist Christians.

A *cladistic* classification also produces a historical descent tree, but it uses a completely different method. Cladistic classification ignores actual beliefs and looks only at patterns of conversion. It asks: if you are a Luminist and your parents were not Luminists, what were they? Since the answer is usually (if not always) "Christian," in this case cladistics produces the same result as morphology For obvious reasons, this is often so.

Besides the usual trees, both morphological and cladistic methods can also produce graph structure, that is, patterns of combination or *syncretism*. For example, both methods identify Hellenistic and Jewish roots for Christianity, with the cladistic method adding various Roman cults such as those of Augustus, Sol Invictus, and Mithra.

An *adaptive* classification is not interested at all in descent. Rather, it focuses on how and why the prototype *succeeds*. For example, Luminism, Christianity, Sol Invictus and Islam are all prototypes that succeeded (at one time or another) by virtue of being an *official prototype*, that is, by explaining the legitimacy of a government — helping to organize its supporters, strike fear into the hearts of its enemies, brainwash its dutiful taxpaying serfs, etc, etc, etc. But with the exception of the third, all the above have also done just fine in an unofficial capacity, so this *official selection* is not a complete explanation of their success.

Of course, I personally find the last three classification methods the most compelling, with my favorites being the morphological and adaptive methods. But words are just words, and anyone can look at these phenomena any way they like. And if you can suggest any additions to the list, the comments section is, as usual, open.

Understanding racial idealism

Sunday, May 20, 2007 at 11:02 AM

Lately I've been making the case that the modern world has largely replaced "religion," defined as the veneration of paranormal beings, with idealism, defined as the veneration of mysterious universal principles.

While I am not a paranormalist, I see this change as almost entirely pernicious. Gods, goddesses, saints and such tend to come with holy books and sacred myths. So religions, while they do of course change, have a certain stability — think of them as DNA viruses. Idealisms are more like RNA viruses. Idealists are constantly creating new universals and mutating the existing ones, often in the weirdest and most surprising ways.

In my last post on the subject I referred to our present official idealism as, simply, Idealism. But of course we have a specific set of ideals that we venerate — *Democracy*, *Equality*, and so on. (I think italicizing these words is a good way to underscore their murky, ill-defined nature.)

So it's probably best to pick a specific name for this faith. When naming other peoples' beliefs — which is often necessary, as people tend to believe their beliefs are simply the truth — it's a good idea to pick words that they consider complimentary, certainly not pejorative. I think a good name in this spirit is *Progressive Idealism*. Certainly it's hard to imagine any officer of the Polygon taking umbrage at the epithet "progressive idealist."

Okay. So the planet is a one-party state ruled by the PIs. Progressive Idealism is of course the idealism of the Allies of World War II, and the faith of today's Brahmin caste. What we know as politics is mere squabbling between Progressive-Idealist factions. Even Communism is probably best understood as a PI splinter group. Like all good parties the Progressive Idealists have a color, and that color is gray. There are no red states or blue states. There are only pinkish and bluish grays. Moreover, Progressive Idealism is a nontheistic branch of Christianity, specifically its Unitarian (American) and Nonconformist (British) sects, both of course dating back to the Puritans, who were the first to construct the integrated political, educational and religious system whose much-improved descendant now holds Planet Three in its icy, inexorable grip.

So what's the good news?

The good news is that we actually could have done a lot worse. Progressive Idealism was by no means the only idealism contending for power in the last century.

Perhaps it's just me, but I have trouble seeing how anyone can not be fascinated by the Third Reich.

National Socialism developed in the most civilized country in the world, and at least before the war its popularity there was overwhelming. And its failure to dominate the planet, or at least Europe, was the result of a few military mistakes that easily could have gone the other way.

I find it extremely easy, in fact, to imagine an alternate Nazi 2007. I don't even imagine it as a Gestapo-dominated paranoid hell. Much of our historical memory of the Third Reich is, quite understandably, a memory of wartime Nazism. But if the war had gone the other way, this would be a memory of the wartime Allies, hardly a pretty picture either. Hitlerism no doubt would have moderated over time, as Stalinism and Maoism did.

For me the best way to understand National Socialism is, again, as a kind of Idealism. Instead of Progressive ideals such as *Democracy*, *Equality*, and *Humanity*, the Nazis venerated ideals such as *Courage*, *Loyalty*, and *Aryanity* (if we can use the word).

One interesting case of an ideal shared by both the 1930s Nazis and the 2007 Progressives is the *Environment*. Nazi environmentalism was definitely a different thing from ours, but the family resemblance is clear, and although environmentalism was hardly the most important part of the Nazi program it perhaps provides a window into their worldview.

A name for Nazi idealism that's independent of the specific organization might be *Aryanism*. The "Aryan race" is certainly an Ideal by my definition — an undefinable universal — because human biodiversity is clinal. And in fact the Nazis struggled mightily for a definition of "Aryan" that made any sense at all, without success. Nor, even if Nazi anthropology somehow could be persuaded to cohere, is there any way to derive such concepts as "Aryan" or "German" science or art from the whole weird mirage.

For me, the simplest way to understand the Nazi conscience is to see that Germans in the Third Reich were concerned about the *Volk* in almost exactly the same way their grandchildren are concerned about the *Environment*. Both Aryanism and Environmentalism have deep roots in the human instinct for cleanliness and purity. Once the ideal of the *Deutsche Volk* as a universal coheres in your mind, it's very easy to see how important it is to work for the future of the *Volk*, expel contaminants, and so on.

Aryanism is also more closely related to *Equality* than most of us would like to admit. German society before World War I was very hierarchical and aristocratic, at least by today's standard. The alliance of Hindenburg and Hitler, the field marshal and the corporal, was something new. Nazism was a lower-middle-class movement, Vaisya to the core. It certainly did not believe that all humans were equal. But it did believe that all *Germans* were equal. This was a revolutionary idea, and it gave Nazism quite a bit of its demonic energy.

In our Progressive-Idealist world, Aryanism is about as unfashionable as it gets. The only people who openly espouse it are criminal gangs. So it's very difficult to imagine a civilized society in which Aryanism is fashionable, exactly as Environmentalism is in our world. But of course, in 1930s Germany, so it was.

This is why Nazism still strikes us with a special horror, unlike Communism, despite the fact that Communism killed far more people. It is simply more alien and more unfashionable. Ultimately, Communism was if not a branch a close relative of Progressive Idealism, an estranged family member, misguided but "well-intentioned." Nazism was a true enemy, defined very much as a reaction to the Progressive victory of the Great War.

It's also important to remember that the mass murder of the Jews was not, by any means, a mainstream element of 1930s Aryanism. The peacetime Nazi program was to expel them, confiscating their property, which was thought in the usual undefined way to have been unfairly cheated from the German people. Therefore, the fact that most Germans supported the Nazis does not make them in any way complicit in the Holocaust (and still less their descendants). The Holocaust, a secret military operation, was the act of the people who planned and executed it.

Is it so impossible to imagine Environmentalism being used as the basis for mass murder? Our ideals of *Humanity* and the *Environment* coexist uneasily, to say the least. Today's PIs have no trouble seeing themselves as both humanist and environmentalist. There is no need for this to make any sense — Idealism never has to make sense. But perhaps future historians will regard it as a bizarre and inexplicable juxtaposition.