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The 'Ideal' Atheist

Nonreligion and Moral Exemplarism

Stefan Binder

■ **ABSTRACT:** Drawing on theories of moral exemplarism and ethnographic research with an atheist movement in South India, this article explores how narratives of idealism and the Telugu concept of '*ādarśam*' signal a distinct register of moral experience. By foregrounding the role of concrete interpersonal and affective relationships, the article complicates methodological approaches to the ethics of nonreligion that concentrate on forms of moral reasoning based on semiotic or ontological distinctions between religion and nonreligion. Rather than positing idealism as an intrinsic attribute of nonreligion, the article investigates ethnographically how atheist activists draw on different moral registers and ambivalent investments in the making and policing of boundaries between religion and nonreligion for making moral judgments and working out what it means to lead an idealist life.

■ **KEYWORDS:** atheism, ethics, exemplar, idealism, moral experience, South India

During Sankranti, an important holiday in South India, my friend Lalita—a cultural activist associated with various communist, feminist, and nonreligious groups—organized a camping trip along Godavari River for her friends and family. On our first night, we were sitting around a campfire on the riverbank, chitchatting and sharing the occasional song or recited poem. At one point during our conversation, Aniket, Lalita's neighbor and one of her son's oldest friends, mentioned that he had some doubts about the relation between ideals (*ādarśālu*) and desires (*āśalu*). He seemed most concerned with the possible clash of individual aims (*āśayālu*) and moral expectations of family and society and the resulting difficulty of avoiding selfishness (*svārtham*). He explicitly addressed his doubt to Lalita, her brother Venkatesh, and the rest of 'the adults'¹ of the group, who readily provided their points of view. Venkatesh stressed that ideals were the 'basic principle' (*mūlasūtram*) giving direction to people's lives, as opposed to merely superficial and potentially derailing personal desires. Unfortunately, ideals had gotten weak nowadays, because the human bonds and mutual respect, which had characterized society in the past and especially in villages, were being torn apart by urbanization, globalization, commercialization and so forth.

I cannot remember more about the conversation and did not write down any further details in my fieldnotes. However, I did record my feelings of frustration. The adults seemed to simply dismiss the issue of individual desires, focusing entirely on the need for ideals, which looked a lot like traditional values and socially sanctioned morality. I was frustrated because I knew all the adults around the campfire to be atheists,² committed to progressive³ values of individual emancipation and autonomy. During my previous eleven months of fieldwork on organized



atheism and lived nonreligion in the Telugu-speaking parts of South India, my interlocutors had persistently stressed that religion was above all an ideological tool to disguise forms of social inequality and exploitation as morality. As such, being an atheist was understood as an intrinsically moral project of ethical reasoning, requiring that blind belief in certain moral claims be deconstructed—for example, the claim that morality is impossible without religion or the claim that individual freedom amounts to selfishness and is incompatible with social responsibility. Against this background, I had hoped that Aniket's question would prompt some kind of debate about the possible role of individual freedom and desire in discerning the difference between 'right' and 'wrong' ideals and moral values. Instead, the adults deferred to a narrative of idealism that ignored individual desires entirely, evoked what seemed like a romanticized 'ideal' of bygone village life, and avoided critical engagement with 'real' problems in the present like inequality, intergenerational conflict, or oppression.

In fact, I had heard such narratives of past idealism many times before and had come to think of them as a latent contradiction in my interlocutors' moral discourse: Idealism seemed to foreclose ethical reasoning by enjoining compliance with models of ideal conduct exemplified or expounded by a cadre of senior figures of authority. While I was not entirely surprised that the adults emphasized the role of idealism—to the point where I did not even record their opinions in my fieldnotes—I had hoped for some kind of at least minimally rebellious self-assertion by Aniket or any of the other five 'youngsters', who had only listened so far. Since they had all reached an age at which people start experiencing family pressure to get married and face tensions regarding the timing of marriage or partner choice, I suspected that most of them would have their own ideas about possible conflicts between personal desires and moral pressure; in fact, based on previous conversations, I was certain they did. Yet, none of them spoke up. In a desperate attempt at polemical provocation, I joined the conversation by claiming that, surely, the last thing we needed was more lofty ideals and moralizing accounts of a romanticized past to bolster conservative ideologies that keep hierarchical power relations intact. I obviously missed the mark as, instead of a controversial debate, I only provoked mild puzzlement.

This article is an attempt to work through my feelings of disappointment and frustration regarding narratives of idealism not (only) as my personal failure of understanding or as a case of preconceived assumptions imposed on the field but as themselves a form of ethnographic data. More precisely, I seek to understand those feelings as a symptom of the heterogeneity of my interlocutors' moral framework as well as my unrecognized implication in idealism as a specific register of moral experience. Drawing on theories of moral exemplarism, I describe nonreligious narratives of idealism as discontinuous with forms of abstract moral reasoning, because they signal the experience of a moral force of inspiration that cannot be abstracted from the affective texture of the concrete personal relationships in which this experience unfolds. I argue that narratives of idealism form an integral part of a larger, heterogenous moral framework that makes nonreligion for my interlocutors an intrinsically moral project.

The following is based on ethnographic research among people with varying investments in nonreligion, ranging from atheist activists, for whom nonreligion is the cornerstone of their identity, to people who for diverse reasons disregard or spurn religion in their personal lives. Most of my interlocutors were actively involved in more or less explicitly nonreligious forms of social activism, hailed from Telugu-speaking and Hindu backgrounds, and could be placed on a middle-class spectrum. However, my purpose in this article is not an ethnography of this particular group of people as a discrete cultural entity (for a more detailed historical and sociological contextualization of organized atheism, see Binder 2020; Quack 2012). That is, I do not seek to describe moral practices that are intrinsically or essentially nonreligious or necessarily unique to atheist activists; rather, I explore the manner and extent to which distinctions between reli-

gion and nonreligion are mobilized in certain situations as ethical resources for making moral judgements.

The Moral Framework of Ideals as 'Mirrors'

An important stream within anthropological scholarship on secularity retraces the histories of epistemic regimes and semiotic ideologies that have shaped the meanings and politics of secularity at individual, institutional, or societal levels (e.g., Asad 2003; Keane 2013; Mahmood 2016; see also the introduction to this issue). Rather than defining secularity as simply the absence of religion, anthropologists have focused on the historical and political contexts in which religions have been differentiated from their various 'Others' such as magic, culture, superstition, or science (Steyers 2004; van der Veer 2014). They have also examined how such differentiations entail further distinctions—between reason and emotion, tradition and modernity, body and mind—and how “discursive grammars” (Asad 2003: 25) regulate their deployment and invest them with power. The delimitation of religion from nonreligion is therefore not only an intellectual exercise but also an intrinsic part of an “epistemic-moral entanglement” (Quack 2012: 219) or “moral narrative” (Keane 2013) of secular modernity. Moral values like sincerity (Keane 2002) or authenticity (Asad 2011) have emerged as central objects of inquiry, insofar as they tie concrete ways of living to more abstract moral grammars and narratives of secular modernity.

This is the methodological approach I had been employing to analyze how my atheist interlocutors made distinctions—for instance, between religion and nonreligion, reason and (blind) belief, or word and deed—and how they used those distinctions to evaluate the ‘sincerity’ (*nijāyitī* or *dvikaraṇaśuddhi*) of each other’s commitments to atheism as a way of life (Binder 2020). However, as the vignette above illustrates, it frustrated my attempts at making sense of the concept of ‘ideals’ (*ādarśālu*) and the moral narratives of idealism derived from it. I perceived talk about idealism as too idealized—too unrealistic and stereotypical—to be an effective resource for the kind of ethical reasoning involved in controversies around sincerity. Rather than sparking critical debate about relations of power and authority in society, it seemed to further entrench them in the atheist movement itself.

In recent anthropological scholarship on ethics (see Mattingly and Throop 2018), this has been identified as a common weakness in social scientific analyses of morality, which tend to treat moral discourse as a reflection of underlying social, political, or economic structures. By contrast, the anthropology of ethics seeks to explore alternative frameworks where morality is not reduced to either compliance with or opposition to social norms and moral codes. Exemplarist approaches to virtue ethics are one such framework (Deeb 2009; Forbess 2015; Humphrey 1997; Robbins 2018; Watanabe 2017). In moral theory, exemplarism refers to a modality of morality that is grounded not in abstract rules or sets of virtues but in individual engagements with concrete, personal exemplars. Exemplars are more than just examples that illustrate or embody abstract moral codes and virtues, because they are themselves the ground or source of moral judgement and, potentially, moral theory (Zagzebski 2010). Rather than rule-following—or rule-questioning—moral exemplarism demands an “ethico-aesthetic sensibility” (Olberding 2012: 91), which allows the apperception of goodness as a kind of inspiration or moral force emanating from the unique style, look, or feel of a concrete personalized exemplar.

Hence, the task of identifying what constitutes a moral exemplar is more akin to narrative description than abstract ethical reasoning, as the question to be answered is not ‘What is the good?’ or ‘How should one live?’ but rather ‘What would *she—this* concrete person—do?’ (see

Sor-Hoon Tan 2005). In contrast to approaches that understand exemplars as perfect or extraordinary embodiments of virtue (e.g., Olberding 2012; Robbins 2018), I approach exemplarism in terms of a more diffuse moral experience. It is grounded less in the pursuits of explicit virtues than in an “attuned concern for the relationality that constitutes our very existence” as human beings (Zigon and Throop 2014: 3; see also Das 2015). In this article, I explore how narratives of idealism based on the Telugu concept of *ādarśam* signal such an exemplarist register of moral experience, which is related to but discontinuous with other forms of moral reasoning prevalent among atheist activists.

The word ‘*ādarśam*’ can be translated as ‘ideal’. In most European languages, ‘ideal’ gains meaning primarily in contrast to ‘real’. Starting with the Platonic theory of ideas, the relation of ideal and real tends to imply gradations of ontological, aesthetic, or moral value, since one or the other is ‘more’: more ontic, more true, more effective, more beautiful, etc. Such gradations can go in both directions. In an ethical context, for instance, an idealist can be deemed ineffective for being naïve, impractical, and unworldly, yet they can also provide an antidote of optimism, innocence, and candor for the realist’s cynicism. By contrast, the Telugu word ‘*ādarśam*’ derives from a Sanskrit word for ‘mirror’. Its extended meanings include ‘original manuscript’ from which copies are made as well as ‘pattern’, ‘model’, and ‘type’. When ideals are understood as mirrors, attention is focused neither on how ideal and real can be measured *against* one another, nor which one is hidden within, behind, or beyond the other. Mirrors make something visible by displaying it, but what is displayed is ideal not because it is less real—say a derivative copy—but because it is usefully apparent. Mirrors allow us to brush our teeth, apply makeup, comb hair, or scrutinize for signs of diminished youth and vigor. When thinking about ideals as mirrors in a context of practical use, we can highlight their capacity of generating useful reflections, rather than derivative or diminished copies of an original.

From this perspective, there is no such thing as *too idealized*: The more visible, apparent, clear, brilliant, or poignant the ideal, that much better, generative, and useful it will be. A common way to understand the English word ‘ideal’ implies that it has moral force because it is *perfect*, while its perfection is qualified as ‘only’ intelligible, imaginary, archetypical, or transcendental; however, the etymology of ‘*ādarśam*’ allows us to think of ideals as *perfective* in a grammatical sense, which emphasizes unity and wholeness (aoristic aspect) or the continuing effect of the past on the present (perfect tense). The moral force of ideals is perfective insofar as it impresses itself on you because you have encountered it not as an abstract ideality but faced it in the mirror of the concrete, integrated form of a personal exemplar. In mobilizing Sanskrit etymology, my aim is not to culturalize idealism as a specifically ‘Indian’ moral framework but simply to show that the English word ‘ideal’ may obscure rather than elucidate an exemplarist understanding of *ādarśam*. A more helpful English candidate would be ‘inspiration’, which seems to point precisely at the elusive affective experience of what theories of exemplarism describe as the moral force of an exemplar (see Reed 2011).

In Telugu, ‘inspiration’ can be translated as ‘*sphūr̥ti*’. In fact, my interlocutors often used this word to talk about the influence or impact of eminent leaders of their movement. *Sphūr̥ti* is also a Sanskrit derivative. It evokes a sense of both ocular and haptic immediacy because its primary meaning is ‘throbbing, shaking, vibration’ but can also include connotations like ‘manifestation’ or ‘display’ and, in modern Telugu, ‘brilliance’ and ‘glamour’. Encounters with ideal or exemplary persons—literally ‘givers of inspiration’ (*sphūr̥tidātalu*) or ‘somebody showing the way’ (*mārgadar̥śi*)—were a common element in many of my interlocutors’ life stories. And, especially in the atheist movement, portraits and anthologies of exemplars are an important literary genre (Bhaskar 2012; Sambasiva Rao 2017), which can function as both pedagogical tool and historiographic method (Venkatadri and Subba Raju 2003). Leading an idealist life is also a

near obligatory trope in autobiographies of the movement's leaders and luminaries (Gora 1972; Innaiah 2013; Subbamma 1991).

References to ideals, idealism, and inspiration were ubiquitous in different kinds of oral and written narratives, but they consistently remained opaque. That means they did not serve as opportunities to discuss in any detail the actual nature or 'content' of a person's ideals or virtues. In other words, references to idealism were not discursive sites for explorations of moral convictions but for perfective assertions that, as a matter of fact, a person's life had been shaped by such convictions and, as a consequence, was so ideal—so apparent, manifest, brilliant, vibrant, full of *sphūr̥ti*—that it did or should inspire others. The use of the word '*ādar̥saṃ*' therefore oscillated between ideal and idealist: Living by ideals is also to lead an ideal life for others—to become an idol—and inspire them to lead ideal/idealist lives themselves. Of course, this does not imply that people never cared about the 'content' of values and convictions; they simply tended not to focus on it when talking or writing about ideals.⁴

Instead, narratives of idealism summoned a perfective perspective that seemed to foreground the entirety, intensity, or ultimacy—as opposed to the content or the sincerity—with which a life as a coherent whole had effectively been shaped by ideals. It was precisely this perfective perspective that caused my initial frustration with—and indeed disinterest in—the concept. The oscillation between *idealist* and *ideal* as well as its supposed power of inspiration were asserted in a manner that seemed unrealistic to me; it all seemed too perfect, *too idealized*. However, this does not mean that people always talked about idealism uncritically or that its moral force of inspiration was always experienced as certain or unambiguous. In his insightful discussion of inspiration, Adam Reed cautions that an adequate analysis of inspiration—or, in this case, idealism—must “include an exploration of some of that condition's constraints or potential problems” (Reed 2011: 174). The remainder of this article therefore focuses on situations and narratives that elucidate concerns about the diminishment, loss, or uncertainty of idealism.

Diminished Idealism and “False” Atheists

In many informal conversations and interviews about the current state of nonreligious movements, my interlocutors lamented a worrisome diminishment of idealism as the effect of a society engrossed in self-interested pursuits of consumerism and personal gain. Against the backdrop of rapid social change in India since the 1980s—ranging from a neoliberal restructuring of the economy to profound transformations of media environments and reconfigurations of the political landscape through the emergence of lower-caste, Hindu nationalist, or regional politics (Fernandes 2006; Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 2003)—the trope of diminishment appears at first like a displacement of blame onto society and younger generations. At second glance, however, many of my interlocutors also identified their own failure to become exemplars as the reason why progressive ideals and their power to inspire were lost or had diminished.

The topic of diminished idealism also came up during the return from our camping trip. On our way home, Lalita, her husband Ravi, her elder brother Venkatesh, and I made a detour to the town of Kakinada. Lalita wanted me to meet an old friend who could help me with my research on atheism and nonreligion. Gopal Rao, then in his sixties, had been active in the student wing of a communist party (CPIM) and, as an extraordinarily gifted orator, he had inspired innumerable people to join the movement—including Ravi. In fact, Lalita and Ravi had met while working for the cultural wing of CPIM. When I asked Gopal Rao about his opinion on the current state of nonreligious movements, he replied that there was no movement in the region anymore. There were only isolated individuals, distracted by television and

other technologies, especially mobile phones. Instead of coming together and discussing “ideas and issues,” people simply stared into their devices and consumed information provided by the media. He concluded with a rather crushing verdict that, consequently, almost all people were “false” nowadays: They talked about progressive values but did not want to change their own lives accordingly. Venkatesh emphatically agreed and brought up once more our debate at the campfire two nights before as well as his assessment of tattered human bonds and the decline of village culture.

This condemnation of rampant ‘falseness’ as a symptom of the disintegration of nonreligious movements—and progressive culture more generally—spoke directly to issues of sincerity. Sincerity was an important moral value among my atheist interlocutors. They argued that the success of any social reform depended on the sincerity of its proponents, that is, their ability to realize their desired reform in their own lives. “Their own lives” referred not only to individual conduct but also to one’s social relations, above all in the sphere of domestic life. Since nearly all the groups I was working with were dominated by middle-aged and senior men, the problem of sincerity emerged as a fundamentally gendered problem of men changing the habits and conduct of their wives and children. This dynamic and its reliance on a gendered distinction of public and private spheres has a much longer history that leads back to middle-class and upper-caste social and religious reform movements in colonial India (Chatterjee 1993; Quack 2012; Sarkar 2013).

Against the background of this deeply entrenched moral discourse on gendered sincerity, Gopal Rao’s stern indictment of falseness stood in stark and all but stereotypical contradiction to the domestic space in which it was articulated. Upon entering the house, Lalita had immediately drawn my attention to several devotional objects depicting Shirdi Say Baba, a popular Indian saint revered by both Hindus and Muslims and also, as Lalita informed me, by Gopal Rao’s wife. Later that day, while driving back home, she told me that Gopal Rao’s marriage was an inter-caste marriage and a love marriage. This usually implies that it was contracted without consent or in direct defiance of parents and families. Such marriages are an important part of nonreligious activism because they are considered to be prime instruments of secular social reform and, therefore, one of the most significant and widely accepted indicators of a successful transformation of ‘one’s own life’ (Binder 2020: 198–205; see also Ambedkar 2003; Hodges 2005). They are sometimes called “ideal marriages” because they are deemed capable of inspiring change in others by concretely manifesting ideals of social reform. Lalita explained that Gopal Rao had been over-confident in hoping to change his wife and to make her abandon religious and caste-based traditions. He had failed. They had not divorced only because Gopal Rao refused to add fodder to a prevalent conservative discourse predicting the failure of such ideal marriages as inevitable.

While Gopal Rao may have set himself up for being judged in precisely the terms of falseness that he himself had brought to the table, Lalita did not insinuate, let alone criticize insincerity on Gopal Rao’s part. Instead, her account was tinged in a distinctively gloomy mood, as if rueful for a life that could have been, a life whose idealist ambition and moral force had worn itself out by sticking to ideals—in this case an ideal marriage—rather than forsaking them. She had introduced Gopal Rao not only as a valuable informant and former leader of a progressive movement but also as an inspiring personality and influence on her and Ravi’s lives. I had soon realized that our meeting was not primarily an occasion for me to conduct an interview but a social call on a dear and respected friend. Why, then, had Lalita drawn my attention to the Hindu devotional objects to begin with?

She neither ignored nor denied the jarring tension between Gopal Rao’s words and the physical environment in which he uttered them. That tension was the perfective lens through which

Gopal Rao's entire life—including its failures—could be viewed as part of a general diminishment of ideals, manifesting in this case in the obduracy of conservative marriage ideologies. Ravi and Lalita's lives had been affected—if not transformed—by Gopal Rao and the inspiring experience of his idealism. The sincerity of his convictions or his efforts to put them into practice were either not in doubt at all or, on this occasion, irrelevant. I suggest that this irrelevance was not the effect of Lalita balancing different moral values, say steadfastness versus sincerity, nor of her admitting that nobody, not even exemplars, are perfect; instead, I argue that it was the effect of the intimate and idiosyncratic affective texture of Lalita's relationship with Gopal Rao through which she perceived this situation—and spoke about it—in the moral register of idealism. This register is not necessarily oblivious of the discourse of sincerity, but it is discontinuous with it.

In retrospect, my frustration with narratives of idealism was largely due to mistaking this discontinuity for inconsistency; a mistake that was constantly reinforced by the apparent contradiction between a pervasive tendency among my interlocutors to idealize their own exemplars and, at the same time, critique the pervasiveness of that tendency in others. Lalita herself was a staunch critic of what she perceived as a steadily growing proclivity to idolize prominent personalities. And she was not alone. Rival factions within the atheist movement regularly accused each other of indulging in “personality cults,” claiming that glorifications of exemplars and their past achievements threatened not only to eclipse concrete efforts for social change in the present but also to take on forms that were precariously reminiscent of religious worship.

Insofar as the example of devotional objects and Hindu idols in Gopal Rao's sitting room can pose a moral problem of falseness or insincerity, it is predicated on a clear boundary between religion and nonreligion; a boundary that is, in this case, further reinforced by the gendered displacement of religion onto the ‘Hindu wife’. By contrast, concerns about ‘personality cults’ within the atheist movement thrive on the instability of that boundary, as they place the ‘ideal atheist’ and the ‘Hindu idol’ in an unsettling contiguity. It is thus helpful to look more closely at those concerns and what they can tell us about the constraints and problems of idealism as well as its discontinuity with the moral value of sincerity. The following is an example from the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada (Andhra Pradesh), one of the oldest and most prominent nonreligious institutions in the Telugu-speaking parts of South India.

Hindu Idols and Ideal Atheists

The Atheist Centre was founded in 1940 by Gora (Goparaju Ramachandra Rao) and Saraswathi Gora and has been run by their family ever since. It is famous for its open propagation of atheism as well as its insistence on putting it into practice through diverse forms of social service and reform. While the Centre was widely recognized as an important trailblazer for the atheist movement, it has also been criticized for indulging in an excessive ‘personality cult’ of its founding members. An illustrative example is the commemoration of the fifth death anniversary of Mr. Veeraiah, the Goras’ son-in-law and founder of ASM. ASM (Arthika Samatha Mandali) is an NGO associated with the Atheist Centre, which has worked for rural development in fields like disaster relief, health, sanitation, education, or women's cooperative banking since 1978. For Veeraiah's death anniversary, around sixty current and former staff and volunteers congregated at the NGO's headquarters in Srikakulam, a small village close to Vijayawada. Besides a photo exhibition and a symposium on natural disaster preparedness, the day's main event was the instalment of a life-sized bust depicting Mr. Veeraiah within a festively decorated concrete pavilion (see Figure 1). After the statue had been ceremoniously revealed, the assembled guests



Figure 1. Bust of Mr. Veeraiah (photo by author)

started circling it, depositing flower garlands and petals on and around it (see Figure 2). Many also touched the bust or their own cheeks while approaching the bust.

The scene was evocative of a distinctly Hindu aesthetic, and the guests' general conduct seemed similar to how people engage with idols of Hindu deities. In general, the Gora family did not mandate disbelief in gods or irreligion for their staff and volunteers because their understanding of both atheism and theism—as well as religion more generally—revolved less around beliefs than around practices, habits, and everyday “ways of life” (Gora 1972). However, this understanding of religion as a question of habituated practices and customs—including habits and customs of the mind—made it even more perplexing that the Gora family had not only condoned but in fact organized this kind of behavior as well as the material practices and aesthetics it entailed. Why would an explicitly irreligious institution celebrate one of its stalwarts in a manner that replicated or at least resembled forms of religious worship?

Existing scholarship on the replication or migration of aesthetic forms across the boundaries of religion and nonreligion has focused on the instability, historical variability, and contested nature of those boundaries (Copeman and Quack 2015; Grieser 2015; Engelke 2015; Hagström and Copeman this issue). In this body of work, we find examples of how people draw on what Webb Keane calls “semiotic ideologies” (Keane 2003: 417) to determine and evaluate differences between religion and nonreligion. The commemoration of Mr. Veeraiah was a typical, indeed extreme, instance of the kind of practices that fueled critical debates about excessive, ill-suited, or detrimental relationships with leaders in the nonreligious movement. However, from the perspective of exemplarism and the moral register of idealism, concerns about ‘personality



Figure 2. Circumambulation (photo by author)

cults' within the atheist movement raise a slightly different set of questions. After all, I had never heard anybody go so far as to accuse the Atheist Centre—or any other nonreligious organization for that matter—of trying to *effectively* deify their founders or establish a religious cult. While I have witnessed how atheist activists argued about where and how to draw the boundary between religion and nonreligion, I suggest that this ultimately ontological question is not necessarily the only issue at stake in trying to determine the moral stakes of a given practice.

To illustrate this, I return to my discussions with Lalita about her critique of the proclivity in nonreligious movements to idolize leadership. From her vantagepoint, nonreligious movements had become weak because they had devolved from mass movements into “leaders’ parties.” They had misunderstood that progress happens not because of leaders but as a larger social process. During one of our conversations, I described the commemoration of Veeraiah and asked Lalita about her opinion on it. She straightaway dismissed my attempt at framing the event and its material practices—especially its use of flowers—in terms of a potential replication of Hindu worship. In the hot climate of India, Lalita argued, the use of flowers was merely an issue of “aesthetic sense.” Flowers evoked notions of freshness, life, and beauty and were therefore associated with the divine, but they had no intrinsic connection to religion or Hinduism. People used flowers all the time, regardless of the human or divine nature of those adorned with them. What mattered in the case at hand, she proposed, was whether “they democratize it” or let it slide into “blind belief.”

Lalita sidelined my prompt to consider the ontological or semiotic differences between religion and nonreligion by reducing my question about the use of flowers to a mere accessory of

morally irrelevant climatic conditions and aesthetic sense. Instead, she introduced the notion of ‘democratizing’ to veer our discussion into a different direction, namely the question of the nature and role of leaders. For Lalita, the problem was ultimately not that people idolize their leaders and submit to them, but that those leaders start to think of themselves as such. She argued that, on the one hand, people do not really *want* to be led and, on the other hand, genuinely great people actually *do not know* that they are great. Regardless of whether this assertion is empirically correct, it describes a key element of exemplarist moral theory: the distinction between ‘leaders’ and ‘exemplars’ (Olberding 2012; Reed 2011; Scheler 1987). Leaders can in fact be exemplars, but not always or necessarily. Leadership can be attained strategically, pragmatically, or even by coercion. Exemplars, by contrast, emerge through the formative impact on those they inspire, which can be independent of their volition, intention, and possibly—in fact, ideally—their awareness.

It seems that, for Lalita, what separates a democratic relationship with a leader from blind belief in them is not some idea of formal equality or equal access to positions of power, let alone the absence of hierarchy. It is instead premised on the presence of a certain moral force of inspiration that cannot be orchestrated by will or strategic design. But why, then, would people ever start idolizing ‘undemocratic’ leaders—as in leaders who are not also exemplars—especially if they do not want to be led but inspired? When I queried Lalita on this, she seemed to perceive my question as a somewhat feigned naivety. She nonetheless decided to humor me by explaining patiently that if one wanted to get things done in India—and anywhere else too, for that matter—one needed powerful people and leaders. Nobody liked feeling unequal, but hierarchies, whether openly paraded or hidden in plain sight, were everywhere and had to be navigated by, among other things, deference. “Or perhaps,” Lalita paused for a moment, smiled, and with a sly flicker in her eyes concluded, “once in a while everybody needs some recognition and patronage.”

It is significant that our conversation ended on this ambivalent, somewhat playful note. Lalita did not share with me a final assessment of whether the commemoration of Veeraiah qualified as an undemocratic ‘personality cult’. However, she did sketch parameters of how to engage with the event within the moral register of idealism, even though Veeraiah was not a personal exemplar for her. In contrast to a semiotic or ontological approach, which requires *abstract* reasoning and forces a decisive though contestable moral judgment, the moral register of idealism operates on ambivalence and uncertainty. It cannot be resolved outside the *concrete* affective texture of interpersonal relationships and the individual desires and needs in which moral experience unfolds.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by returning to the campfire of the introduction and attempt another go at Aniket’s question about the difference between ideals (*ādarśālu*) and desires (*āśālu*). Maybe the question was less about whether one should act on the basis of ideals or individual desires and more about how to tell the difference between the two. The word ‘*āśā*’, another Sanskrit derivative, carries not only the meaning of desire and hope but also greed and avarice. The verbal root ‘*as*’ means ‘to pervade’ but also ‘to reach’, ‘obtain’, ‘enjoy’, and ‘to addict oneself to something’. This suggests a motivation that comes from and is directed to the self, which Aniket seemed to address as a risk of selfishness (*svārtham*). When Venkatesh responded with the image of an ideal/idealist rural society, his purpose may not have been to evoke an idealized past, when people still renounced their individual desires in compliance with collectively authorized moral

ideals; rather, he may have tried to explain why the diminishment of perfective experiences of ideals in concrete exemplars has made it increasingly difficult to discern the difference between ideals and superficial desires. Perhaps, the whole debate was not at all about choosing *either* ideals *or* desires as grounds for moral action but about the difficulty of telling whether a particular moral experience—or the experience of a moral conviction about a specific course of action—is in fact one or the other.

Venkatesh's answer and the whole genre of 'perfective' life stories of ideal atheists suggest that ideals differ from desires because only the former generate a moral force capable of sustaining an enduring form of life beyond the gratification of individual, possibly volatile appetites. From a perfective perspective, the moral force of an ideal atheist is their capacity to manifest an inspiring form of life that obviates—or at least does not respond to—questions of ethical justification grounded in a moral semiotics of sincerity or essentialist distinction between religion and nonreligion. Against this background, it may not be surprising that my intentionally provocative polemic against ideals fell flat. As stated above, I had assumed that the difference between ideals and desires articulates a conflict between individual autonomy and collectively enforced moral norms. Thus, my frustrated plea for individual desires *against* collective ideals responded to a moral question that, arguably, nobody had posed that evening. This does not mean that nobody ever poses it, as I had witnessed my atheist interlocutors copiously debating it when discussing the sincerity of nonreligious ways of life. Hence, my frustration was an effect of me not being attuned to the moral register of that moment and of misunderstanding the discontinuities within my interlocutors' moral framework.

I do not foreground my affective and conceptual difficulties in coming to terms with idealism to stress its 'otherness' or authorize my ethnographic insight by rhetorically staging its belatedness as a reflection of the 'arcane' nature of its object. Quite the contrary, I emphasize it to indicate its familiarity and my own entanglement in the contingent and often idiosyncratic realm of the moral experience of idealism. Just as Ravi and Lalita *knew* Gopal Rao's idealism, Aniket *knew* who was sitting around the campfire—and so did I. In fact, I had been living with Lalita's family for six months at that point and knew all 'the adults' to be staunch atheists, who are widely admired as exceptional social activists sincerely committed to progressive values of freedom, autonomy, and social responsibility. I cannot speak for Aniket, but I had come to greatly admire them and, even in the short period of time that I had spent with them, they had made an impact on me. They had inspired me. In a sense, it was not the moral register of idealism that was unfamiliar to me but the idiom of *ādarśam*. I knew the lexical meaning of the word, but I had not paid close attention to how it was used. Having misunderstood the question, I was frustrated that the people whom I had come to experience as moral exemplars did not provide the answers that I was expecting from them.

Then again, I was not there for the purpose of moral edification but for a research project on lived nonreligion. Thus, my frustration was also a symptom of mistaking the discontinuity between two moral registers—experiences and narratives of idealism on one side and forms of moral reasoning based on a semiotics of sincerity and conceptual distinctions between religion and nonreligion on the other side—for a contradiction of what I had assumed to constitute a unitary moral framework of a distinctly 'nonreligious' ethics. In other words, there is nothing intrinsically nonreligious about idealism or about its discontinuity with other moral registers.

And yet, I also learned something about nonreligion, namely that a project of studying it ethnographically need not exclusively answer the question 'What is nonreligion?' By assuming that the only meaningful way to study the moral practices of nonreligious activists is to specify what makes them *different* from the ethics of other groups, say religious communities or other kinds of social activists, we unnecessarily limit what an anthropology of nonreligion can do. As

I attempted to show in this article, it can contribute to a general understanding of specific moral registers, in this instance exemplarism. It can also contribute to our understanding of the complex ways in which people navigate plural and heterogenous moral frameworks. At the same time, differences between nonreligion and religion certainly matter in some situations, and it is worthwhile paying close attention to when, how, and for whom.

The precarious contiguity of Hindu idols and ideal atheists in critical debates around ‘personality cults’ demonstrates that, in certain situations, atheist activists did not engage the difference between religion and nonreligion as an analytical tool for making ontological distinctions but as an ethical tool for making moral judgments: *Because* something is perceived as bad or undesirable—undemocratic, insincere, lacking ideals—it becomes signifiable as ‘religious’ or a ‘personality cult’ or ‘blind belief’. What makes this an instance of a nonreligious moral judgement is the fact that the people among whom I have observed it—and with whom I have participated in it—placed morality on the side of nonreligion rather than religion. By giving an ethnographic account of idealism as a moral register among atheist activists, my aim was not to define nonreligion but to understand *how* and *why* they achieved that moral judgement.

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■ NOTES

1. Aniket and his group of friends were in their early twenties. Since none of them were married and adulthood in India is often linked to marital status rather than age, I will refer to them as ‘the youngsters’ as opposed to ‘the adults’.
2. My research focused on activists with explicit investments in nonreligious identities. While some rejected the label ‘atheists’ (*nāstikulu*) for strategic reasons, preferring what they considered less controversial categories like ‘humanists’ (*mānavavādulu*) or ‘rationalists’ (*hētuvādulu*), all agreed that atheism in the sense of ‘disbelief in god’ is a cornerstone of their worldview (for a detailed discussion, see Binder 2020).
3. While ‘progressive’ (*pragatiśīla*) cannot be simply equated with ‘nonreligious’ or ‘atheist’, it was taken for granted by many of my interlocutors in South India that these terms are closely linked, and that ‘progressive’ describes a larger social milieu leaning toward leftist political opinions, commitments to social justice, and at least ambivalent if not outright oppositional stances toward organized religion (see Binder 2018).

4. There are other concepts that served this function, for example *bhāvaviplavaṃ*, which can be translated as 'mental revolution'. For many of my interlocutors, it indicated the essence of atheism, insofar as it refers not only to concrete ideas, opinions, and attitudes (*bhāvālu*) but also to their transformation from theist to atheist.

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