

MORALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

THE ASCENT OF BEAUTIFUL AND PUNITIVE SOULS

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I begin a philosophical reflection concerning moralism on social media platforms. I am interested in explaining the negative consequences for critical debate and morality itself. To do so, I describe how this moralistic trend emerged in recent years, replacing postmodernism, and then I explain its characteristics, namely the culture of victimhood, permanent outrage and cancel culture, and the rejection of institutions. Finally, I argue that this moralism, beyond publicly displaying the “beauty of the soul” of its proponents, does not contribute to achieving genuine social justice, since, ultimately, moralism ends up discrediting morality.

Keywords: moralism, social media, cancel culture, woke, morality

I. Introduction

A sense of immaculate, yet punitive and complacent moral sensitivity prevails on social media platforms; a sense that grants social prestige and boosts one’s own ego. The intensity, the duty, and even the satisfaction of exercising it publicly give the feeling of changing the world’s injustices. But it is also a form of moral empowerment that seeks to suppress plurality of opinion, critical thinking and, ultimately, brings morality into discredit. Indeed, this moral sensitivity, which can be seen by accessing any social network, is often called moralism. Moralism, through its various manifestations, can have a number of consequences: the cancelling of certain books, actors, musicians or films; the disdain of certain theories or social theorists; and the rejection of basic institutions of the rule of law, such as due process. All these manifestations, claimed from the supposed moral superiority of a certain discourse or group, create an unbreakable moral shield. Thus, in the name of what is right or good, it becomes possible to do evil or harm others.

If the spectre of populism is currently haunting the world², I would say that behind it there is often another spectre lurking: moralism. What used to be a matter of aesthetic pleasure, musical taste or an epistemological issue is now a matter of morality. We see this moralistic trend in new discussions on issues that are equally

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² M La Torre, ‘Populism as a Spectre and an Unmanageable Concept’ in I van der Geest, H Jansen, and B van Klink (Eds.), *Vox Populi. Populism as a Rhetorical and Democratic Challenge* (Cheltenham: Edgar Elgar Publishing 2020) 29–42.

important and inconsequential: political debates often end with a moral condemnation of the other side. Long-time friends end up “permanently estranged because of one of those fleeting indignations”³. Appealing to victimhood is the best weapon, because “the victim is always right”⁴. In sum, “moralism is our religion, and hypermoralism is its theology”⁵.

In one way or another, this renewal of moralistic discourse on social media, which has nothing to do with the justification of rational moral standards, is criticized in a wide variety of Western academic circles. But few voices publicly confront moralism. There is a fear of being lynched in the new virtual public sphere. No one wants to be accused of being an insensitive victimizer. The price to pay is high: being lynched, cancelled, immoralized. My recent work on punitive populism⁶ led me to analyze this new form of moralism in more detail, for punitive culture has been strengthened by this cultural phenomenon. For this reason, in this essay I aim to explain its origin and consequences. This is a first step toward minimizing its effects and, at the same time, saving morality from moralism.

II. How the New Moralism arrived

In various academic and even personal conversations, we regularly hear that we should stop moralising others, because it is one thing to offer moral criticism and quite another to offer moralistic criticism. While the nature and inclusion of morality in some institutions is debatable, for example in the philosophy of law,⁷ there is general agreement that the concept of moralism has a “negative characteristic of statements or persons. Those who use the word ‘moralism’ in this way attribute a specific moral flaw to persons or statements”⁸. However, in political debates and social media, it is clear that the most effective accusations are those with a moralistic tone. Immoralizing others is perhaps the most effective weapon for refuting their arguments. The same can be said of other expressions such as “cancel culture” or the adjective “woke”: they can be criticised academically, but they undoubtedly have power in the digital public sphere. But what is moralism, and how does it relate to “cancel culture” to arise and amplify on social media? A minimal but sufficient conceptualisation of moralism becomes necessary. According to John Kekes:

Moralism is the misguided tendency to exaggerate the moral importance of what has little or none. Led by this misplaced emphasis, moralists arrogate to themselves a spurious authority to judge

³ G Bronner, *Apocalipsis cognitivo. Cómo nos manipulan el cerebro en la era digital* (Barcelona: Paidós 2022) 105

⁴ F Bosco, *A vítima tem sempre razão? Lutas identitárias e o novo espaço público brasileiro* (São Paulo: Todavia 2022) 17.

⁵ A Grau, *Hypermoral: Die neue Lust an der Empörung* (München: Claudius 2021) 57.

⁶ A Nava, *Populismo punitivo. Crítica del discurso penal moderno* (Tlalpan: INACIPE 2021); Id., *Populismo punitivo. Crítica del discurso penal* (Rome Castelvechi 2024); Id., ‘Toward the critique of punitive populism’ (2025) 19(19) *Problema. Anuario De Filosofía Y Teoría Del Derecho*, e19531. <https://doi.org/10.22201/ijj.24487937e.2025.19.19531>.

⁷ The relation between law and morality occupies a central place in the philosophy of law, whether to deny their connection (J Raz, *The Authority of Law: Essays on Law and Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979)) or to recognise their necessary connection (R Alexy, *The Argument From Injustice – A Reply To Legal Positivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002)). Meanwhile, the issue of legal moralism has been the subject of important reflections, such as those of the renowned British legal philosopher H. L. A. Hart on the imposition and criticism of moralism (the “Hart-Devlin debate”) in the context of sexual morality (HLA Hart, *Law, Liberty and Morality* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press 1963)). However, for the purposes of this essay, I will go beyond my usual reflections on legal philosophy.

⁸ M Scheftzyk, *Der Moralismusvorwurf als Verkennungs und Übermaßkritik* in C Neuhäuser & C Seidel (Eds.), *Kritik des Moralismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2020) 153.

others. They cultivate a hyperactive sensitivity that finds serious moral problems behind ordinary, customary practices, and condemn those who resist their bullying for colluding in immorality. They pontificate about how we should live, but their inflated claims actually give morality a bad name⁹.

This spurious attitude, which gives morality a bad name, has recently been amplified by the use of social media. Regardless of whether moralism is parallel to morality, the first twenty years of the 21st century, writes Gérald Bronner in his splendid book on brain manipulation in the digital age, “have brought about massive deregulation of a cognitive market that we can also call the *market of ideas*”¹⁰. This deregulation has led to situations such as *gatekeepers*, who previously editorialized to the world, now being questioned by anyone with a social media account, who “may even claim to have a larger audience than the latter”¹¹. This horizontally-oriented virtual communication may, on the surface, have its advantages, but it also has its downsides.

During the second half of the 2000s, social media emerged in a context where postmodern philosophy still dominated the social sciences. According to this philosophical movement, nothing can be rationally justified, for everyone has their own truth or criteria for correctness: “*Es ist alles subjektiv*”¹². In short, the famous philosophical and cautionary discourse from Hideo Kojima’s video game *Metal Gear Solid 2*, “no one is invalidated, but no one is right”,¹³ summed up the emergence of social media and its relation with the still-prevailing postmodern thought. But in recent decades, moral thinking evolved, and so did the way we express our emotions on social media.

Unjust acts happen every day, but we rarely hear about them. Even if these events occur nearby, we probably won’t hear about them. But what used to remain in the private sphere or as an isolated incident soon became visible. The ability to post and record news on social media contributed to the exposure of these acts. Everyday injustices, both local and global, soon began to go viral on social media. Private or secret vices became public. What once went unnoticed was exposed. And what was exposed, outraged us. And what outraged us was shared by other people, some known and some unknown, but united by the same causes. Thus, recognition, as a “vital human need”¹⁴, found a new space in which to be demanded. In the North American context, two social movements gained particular notoriety and subsequently spread to other cultural contexts. Both movements, represented by the hashtag symbol (#), are Black Lives Matter (BLM) and MeToo.

Since its inception in 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement has aimed to highlight the discrimination, police violence and racial inequality suffered by black people. Constant incidents of police brutality, many of them exposed on social media, led to mass protests and awareness campaigns about historical inequalities

⁹ J Kekes, *The Nature of Philosophical Problems. Their Causes and Implications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014) 101.

¹⁰ G Bronner, *Apocalipsis cognitivo. Cómo nos manipulan el cerebro en la era digital* (n 3) 14

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² F Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe 12: Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1999) 60

¹³ The whole discourse of this game, released in 2001, reads, “The untested truths spun by different interests continue to churn and accumulate in the sandbox of political correctness and value systems. Everyone withdraws into their own small gated community, afraid of a larger forum. They stay inside their little ponds, leaking whatever ‘truth’ suits them into the growing cesspool of society at large. The different cardinal truths neither clash nor mesh. No one is invalidated, but nobody is right.” For more information on this, see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2019/11/08/we-are-living-hideo-kojimas-dystopian-nightmare-can-he-save-us/>

¹⁴ C Taylor, ‘The politics of Recognition’ in A Gutmann (Ed.) *Multiculturalism and ‘The Politics of Recognition’* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992) 26.

towards black people. Similarly, starting in 2016, the MeToo campaign against sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and rape culture became popular on social media, seeking to highlight the testimonies of many famous women who were victims of powerful men. Although the initial focus was on film producer Harvey Weinstein, allegations made by famous women spread against men in other industries. This led to the empowerment of women who had suffered sexual harassment and assault in their workplaces. With the allegations centred on two historically vulnerable groups, social media soon shifted towards a “Call-Out Culture”. The generations born at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st were not indifferent to these movements: they *woke up*.

To say that society “woke up” has several meanings: on the one hand, there was a growing awareness of social inequalities. Violence against women and black people became causes of outrage. On the other hand, in the search for safe spaces, this “Call-Out Culture” spread to new horizons, such as universities and even private communications. Some social media platforms such as X or Facebook were not indifferent to the outrage of the “woke” movement. On social networks such as Facebook, outrage can be expressed. As William Davies points out¹⁵, by expressing our feelings through emojis, we provide artificial intelligence with accurate data through which advertisements can be sold. The use of emojis has enabled several things. First, it allows us to express our emotions. Whether genuine or not, the diversity of social reactions encompasses most of our emotions. Secondly, seeing other people’s expressions allows us to make a moral assessment of which social cause is being defended or attacked. Finally, the visibility of our emotions allows us to show a sense of identity to a group. This allows us to recognise our friends in a moral cause, as well as our enemies. The others. The moral monsters.

Zamyatin’s provocative imagination envisioned a dystopia in which citizens lived in almost panoptic glass cages where their guardians could see all their actions in his novel *We*. Nothing remained private; it was a dystopia of complete visibility. Now, social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok enable us to see people’s moments of fun, travel and hobbies, while other digital platforms such as X and Facebook also enable us to see where others stand morally. In the face of such horizontal surveillance, not taking a moral stance is not an option.

Postmodern philosophy, which for years dominated the field of social sciences due to its opposition to the grand narratives of reason and Enlightenment ideals, began to fade in the face of the rise of the woke movement and the emergence of outrage on social media. Everything that seemed to have the same value was questioned by internet users, who, in search of identification with a digital tribe, began to doubt “the postmodern condition”¹⁶. Moral relativism, in the face of extreme injustices, ceased to have explanatory value. Postmodern explanations lost their meaning in the eyes of the new generations who became “woke”. Anti-racist, classist, misogynistic and LGBTQ+ rights discourses achieved what Habermas failed to achieve with his critic to postmodern philosophy¹⁷: they banished postmodernism in spectacular fashion. Without it being part of their agenda, the “digital warriors” cancelled postmodern thinking. Instead, they spawned a form of moralistic thinking that calls for the cancellation or lynching of anyone who is not part of their identity politics.

¹⁵ W Davies, *Nervous States: How Feeling took over the world* (London: Jonathan Cape 2018)

¹⁶ J-F Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984)

¹⁷ J Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1987)

III. The Manifestations of the New Digital Moralism

I agree with Markus Gabriel that the early 21st century has shown significant moral progress with the rejection of slavery, misogyny, racism, classism, and other forms of disregard for human dignity¹⁸. Today, more than ever, the younger generations are aware that there are things that should not be done to others. That is why they are often referred to as the “awakened” generation. But what did society awaken from? From the dream of moral relativism? From the nightmare of not making our voice heard by others? Postmodern philosophy, faced with the rise of indignation on social media, became insufficient to provide a foundation for this moral awakening. If the motto of postmodernism, as I said before, was to say that “no one is invalidated, but no one is right”, now the motto would be, “Everyone else is wrong. I am right”. And this is where things, morally speaking, get ugly.

If “woke” is no longer a morally acceptable label, it is because it has reached reprehensible punitive extremes. In Germany, for example, works criticising moralism have recently been published, understood as a “hypermoral”¹⁹ of the outraged or a “moral spectacle”²⁰ that does not make the world a better place. Meanwhile, in the English-speaking world, the tribalist claims of woke culture, opposed to universalism, are being questioned²¹. Cancel culture, spawned by wokeism, with its hypermoralistic and punitive pretensions, attacks the moral relativism that at one time served as a justification for racism, classism, misogyny, and other discourses that undermined human dignity. At the same time, by virtue of its attitude of revenge, it endangers critical thinking, which, paradoxically, supported the moral awakening of new generations. Thus, the child of critical thinking is thrown out with the relativistic bathwater.

If these hypermoral manifestations are perceived academically as negative, how is it that they have spread so widely throughout society? Social media has played an important role in establishing moralism as the new secular religion. Equally important are the elements with which moralism operates its cancel culture logic, namely victimhood, punitive outrage, and the rejection of institutions and rationality. These elements deserve closer analysis.

Moralism and victimhood. There is no moralism without a victim. If the victim is the hero of our time²², then moralism elevates them to its epicentre. There is now a “culture of victimhood”²³ that manifests itself in almost all areas of life: “microaggressions”, “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings” are part of today’s language. What once sounded like private distress is now a public honourable praise: seeing influencers or famous people talk about their vulnerability, family traumas, or healing therapies can be comforting to those who never imagined that they too had been victims of something. If they were victims, then “Me too”.

In the *Phänomenologie des Geistes (The Phenomenology of Spirit)*, Hegel introduces and elaborates his conception of the “Schöne Seele”, the “beautiful soul”. For Hegel, this figure of the Spirit, in which self-consciousness

¹⁸ M Gabriel, *Moralischer Fortschritt in Dunklen Zeiten. Universale Werte für das 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Ullstein 2020) 265–342.

¹⁹ A Grau, *Hypermoral: Die neue Lust an der Empörung* (n 5).

²⁰ P Hübl, *Moralspektakel. Wie die richtige Haltung zum Statussymbol wurde und warum das die Welt nicht besser macht* (Berlin: Siedler 2024)

²¹ S Neiman, *Left is Not Woke* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2023); U Özkirimli, *Cancelled: The Left Way Back from Woke* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2023); D Rieff, *Desire and Fate* (New York: Columbia University Press 2025)

²² D Giglioli, *Critica della vittima. Un esperimento con l’etica* (Milan: Nottetempo 2014) 9.

²³ B Campbell and J Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture. Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2018)

and consciousness of duty have the same content, represents the moralist for whom words speak louder than his actions, insofar as the beautiful soul does not externalise its interiority because it considers this action to be irrelevant. Its only activity is to challenge other interpretations of moral law. In other words, it rejects the relevance of arguments that contradict its own perspective. For Hegel, by being obsessed with purity, this “beautiful soul, being conscious of this contradiction in its unreconciled immediacy, is unhinged, disordered, and runs to madness, wastes itself in yearning, and pines away in consumption”²⁴.

This madness, to which the beautiful soul is driven, now presents itself as a “self-empowerment” to lynch opposing opinions, because for the modern beautiful soul the important thing is to appear moral in virtual space and shut yourself away in your echo chamber. Anyone who interacts in virtual space must be morally virtuous. There is no more dignified way to empower yourself as a beautiful and punitive soul than to be a victim or assert yourself as a potential or collateral victim, or, ultimately, as a defender of victims. That is, a social media account is enough to show yourself as a beautiful soul.

Beautiful souls are not only those who have the pure status of victims. They are also those who, in support of victims, show their outrage on social media, for “the victim is always right”. A beautiful soul signs petitions on change.org, shares news articles or posts that confirm their biases (while disapproving of news articles or posts from those with opposing beliefs) but, above all, expresses outrage, cancels or punishes. Beautiful souls become punitive souls. Therefore, it is not surprising that any trivial discussion on social media becomes “an occasion for people to exhibit their moral intransigence and the beauty of their soul”²⁵. In social media the beauty of the soul is now demonstrated by cancelling or lynching someone.

Moralism and outrage. Prior to the plethora of works on moralism or hypermoralism, conservative German philosophers such as Arnold Gehlen and Hermann Lübbe analyzed this phenomenon. Gehlen used the concept of “hypermorality” to refer to the tendency to absolutize ethics in times of instability, noting, among other things, how in this “movement toward pure moral extremes, aggression is unleashed”²⁶. Lübbe, meanwhile, reflected in the 1980s on political moralism, understood as “the self-authorisation to violate the rules of customary law and moral common sense by appealing to the higher law of a morally superior cause”²⁷. He summarised this self-empowerment with the phrase “*Uns ist alles erlaubt*”, “Everything is permitted to us”²⁸. One of moralism’s main features is that it gives the outraged absolute legitimacy to exercise various forms of violence against those who do not share their views. Hence one of the main theses of my previous work: “there is no moralism without punitivism and there is no punitivism without moralism”²⁹. The practices of cancelling and lynching on social media are a matter of concern because they are justified under a special case of the claim to correctness, namely, the claim according to which there is an objective moral justification for a legal norm or a moral action³⁰. On social media who could openly defend racism, classism or misogyny? Who could openly defend the bombing and killing of Palestinians in Gaza?

²⁴ GWF Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977) §§ 668.

²⁵ G Bronner, *Apocalipsis cognitivo. Cómo nos manipulan el cerebro en la era digital* (n 3) 110.

²⁶ A Gehlen, *Moral und Hypermoral. Eine pluralistische Ethik* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2016) 119.

²⁷ H Lübbe, *Politischer Moralismus. Der Triumph der Gesinnung über die Urteilskraft* (Berlin: LIT, 2019) 22.

²⁸ H Lübbe, *Philosophie nach der Aufklärung. Von der Notwendigkeit pragmatischer Vernunft* (Düsseldorf und Wien: Econ) 261.

²⁹ A Nava, ‘Toward the critique of punitive populism’ (n 6) 12.

³⁰ R Alexy, *Law’s Ideal Dimension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021) 36–40.

There are things that are indefensible on social media, things that are extremely unfair and cruel. But criticizing injustices can enable people to hurt others under the mantra of moral justification if there is no clear distinction between extreme injustices and trivial issues. Usually, arguing with someone with contrary beliefs will end with one telling the other that they are as evil as Hitler. Nowadays, those who judge morally on social media have the support of strangers who share their resentment or political affiliation. In the past, moralists would debate and lose to another person. Today's moralists will make the debate public on social media so that unknown individuals who share their resentment and political affiliation will join the cause and condemn the opposing side. To preach moralism is tempting and empowering when "everything is permitted to us". Such power must be intoxicating and addictive.

Cancel culture empowers ordinary people to punish colleagues at university, private companies, and famous people in many different ways. Suddenly, recording an event in a classroom leads us to call for the cancellation of a professor for microaggressions against a student. Some new movie star is put on a moral pedestal, until a comment written ten years ago is revived by the woke community to claim that he is not up to the moral standards of the new times. A legendary rock band, when asked for its position on Gaza and not being critical enough, is cancelled for its "complicit silence."

Being "woke" is linked to being sensitive to intersectional injustices, but not to the possibility of forgiveness. If some cancellers forgave, they would lose their power. Endless reproach is the trump card of those who morally judge others. Only groups considered victims can be forgiven or even justified, but everyone else is a moral monster. No matter what they have done, forgiveness would make them part of the community again, an "insider". Anyone who does not appear to have a beautiful soul on social media should be viewed with suspicion, and if they say or do something inappropriate, they will never be forgiven. They will forever be a moral "outsider."

Moralism and rejection of institutions. Most "digital warriors" or defenders of the woke movement may not identify with populism, but both share a certain similarity in their rejection of institutions. The basic institutions of the rule of law must be rejected for being "on the side of corrupt power". Resentment cannot ally itself with political institutions. Historical injustices and impunity serve as rhetorical resources for judging the present and future of all institutions. If musicians, filmmakers, actors, and social theorists are cancelled, institutions will be burned. They all will be burned. In the event of a call to cancel or question due process, there is no forgiveness or institutional defence.

Any rational defence of such institutions will be dismissed as "rationally cold". The canceller is always in a comfortable position of uncompromising rhetoric, allowing them to disqualify anyone who defends institutions as "lacking empathy", "lukewarm," or "complicit." As Bronner points out, there is a fascination for negative things³¹, and much of the news circulating on social media is related to negative news, such as the limits of the justice system or notorious institutional impunity. An unpunished predatory professor, an exonerated businessman, an untouchable film director, an ongoing genocide. In the face of this, justice must go beyond institutions, and there is no room for lukewarm responses or theories.

Hypermoral reasoning does not hesitate to reverse the burden of proof for those accused of committing something contrary to political correctness. As Hübl points out, this victim culture (*Opferkultur*) does not seek to appeal to the authorities of the criminal justice system, "but rather to university authorities or the public

³¹ G Bronner, *Apocalipsis cognitivo. Cómo nos manipulan el cerebro en la era digital* (n 3) 262.

sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), which can be reached through digital media”³². Suddenly, social media is flooded with posts assuming the possible impunity of the accused person, and this might trigger warnings of a possible escape of the criminal who may go unpunished. The number of “likes” and “shares” will determine who is innocent and who is guilty. The hermeneutics of suspicion will fall on all members of an institution. Everyone is potentially an ally of power. The same will happen with social theories.

If social theories come from the academic sphere and are not radical enough in offering solutions, they will be characterized as “complicit theories”. Any academic questioning of dogmatic positions of vulnerable groups or empowered minorities will be considered a “moral offense.” The fear of being cancelled will cause social science research to refrain from questioning certain forms of identitarian reasoning or to avoid citing yesterday’s fashionable theorists. This explains two things: first, why sensitive issues involving victims and panic, such as criminal justice³³, self-help culture and therapeutic language³⁴, or sex work³⁵ are burdened with moral biases. And, second, why most postmodern philosophers ceased to exist publicly or, if they wanted to continue working at universities, became postcolonial.³⁶

Indignation, victimhood, and rejection of institutions are the basic elements of digital moralism, of this rise of beautiful and punitive souls. Digital lynching and cancellation will become as addictive as bad news and sugar. Doing harm to others in the name of good causes has never had so much social prestige, so much self-validation, so many “likes.” In light of all this, what does social justice, the main concern of the woke generation, improve?

IV. And who does this Woke Moralism help?

Harming others has led to controversial social experiments. Understanding its causes, manifestations, and consequences is a matter that goes beyond mere philosophical speculation. Peter Singer, for example, recalls that in “the 1960s and early ‘70s, famous experiments by Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo suggested that most of us would, under specific circumstances, voluntarily do great harm to innocent people”³⁷. I wonder what Milgram and Zimbardo would think if they knew that reacting with “likes” or the “heart” icon would be another way of expressing the intention to harm, immoralize, or cancel someone else. The virtual theatre of hypermorality leads us to shape how we present ourselves to others. The greater the beauty and punitiveness of the soul, the greater the morality. The greater the reflexivity and restraint, the greater the immorality.

³² P Hübl, *Moralspektakel. Wie die richtige Haltung zum Statussymbol wurde und warum das die Welt nicht besser macht* (n 20) 84.

³³ Y Jewkes, *Media and Crime* (Thousand Oaks: Sage 2015)

³⁴ E Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: The University of California Press 2008)

³⁵ A Ramírez, *Sesgos, derecho y trabajo sexual* (Mexico City: Ubijus 2025)

³⁶ Decolonial thinking, which is now a strong trend in the field of social sciences, differs from postmodernism in several ways. One of these is its strongly moralistic tone, which is incompatible with the main postmodern tenets. I have already addressed this issue previously, see A Nava, ‘Kulturrelativismus und Menschenrechte. Eine Antwort auf die dekoloniale Wende’ in C Bäcker (ed.), *Rechtstheorie, Rechtsprinzipien, Rechtsbegriff. Elemente einer diskursiven Theorie fundamentaler Rechte* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2023) 109–123.

³⁷ P Singer, *Ethics in the Real World. 82 Brief Essays on Things That Matter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016) 19.

Modern moralism is more than simply having “strong convictions”. Rather, it is about how morality, in the face of outrage at injustice and fatigue of postmodern relativism, takes a different meaning in the digital world. However, there is still a theological parallel in this moralism. Whereas morality was traditionally derived from traditional systems – such as religion – today, a morality has been imposed that is self-founded and defends an “absolutist claim.” Morality, which was once based on religion, sought to fight evil in a metaphysical sense; this struggle was transferred to the real world, and then to the digital world. Thus, “the biblical apocalypse at the end of time became the apocalypse in this world – the bloody war of ideologies in the name of good”³⁸.

Over the past decade, cancel culture has become the battle cry of those disappointed by liberalism, post-modernism, and even Marxism. Permanent outrage sought an intersectional approach to global, local, and private injustices. But this outrage, along the way, began to reveal a dark side. What began as an awakening of consciousness became a tool for the elevation of the ego, the creation of echo chambers, and the suppression of debate. The aspiration for a better society became a “*vorwerfbarer Fetischismus*”, that is, a “morally reprehensible fetishism”³⁹.

This moralistic fetishism is thriving because it has turned us into guardians of morality. Social media platforms, as Mathiesen lucidly observed almost thirty years ago, marked a transition from Foucault’s panopticon to the synopticon⁴⁰. Now, there is no guardian watching from a panoptical structure. Rather, “the many” watch “the few”, we are each other’s guardians. We make sure that no one deviates from the dominant morality. If someone “likes” something we consider wrong, it is a reason for judging them mercilessly. The same goes for many social theories, movies, albums, books, or actors we consider immoral. Only then will beautiful souls reach the heaven of the purest morality.

But the heaven of the purest morality is not for those who do not make their moralism public. *Moral appearance* is more important than *being moral*. Herein lies a central problem with the woke movement: the intoxication of cancel culture forgets to do justice to the victims of social injustices. It seeks revenge, not reparation for the damage caused. It seeks to satisfy emotions, not to create just institutions. It seeks to appear moral in the mirror of social media, not to transform reality. In their own quest for moral expiation, beautiful souls end up denying universalism. Thus, a contradiction arises: moralists abominate perverse acts, but they are not fully aware that for this judgment and refusal they appeal in one way or another to norms implicitly assumed as objectively valid; universal norms are not admitted by the woke movement, but when there are conflicts and problems, like the unfolding genocide in Gaza, they appeal to justice, solidarity and human rights.

This is one of the reasons why a certain universalist left seeks to distance itself from the woke movement and its culture of victimhood. Precisely, in Neiman’s words, “Those on the left who are uncomfortable with universalism should consider: there is no more successful example of identity politics, complete with the appeal to past victimhood, than the Jewish nationalism of Israeli politicians like Binyamin Netanyahu”⁴¹.

If the beautiful souls of the woke movement reject universalism and only seek to punish those who think differently, who exactly are they trying to help? More precisely, who does woke moralism help? If the aim is to cancel any thinking that challenges victimhood, then critical thinking is thrown into the bonfire, and with it the possibility of transforming outrage into policies that can truly repair damage and create genuine social

³⁸ A Grau, *Hypermoral: Die neue Lust an der Empörung* (n 5) 40.

³⁹ M Rehm, ‘Ist moralistisches Handeln eine Form des de dicto motivierten Handelns?’ in C Neuhäuser & C Seidel (eds.), *Kritik des Moralismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2020) 152.

⁴⁰ T Mathiesen, ‘The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault’s Panopticon Revisited’ (1997) 1 n. 2 *Theoretical Criminology* 215–234.

⁴¹ S Neiman, *Izquierda no es woke* (Madrid: Debate 2024) 40.

justice. But I suppose this is not part of the plans of contemporary moralism, because if the world were truly transformed, its discourse of permanent outrage would be lost, and with it, the power it wields. I suppose this would greatly diminish the power of many identitarian arguments, which do not see the narcissistic self-affirmation of their souls in the possibility of transforming real institutions, but rather in moralistic and punitive discourses that keep them forever on a higher moral pedestal.

Therefore, I claim that woke moralism through social media has replaced postmodernism and even Marxism as a form of thought and protest against great inequalities. The void and discontent against moral scepticism led to hypermoralism, which is right in what it affirms but wrong in what it denies. It is right in seeking to raise awareness of many injustices that are impossible to criticize from the point of view of academic moral relativism. It is wrong in leading moralism and punitivism to cancel any form of thought that questions its moral crusades. Burning, cancelling, or boycotting books, singers, theories, or philosophers with whom one disagrees because of their alleged immoral acts is not the solution.

In sharp contrast to this, a truly moral discussion on what matters allows for different opinions, precisely because it is worthwhile to debate controversial moral issues without violence or fear of cancellation. Freedom of expression is a necessary condition for rational debate. Losing it comes at a high cost to critical thinking. Therefore, those who, like me, are fed up with moralists on social media should not hide their political convictions for fear of cancellation, but rather point out how immoral their woke moralism is: unfairly discrediting morality at a time when we need it most.

V. Conclusion

It is tempting to fall into the traps of moralism on social media. Since *appearing moral* is more important than actually *being moral*, the cost of not jumping on the moralistic bandwagon is high. But the price to pay is even higher: sacrificing tolerance, reasonable disagreement, critical thinking, and, above all, moral principles, which, today more than ever, are important for criticizing the great injustices experienced by the most vulnerable people, groups, and countries. This is not a price I am willing to pay. No pursuit of capital or moral prestige is worth more than defending universal moral principles that allow us to take a step toward a better society.

We live in a time when we are more aware of injustices of all kinds. Moral scepticism, with its lack of commitment, has given way to various social movements that demand an active stance. For this reason, I believe it would be disastrous if various identitarian movements took their claims to moralistic extremes, as the far-right lurks in the shadows. Being left-wing, now more than ever, requires a commitment to plurality of ideas and public debate.

Being woke, a canceller, a digital warrior, or hypermoral are not anti-establishment positions, as is commonly believed. Nor do they contribute to transforming the world. Genuinely opposing local and global injustices requires more than just appearing to be a beautiful, punitive soul with a social media profile. It requires an active commitment, without being a perfectionist, to minimal universal moral principles and institutions, regardless of the place, person, or theory from which they were enunciated. Ultimately, this active commitment also plays a role in answering the old question of being moral without being moralistic.