personal-essays

# Critique of GNU Philosophy

**tl;dr i can agree with parts of it but it seems pretty absolute in its values**

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## Introduction

I'd like to preface this with the fact that I'm not anti-FOSS or anti-open source. I myself use Linux and most of my utilities are open source, because I enjoy using them personally. I can definitely agree with **parts** of the GNU manifesto, but some of the conclusions that they arrive from their claims are a bit silly.

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## What is the GNU Philosophy?

As defined by the Free Software Foundation:

> "Free software" means software **that respects users' freedom and community**. Roughly, it means that **the users have the freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software**. Thus, "free software" is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, y**ou should think of "free" as in "free speech," not as in "free beer"**. We sometimes call it "libre software," borrowing the French or Spanish word for "free" as in freedom, to show we do not mean the software is gratis.
>
> You may have paid money to get copies of a free program, or you may have obtained copies at no charge. But regardless of how you got your copies, **you always have the freedom to copy and change the software, even to sell copies**.

This isn't bad so far, but then we get into the essential three freedoms that make software "free".

> The freedom to study how the program works, and change it so it does your computing as you wish (freedom 1). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

> The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help others (freedom 2).

> The freedom to distribute copies of your modified versions to others (freedom 3). By doing this you can give the whole community a chance to benefit from your changes. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

## Freedom 1

Access to the source code is **absolutely not a precondition to understand how a software works**, people have made ROM hacks of so many games back then and still do of games that are not open source, such as Mario 64 and Pokemon. This is just due to disassembly, which source code is not required for!

## Freedom 2

Nothing stopping me from sharing Google Chrome.exe with my friend, **despite being proprietary software**, I can share it just fine!

## Freedom 3

Just like Freedom 1, it's not a precondition due to decompilation, you may say "It's too hard to decompile!", but so is programming in general, and if you give someone open-source software and tell him to modify it, he won't be able to due to lack of coding knowledge.

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## The Problem

> A program is free software if it gives users adequately all of these freedoms. Otherwise, it is nonfree. While we can distinguish various nonfree distribution schemes in terms of how far they fall short of being free, **we consider them all equally unethical**.

This just seems like a very pseud and black-and-white way of thinking about the ethics of FOSS. Is a proprietary
 software that doesn't spy on you more unethical than a open source software that does spy on you? If you don't apply an arbitrary license (that has no actual enforcement, but we'll get into that later), to a software, that makes you just as ethical as proprietary software.

## Licensing (or lack-thereof)

**The license is a lie**, it's actual enforcement amounts to "don't do it and I might say some naughty things to you". We've probably violated EULAs of some video games, but that's not illegal.

To quote Lawrence Rosen:

> A third problem with bare licenses is **that they may be revocable by the licensor**. Specifically, a license not coupled with an interest may be revoked.
> Unless the courts allow us to apply these contract law principles to a license, **we are faced with a bare license that is revocable**.
>
> For now, I simply point out that the **GPL licensors are in essentially the same situation as other open source licensors who cannot prove offer, acceptance, or consideration. There is no contract**.

This was actually put to the test when the author of the **GPL licensed** text-mode casino game "GPC-Slots 2" had rescinded the license from the "Geek feminist" collective.

Even the Free Software Foundation agrees with this:

> In order to make sure that all of our copyrights can meet the recordkeeping and other requirements of registration, and in order to be able to enforce the GPL most effectively, FSF requires that each author of code incorporated in FSF projects provide a copyright assignment, and, where appropriate, a disclaimer of any work-for-hire ownership claims by the programmer's employer.

So, since there is no actual value attached to a license, why is it unethical for a software to not be GPL licensed? I'd be a bit more sympathetic to this point, if it were legally enforced, but it isn't.

## Conclusion

I have several problems with the **axiomatic statements of GNU philosophy** (i.e "you need to have the source to understand the program") and saying **that proprietary software is always immoral no matter what is a childish view in my opinion.** Open source software is always good and proprietary software is always bad, even though there are definitely **open source software that are malicious.** Even if the open source software may spy on you, **it's still good guys, because um…. it's open source!** This is simply a **fallacy of composition: Openness is good, therefore all open source software is good.**

There's also the **problem of comparing the quality of certain software**, let's say we get a new GNU user! He will try to get rid of all the disgusting nonfree software on his computer. He will care too much about licensing and whether it's on GitHub instead of the actual quality of the software. For example, whether you like it or not, **Photoshop is currently the industry standard** (note: i don't personally like photoshop i use krita) when it comes to graphic design and photo editing, despite this, other GNUers will tell him "nah just install gimp!", despite the fact that Photoshop is the industrial standard and has more features than GIMP.

Is free software bad? **Of course not**, I'm glad when people open-source their software, but that does not necessarily **mean the software becomes better. If I were to get into the industry,** I'd use Photoshop as opposed to Krita**.**