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“A GENERATION THAT DIDN’T AGREE”: THE PARAMOUNTCY OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL MORAL HIERARCHY IN THE SYSTEM OF A DOWN DISCOGRAPHY

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“A Generation That Didn’t Agree”: The Paramountcy of Multidimensional Moral Hierarchy in the System of a Down Discography

A simultaneous, nearly paradoxical contemporary phenomenon exists by which a critical mass harbors great skepticism for objective ethics yet increasingly asserts what ought and what ought not to be. As the technological age further develops, the masses continue to fragment, each person arguing his or her own point on political news programs and blog posts. Initially, this prevalence of ethical claims would seem to indicate a war against apathy is largely successful; increasingly few are without a means of expressing their concerns for humanity, the environment and other pertinent issues. Yet in a society of assertions, the only reliable consensus that has emerged is the consensus that there is none. Uncertainty is no new dilemma, yet its magnification following failures of Enlightenment, modern and postmodern ages has not only amplified the need for life-governing answers but has also demonstrated that a stable narrative must be stylized with abundant effectiveness so as to break through walls of rampant cynicism. Into this cauldron of moral claims enters the band System of a Down and its discography, which calls for an ordering of principles. As one examines the band’s commentary, the crucial question emerges, “By reevaluating or demoting the taboo placed on the vices of profanity, sexual behavior and drug use while emphasizing the culpability of violence and oppression, does System of a Down’s ordering of morals have epistemological merit in opposing Christendom’s ethics?”

Despite the substantive intricacy of System of a Down’s work, academia has not yet formulated commentary regarded it; thus, a detailed delineation of the band’s songs is warranted when judging their place as a potential viable construct of morality. Several other aspects of the band’s work could be explored, both due to the wide variety of concerns that System of a Down
presents and the great ambiguity they utilize, but the concept of moral hierarchy will be explored here, as it presents the potential for the most holistic analysis of the band’s work. Moreover, while songs, lines and even singular word choices carry multiple meanings in the works of songwriters Daron Malakian and Serj Tankian, this exploration will focus on the most plausible interpretations regarding a relationship to moral hierarchy.

While a seemingly rigid concept such as moral hierarchy may appear incongruous with a polysemous lyrical style, System of a Down envelops their ethical commentaries in a cloud of awareness. Contrary to other artistic utilizations of ambiguity, which sometimes revel in uncertainty, System of a Down’s work ensures that any number of multiple meanings making themselves known to the listener imparts him or her with an ethical claim. Essentially, while moral hierarchy is at the root of the band’s concerns, the most universal aspect that grounds such prioritization is a constant raised level of cognizance for the listener. Though different listeners may enter into the cloud of awareness having derived different meanings from the songs and will therefore see a different angle of the moral hierarchy that is entrenched beneath the informative envelope, all perspectives will guide the listener toward what ought to be in realms of government, philosophy, personal morality and responsibility.

System of a Down demonstrates a keen awareness that their work enters into a society that is exhaustively impacted by the ideological progressions of recent history. Specifically, undergirding the band’s music is a lingering sense of the failed promises of the Enlightenment. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who chronicle this progression from hope to disillusionment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, articulate that, after centuries characterized by religiousity and an absence of tangible evidence for understanding life, the Enlightenment sought “to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1). The
theorists consider Francis Bacon to be the roots of this movement toward intellectual concrete ness. Those who came after Bacon similarly placed great hope in knowledge, which came with optimism in moving away from a past era that was “as unwilling to doubt as they were reckless in supplying answers” (1). Thus, by contrast, the thinkers of the Enlightenment would continually question, but with a promise that such questioning would indeed supply answers. While the Enlightenment maintained a rallying cry that “anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion,” such empiricism did not completely necessitate the absence of the concept of God as later delineations of naturalism would suggest; rather, humankind began to elevate itself to a level of godly comprehension in which it held “sovereignty over existence” (6). With limitless possibilities of knowledge in the fields of science, medicine, philosophy and governance, a conglomeration of truth-filled, autonomous individuals could live better lives.

Yet, within the very areas the Enlightenment purported to master, it, despite noticeable and helpful advancements, subjected people to immense doubt from different failures and cataclysms. Whereas the promise of more informed political leaders and the development of machinery connoted the hopeful idea that laborious oppression could be alleviated, the realms of technology and government collided for adverse effects by which the “powerlessness of the worker” was “not merely a ruse of the rulers but the logical consequence of industrial society” (29). In addition to oppressive working conditions and hours, results of the Enlightenment furthered the ultimate form of oppression, warfare. Industrial machinery yet again enabled degeneration with the horrific slaughtering of the Great War, and discoveries in science, once thought of by a critical mass with positivity, contributed to the formation and detonation of atomic bombs.

As if the growing disillusionment stemming from the growth of modern society was not
severe enough, even opportunities to make sense of the surrounding world in the realm of philosophy ended with the dissatisfaction of relativism. Even the most prominent philosophical constructs – such as those derived from Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* – may have they projected what was perceived as objective knowledge, they offered a dubious outlook of humanity. If the common person of the early 20th century considered the world around him or her, he or she could probably see little to disprove the disillusioned outlook of the human race as primal, destructive and oppressive – the antithesis of Enlightenment aspirations.

And while the onset of postmodernism in many ways worked furiously against the disaster of the era before it, a great cultural vacuum still persisted and continues to abound. Much of Horkheimer and Adorno’s work qualifies this general, existential dismay with explorations of social class and economics, and the relationship between the two is especially fitting when considering the similar trajectory between the Enlightenment and the American Dream – from promised happiness to deep-seated uneasiness and dread. The results of such widespread vulnerability and desperation for appeasement will later be discussed.

By knowingly entering into a culture with this history, System of a Down quite appropriately uses the opening chorus of the first song of their first album to put words to Enlightenment fallout, which is foundational to understanding the discography. Like in a majority of the band’s songs, numerous different yet related concerns abound in the opening track, “Suite-Pee.” The opening line “I had an out of body experience / the other day, her name was Jesus” demonstrates a recognizance that relativism has had its impact; particularly, the use of “her” in reference to Jesus demonstrates a contemporary skepticism that seeks to make subjective even the most basic of facts (1-2). After the introductory line asserts the presence of postmodernism, the remainder of the song indirectly chronicles how society arrived at such a
point. Society progresses from a propensity to “try her philosophy” (an adherence by the critical mass to Jesus’ philosophy, Christianity) to “die for her philosophy” (either willingly by martyrdom or, with greater relevance to the Enlightenment, unwillingly by the hands of Crusaders and other religious killers) and finally to allow “her philosophy” to “die” (6-11). The lyricist, Serj Tankian, is cleverly able to utilize the same exact words in three different ways to narrate the historical trajectory of society from one that widely follows an objective Christian narrative to one that is impeded and oppressed by that Christian narrative to one that no longer follows Christianity. Such a progression is reinforced with the song’s concluding transition, “The following of a Christ, the following of a Christ / The falling of Christ, the falling of Christ” (41-44).

Contexts delineated by Horkheimer and Adorno particularly clarify that while Christianity is the only religion referred to in “Suite-Pee,” the song may not necessarily be ridiculing Christian principles as much as it condemns the idea of it as a manipulative, oppressive cultural system. The repeated desire the song expresses for that philosophy to “die” is rooted in a history of injustice in regard to labor: “We're crossed and terrored ravages of architecture / hoist around the spade” (15-17). In Marxian fashion, the song attributes enslavement to labor to the culpable construct of religion. “Suite-Pee,” a pivotal song in establishing the band’s commentary, therefore deconstructs religion and aggressively seeks to obtain distance from its manipulative effects with great similarity to the ages of reason and modern science.

But just as soon as the band had seemed to wish death to a grand narrative of faith, the song “Science” off their subsequent album Toxicity demonstrates the great failures of empiricism. Essentially, “Suite-Pee” longed for the elimination of those forces which degraded
humans, but “Science,” presumably taking place after the culture of “Suite-Pee” has succeeded in replacing traditional religion with Enlightenment ideology, considers in hindsight that it is actually the era of modern advancements that leaves the world debilitated. Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment eras sought to break away from religious brainwashing by, “fighting off the diseased programming / of centuries” (3-4). Yet, not only does “Science fail to recognize the single / most potent element of human existence,” leaving the world empty philosophically, but it has also “failed our mother earth,” leaving it literally dilapidated (6-7, 10). As will later be discussed, the band places a joint importance on humanity and the environment through the emphasized phrase “our mother earth,” and the aforementioned use of modern machinery in warfare and pollution clearly demonstrates a dual rape of these crucial life qualities. Essentially, “Suite-Pee” and “Science” lay the foundation for all subsequent understanding in the same way Dialectic of Enlightenment abundantly considers the history of cultural mentalities that result in the present context.

After performing “Science,” Serj Tankian emphatically voiced the concerns of Horkheimer and Adorno, proclaiming to the crowd, “That's right, science has failed our mother earth. The increases in technology have not benefitted the human race. We work more, we work harder, we work longer. We have no time to realize why we're here, our purpose our goal – our vision” (Live at Lowlands Festival). The Post-Enlightenment dilemma of technology not only greatly detracts from achieving justice in economics and the working sphere as Marxist scholars long for, but it debilitates the search for meaning and morality altogether.

Further clouding society’s ability to attain a viable ethical construct is the loss of the real. Out of the aforementioned historical trajectory of technological advancement, Jean Baudrillard asserts that a “hyperreal” phenomenon has transpired from the power of simulations (1733). To
Baudrillard, Western consumerism and technology and a critical mass’ straying from the natural world have influenced a loss of what his philosophical peer Jacques Derrida deemed the “transcendental signified” (Derrida 30). The existence of this objective entity or, as best as humans could understand it, the “representational imaginary,” “disappears with simulation” and “with it goes all metaphysics” (Baudrillard 1733). Aware that this progression debilitates a search for truth – or in Baudrillardian thought shows that the original sign effectively no longer exists – System of a Down predominately engages the realm of epistemology. They do not entirely submit to the true ramifications of Baudrillard’s procession of simulacra, because moral hierarchy could not be formed amidst such societal aimlessness, but by seeking to portray moral truth largely apart from metaphysical claims, the band’s work is able to aptly converse with recent ethical commentary.

The Concept of Morality

Before considering any works from the discography that begin to structure moral hierarchy and make claims about what ought to be in the aforementioned cultural vacuum, one must first formulate an understanding of morality itself. Some would even say that the objective-subjective dichotomy is not only simplistic but largely irrelevant and that society can still function with stable morals without feeling the need to admit relativism. Thus, obtaining a plausible framework for discerning the epistemological validity of System of a Down’s discography necessitates an understanding of what comprises moral assertions.

Philosophical critic Ben Fraser terms this concept “the nature of moral judgments” and bases his work on the contrasting moral theories of Richard Joyce and Stephen Stich, the former of whom Fraser defends in regard to Joyce’s assertion of the “inescapable authority” of moral judgments (Fraser 1). Fraser asserts that, regardless of a higher system of belief influencing a
person’s to act a certain way, the reality remains that society can and will still consider a rude or wrong behavior to be rude or wrong. Thus, despite belief or worldview’s impact upon moral judgments, they exist independently from belief and therefore are both authoritative and inevitable.

Furthermore, Fraser emphasizes the need to define morality in regard to “interpersonal relations, including especially issues of harm and fairness” (7). Through delineating different strategies for discerning how morality has evolved with humanity, Fraser outlines the criteria for considering a judgment to be a moral judgment. Initially, Fraser’s criteria seems somewhat exclusive, for under his “foot-stamping” strategy, the content of a judgment must have a certain weightiness to be considered a moral pursuit (9). Yet Fraser’s “redescription strategy” differs from “foot-stamping” by redefining religiously-regulated moral behaviors such as abstaining from certain foods as actually valid moral concerns, because the interpersonal relationship of morality still exists but between a human and a god rather than between two humans (10). Fraser’s final strategy, deemed “extend-the-strategy,” argues that some religious regulations dealing with pollution or purity of oneself help maintain health (12). Thus, in realizing his aforementioned requirements for moral judgments seem to not encompass all of moral codes practiced in society, Fraser uses the latter two strategies to broaden the definition of the interpersonal, harm-related morality and emphasize its reaches. For Fraser, while a moral concept must be weighty, a great variety of issues qualify with that necessary weightiness.

Like Fraser, John R. Staver delineations of moral truth are rather inclusive, but Staver specifically explores a resolution to the seeming discord between science and religion. Appealing to the notion that the “competition for social legitimization between two social institutions with identical goals, explaining the world and how it works” is a Western phenomenon, Staver argues
that science and religion can coexist in a pursuit of ultimate forms of knowledge, or that which exists “external to, separate from, and independent of human consciousness” (24). While a pursuit of the metaphysical realm is necessary and noble, Staver’s arguments predominately function in the realm of epistemology. Thus, the school of thought in both ethics and truth study, “truth as correspondence” – entailing the aforementioned comparison between human thought and external reality – could be replaced by a model of “truth as coherence” (31). Whereas the former model emphasizes a disconnect between the actual and the perceived, the latter focuses on connecting the concepts of the perceived, or, the joining of “independent knowledge claims themselves rather than between a knowledge claim and reality” (32).

The joining of claims in the “truth as coherence” model is the ideology that undergirds morality in the System of a Down catalog. As will be later explored in further detailed, the band’s work itself rarely ever deviates from the “truth as coherence” model, and the discography does not explicitly acknowledge a metaphysical or transcendent reality that grants authority to the band’s moral claims. Thus, the great majority of the moral analysis of their work will take place within the epistemological realm, and the more metaphysical notion of “truth as correspondence” will temporarily be set aside to discern moral hierarchy under the conditions of the former.

Moreover, if Fraser qualifies, albeit broadly, a relationship between the importance of a moral component and the extent to which it involves interpersonal interaction while Staver privileges “bridges” of understanding between human perception, one can utilize both approaches to formulate an ethical construct that best interprets the band’s work (Staver 32). Tankian’s assertion in “Science” that “spirit moves through all things” is not just indicative of a transcendental ideology, but it grants validity to intermediate interaction, essentially borrowing the ultimate authority of “spirit” from the “truth as correspondence” model for the band’s claims
in a more finite realm.

This subtle assertion of credibility is convincing but cannot be proven valid before analyzing the validity of System of a Down’s conceptions of interpersonal interaction, or, as Fraser would term it, “the nature of moral judgments” (Fraser 1). While some absolutists might disregard the ability to discern this topic effectively without an ultimately metaphysical anchor, there are indeed myriad ways in which humans make moral distinctions without necessarily having such a framework. As Fraser attests to, moral claims are inevitable regardless of views about transcendent reality, and different schools of thought within the realm of ethical epistemology abound. Examples include natural law theory, utilitarianism and various other systems of thought. Ron Tamborini, Allison Eden, Nicholas David Bowman, Matthew Grizzard and Kenneth A. Lachlan consider terms these different frameworks “moral structures” (136). According to these social analysts, a moral structure does not just have basic guiding principles for making moral judgments but also has a following in which a collective community of that system impacts the reactions of an individual.

The work of Tambourini et al. incorporates results from several studies to draw conclusions about the impact of a moral structure of how violence can market itself to individuals, and this exploration functions on two levels. One function is the actual analysis of the “acceptance and appeal of violence,” which will be discussed later, and the other is the consideration of how a given “moral subculture” lessens or heightens an individual’s propensity to adopt a certain view (136). While the System of a Down discography primarily speaks within the “truth as coherence” model, such a conversation does not suspend the consideration of the systems of belief that claim truth is correspondent to metaphysical reality. Instead, such an analysis will copiously consider the impacts of moral subcultures that appeal to a transcendent code, because a great amount of these moral absolutist schools of thought actually negotiate and
conceive their tenets within the finite realm. Relating one aspect of human perception to another commonly entails the epistemology of a moral subculture claiming transcendence, and such subcultures are frequently found within the realm of religion. Thus, the byproducts of a “truth of correspondence” will inevitably transpire within in “truth as coherence” interaction, both in theory and in practice.

**The Impact of Cultures and Subcultures**

Before delving into the relationship between different moral subcultures and the System of a Down discography, further culture context needs to be established. Religion has been one influential construct alluded to, but there are indeed numerous constructs that lead to the formation of moral thought. Cultural theorist Michel Foucault further delineates the impact of the collective conscious upon the individual in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. Although what Foucault deems vectors of power are not the same entity as moral subcultures, for power vectors can influence other aspects of behavior besides morality, there is a similar essence between the two.

Foucault outlines a complex system of philosophical theory in his work, much of which centers around the aforementioned post-Enlightenment societal progression that has accounted for the incessant influence of power vectors upon the individual. A power vector is a widely applicable term, so it does not just have to entail a national governmental authority, but it can manifest itself in local authorities, educational or religious institutions, companies, marriage and a variety of other spheres of influences. Each individual is comprised of influences from various power vectors and therefore does not actually have individuality due to a “panoptic” phenomenon (1642). The more one senses he or she is being watched, the more that person undergoes a loss of subjectivity; freedom becomes elusory.
Foucault’s concept of the panoptic societal lens arises from his analysis of the prison system. As technology has evolved, prison systems have gained the ability to watch all prisoners at once. Thus, just as the power vector of the prison system is essentially always watching, so the power vectors of society are either always watching or giving the individual the perception that he or she is being watched. Thus, though the rise of technology and images in society has eliminated the concept of an absolute real and decentered subjects, seemingly giving them freedom to choose whichever sense of new identity they desire, the increase of technology has only intensified the influence of power vectors and therefore an “individual” will merely be adopting the influence of one or more vectors.

Foucault’s articulation of power vectors specifically involves the factors of regulation, codification and monitoring (1644). The more one is exposed to the regulation of concepts, the less he or she can be sure of what the concepts would have organically been. Similarly, the process of the Enlightenment has entailed the discovery of knowledge, which has brought about labeling and codifying of the world; the more something is categorized, especially through education, the less of it a person can experience on his or her own. Finally, monitoring involves Foucault’s aforementioned metaphor of discipline and punishment; monitoring is a catalyst for regulation and codification (1654). All these tenets of Foucaultian theory will be foundational throughout the analysis of System of a Down’s moral assertions, as the band shows an abundant familiarity with Foucault by asserting, “Your thoughts and dreams are no longer sacred, as they are exposed to a weapon known as remote viewing and monitoring” (System of a Down).

Horkheimer and Adorno identify that the most destructive vector of influence is actually a cyclical conglomeration of power structures. The theorists regard this phenomenon as the “culture industry,” a term they use rather equivocally with the “entertainment business”; Post-
Enlightenment vulnerability causes the masses to inevitably the readily available entertainment (1229). For example, because the viewer of film “sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left,” the “culture industry as a whole has molded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product” (1226, 1227). The artistic quality of visual entertainment becomes increasingly irrelevant, as “its consequences will be quite enormous and promise to intensify the impoverishment of aesthetic matter” (1226). Yet the grandiose problem extends beyond mere bad taste amongst the masses, for the “ruthless unity in the culture industry is evidence of what will happen in politics” (1225). System of a Down share Marxian realizations with Horkheimer and Adorno that art should be used to liberate the oppressed lower classes, and the entertainment industry is a monumental structure that is diametrically opposed to this moral sense.

Due to the System of a Down’s realization that different moral subcultures and power vectors considerably muddy the search for moral truth, the highest, most overarching principle of the band’s moral hierarchy is awareness. As previously alluded to, the technique of imparting listeners with continually thought-provoking lyrics and styles is itself the highest element of the hierarchy: the moral and artistic obligation to synthesize brokenness through art. All subsequent parts of the hierarchy transpire underneath this basic envelope. Thus, whereas the band is commonly identified by the specific lyrical concerns it raises, Daron Malakian felt it necessary to adamantly clarify, “People we think we sing about politics, people think we sing about sex, people think we sing about drugs; we sing about our life” (Live at Lowlands Festival). Malakian went on to stress that the band’s music points to larger conversations, such as life and death, than the mere discussions of the aforementioned, typical subjects. Malakian is specifically aware of misconceptions and the ability for lyrical about politics, sex and drugs to be considered in a stereotypical manner. When performing at the 2005 MTV Europe Music Awards, Malakian
changed song lyrics to directly address this issue, inserting the new line “This ain’t no bullshit political punk rock” to not only distance System of a Down from other stereotypical bands purporting anti-establishment views but also to directly oppose MTV, who deemed the band “political punk rock” \((MTV)\). The band is aware the culture industry can even market rebellion against it, and they desire to transcend an easily-classifiable label. Thus, for System of a Down, the artistic mission itself, the highest element of the hierarchy, by nature truly opposes the culture industry and the power vector of entertainment.

Yet despite the band’s resisting power vectors exponentially more than most others in society, System of a Down humbly acknowledges their humanity and inability to fully escape the forces of the world around them. Perhaps none of their artistic endeavors illustrates this better than the music video for the song “B.Y.O.B.”. At the end of the video, the band becomes the very machines they set out to resist, thus offering a complicated portrayal of the limitations of the artistic mission amidst the culture industry and the mechanized age. The video is a realistic microcosm of the moral obligation of the artist, for the artist cannot fully attain transcendence of society’s power vectors, but he or she can vigilantly resist them as Foucault would promote. Indeed, the band does not become like the machines until the closing seconds of the video, potentially indicating by the contrast of time increments that the majority of the true artist’s mission can be authentic and successful even if there are societal and ultimate confinements.

The artistic mission now being inseparable from other concerns demonstrates how the band’s moral hierarchy is cyclically harmonious. Art and the societal tenets it incorporates continually rely upon and impact one another. Moreover, contrary to perceptions of moral hierarchy as rigid and overtly didactic, System of a Down’s ordering of principles incorporates multiplicity and sometimes does little more than providing listeners with a keen, nuanced
outlook of life’s brokenness. In other instances, the band is more heavy-handed in its delivery. Often they approach the most urgent, expansive and destructive concerns with more aggression and less ambiguity.

**Navigating the Moral Hierarchy**

Beneath the chief concern of the artistic mission that envelopes all rungs of the hierarchy, manifestations of violence comprise the band’s top concern. The most grave evil System of a Down vehemently resists is genocide. Genocide seems like an obvious evil to resist with clarity, but the band’s emphasis on the Armenian Genocide of 1915 makes their commentary on the grandest evil of genocide more complex and evidences its necessity. The band’s four members, all of Armenian descent, have consistently and aggressively spoken out against not only the mass eradication of Armenians, from which the very term “genocide” originated, but the Turkish government’s historical and shockingly present denial of such events. At the onset of their careers, System of a Down released their first professional recording on a musical compilation purposed for recognizing the Armenian Genocide. On the band’s first album, the song “P.L.U.C.K.” stands for “Politically Lying, Unholy, Cowardly Killers,” and the song’s direct affront to the Turkish government laments the genocide and asserts a three-pronged need for progress: “recognition, restoration, reparation” (13). In one of Malakian’s own songs, he identifies the combination of “genocide mixed with Turkish lies” as immensely destructive.

Yet like most all concerns in the discography, the Ottoman attempt to eradicate the Armenian people and the Turkish government’s continual denial of the genocide embody a more universal realization. Tankian, an adamant activist for recognition of the 1915 genocide, combined forces with other activists to create a video as a call to action. Tankian and his counterparts assert that the recognition of a genocide is not a technicality that can be sacrificed
for harmonious political relations, as the United States has done with Turkey, but rather, it is a crucial component toward the aforementioned process in “P.L.U.C.K.” – to restore and heal.

Tankian clarifies that “the real reason they [the Turkish government] are trying to deny the genocide is because they do not want to take responsibility for it or pay for it. It is not because they do not know what happened; it’s in every archive of every nation in the world” (Tankian).

Thus, the process of “recognition, restoration, reparation” entails making tangible reparations to those affected, but it more importantly prevents future atrocities of the same magnitude. In Tankian’s video, California representative Adam Schiff asserts, “This word – genocide – matters more than almost all others, because encompassed within that single word is a crime of enormous magnitude – the deliberate attempt to destroy an entire people. Denial of genocide is the final chapter of genocide. We don’t want to be complicit in the final chapter of a genocide, so we need to speak plainly: this is a moral imperative” (Tankian). Schiff aptly summarizes the band’s treatment of the issue of genocide, both in the artistic sphere and in political and public life. Genocide clearly emerges as the most pressing concern at the top of the moral hierarchy, and, unlike the concerns beneath it, it demands to be discussed plainly without any room for multiple interpretations.

Moreover, the band emphasizes genocide and its ramifications as particularly unique because every other concern in the hierarchy incorporates some level of ambiguity. Straightforwardly analyzing the obvious issue of genocide is a bridge toward other concerns. Tankian’s asking himself the question, “If something like this [the Armenian genocide] is denied because of geo-political expediency or economics, then how many other troops are there that we need to know about – liberation struggles, human rights issues, labor issues, environmental issues?” spurred on his artistic exploration of the numerous other expansive dilemmas (Tankian).
Other matters near the top of the hierarchy also entail violence and oppression, and a crucial component of such fatal injustice in the System of a Down discography is systematic oppression, especially when it manifests itself in the military-industrial complex. The band greatly criticizes matters of war but presents them with complexity. System of a Down specifically condemns the actions of the United States government, and critic Edmund F. Byrne offers an ethical analysis of the U.S. military-industrial complex that can illuminate the validity of the band’s commentary. While past analysis has sufficiently demonstrated that the practice of war negatively impacts many and serves the interests of a benefitting minority, Byrne emphasizes that one reason such realizations do not translate into widespread criticism and change is because of the military’s claim of ethical sovereignty. Byrne’s work only briefly discusses the guise of self-defense and pragmatically asserts that in actuality, though many wars may claim self-defense within the sphere of public perception, proponents of war more closely involved admit other reasons, not self-defense, urge military action.

Thus, Edmund Byrne’s work asserts that the failure of United States’ military missions to be classified as self-defense necessitates a response as to whether the benefits of war are ethical (153). Byrne realizes that proponents of such wars cite societal business benefits and the sovereignty of the military over “ethical constraints” as justification, and he argues against such claims. By providing the comparison that products of business endeavors such as tobacco use, drug-dealing and prostitution have potential to be considered unethical because of the harm they cause employees or consumers, Byrne creates an approach of reasoning by which financially-based military missions could be considered unethical due to the ethical constraint of harm in professional business.

For Byrne, the two defenses of the military-industrial complex – economic benefits and
ethical exemption – still do not provide direct justification for the harms done by warfare and are therefore not valid defenses. Citing longstanding American public policy that “no individual or corporation should garner extravagant profits by marketing war-related goods to the nation,” Byrne traces through the emergence of military industrialism throughout World War II and the Cold War – deemed matters of national defense – and then emphasizes the murky ideological territory that arises from such industries still wanting or needing to exist despite decreased clarity of the defense claim (155). Thus, the country can still by association claim defense for pursuing “vital interests” (160).

However, while Byrne provides a rather detached ethical analysis that can and will serve to validate System of a Down’s claims, the band does not as quickly jump to cold pragmatism, but instead incorporates emotion to appeal to the right treatment of humanity in regard to systematic violence and warfare. For the band, lines such as, “We fought your wars with all our hearts / You sent us back in body parts” portray the evident injustice done to soldiers caught in the throes of the military-industrial complex (“A.D.D.” 1-2). Though Byrne’s analysis essentially describes the military culture in which war is mostly reduced to the discernment of economic outcomes, System of a Down asserts, “We don't give a damn about your world / with all your global profits” and that “Your remainder is an unjustifiable / egotistical power struggle / At the expense of the American dream” (4-5, 7-8). Byrne’s analysis functions as an ethical reproach to those who bypass the band’s aforementioned sentiments in their song “A.D.D.” (“American Dream Denial”), but the band makes it extremely difficult for listeners with a conscience to ignore their pleas and assertions. In either instance, the condemnation of the military-industrial complex is justified.

In *The Lonely Warriors: Case for the Military-Industrial Complex*, John Stanley
Baumgartner’s tone does not appear nearly as objective as Byrne’s, as Baumgartner boldly emphasizes the great need for the defense industry. Whereas Byrne essentially operates under the assumption that self-defense claims are transparently invalid, Baumgartner seeks to validate claims that military action is justified through numerous emphases, including his considering Cold War era periods “World Wars III and IV” (171). For Baumgartner, “this was a different kind of war” but “nevertheless it was exactly that,” and “it was necessary for the military and industry to support a major effort in Vietnam” (172-173). His propensity to consider a wide variety of concerns grounds for military involvement continues into the present era. Baumgartner intertwines concerns for national security and economics by asserting “the competitive pace in defense development is going to pick up, not diminish, whether or not we choose to stay in the race” (34). Moreover, for Baumgartner, the the “lonely warriors” are actually the “maligned” providers of defense who are stigmatized by the erroneous intransigence to the military industrial complex (1). Critics of the military-industrial complex assert that the creation of defense technology and weaponry clearly implies these goods will inevitably be put to use; Baumgartner unabashedly affirms that reasoning because of his belief that the widespread presence of the United States military is essential.

System of a Down shows immense disdain for the ethical concepts of those such as John Stanley Baumgartner and seeks to refute those like him on the same tonal level. Whereas Byrne undergirds the band’s claims via technically sound ethical articulations and the two both oppose the military-industrial complex, there is a chasm of attitude between their commentaries. Having garnered support in scholarship from analysts such as Byrne and their own research, System of a Down therefore proceeds to wage ideological war against Baumgartner on the same level of rhapsodic intensity. The aforementioned lyrics from “A.D.D.” can be just as readily applied to
Baumgartner, and instead of the nefarious opposition of a political entity, the band takes on the voice of foreign peoples subjugated, displaced and killed by the military-industrial complex in “Tenative.” “While you are talking all detached,” System of a Down sings, “the bombs are falling overhead,” and they poignantly repeat, “Where do expect us to go when the bombs fall?” on behalf of the helpless victims (3-4, 18). Baumgartner’s eagerness for the global involvement of the defense industry is illustrated by the collective first person in the song “Attack,” in which the band sings “The cold insincerity of steel machines / have consumed our euphoria / transforming us into muted dreams / dreaming of the day that we attack” (4-8). System of a Down can validate its opposition to the military-industrial complex, whether through the support of Byrne’s circumstantial ethics or a combination of logic and awareness mixed with the emotion of the human conscience that resists Baumgartner.

Though System of a Down and ethicist Paul Ramsey posit numerous differing views on warfare, Ramsey still proposes helpful clarifications that undergird the band’s claims. The band seeks to expose the fact that “the war-making power still today basically assumes that the topmost leaders estimate the cause, count the cost, and declare justified war” (Ramsey 130). Moreover, in regard to bombing, a chief concern of System of a Down’s moral commentary on violence, Ramsey asserts that “we do not need to know who and where the noncombatants are in order to know know that indiscriminate bombing exceeds the moral limits of warfare that can ever barely be justified” (144). However, while Ramsey’s delineations of war’s ethical boundaries are valuable, the band would ultimately consider them insufficient, because the question Ramsey seeks to answer, “How shall modern war be conducted justly?” is incongruous with the band’s moral epistemology. Modern warfare is an innately unjust phenomenon that cannot be conducted with morality because it will always subjugate a person, whether the
solder, the citizen of the home country or the citizen of the attacked country. One primary reason why the band’s ordering of morals is opposed to a vast majority of Christian thought is because Christendom predominately considers only the morality of an individual’s involvement in war and does not adequately comment on being indirectly complicit with a governmental power vector that practices military-industrial complex.

The band continues to enforce their commentary on how the military-industrial complex ravages Americans drawn into soldierhood on *Steal This Album!*. The song “Bubbles” voices the perspective of those who fight a country’s war, who are “adhering… believing then kneeling, appeasing / The power struggle” – they are “the power-struck” (11-14). In a sea of political fragmentation and binary opposition, the American victims of warfare are “left with no arms / right in the power struggle,” and the allusions to the political parties at the beginning of these lines are no coincidence, but rather, intricate artistry (15-16). Line breaks and word placement function as key agents of ambiguity in the band’s discography, but in the situation of this line, they further amplify not only the dilapidation of humans from warfare, but also the failed attempts to justly control the political sphere, which could quell the injustices of the military-industrial complex.

“Boom!” identifies how the continual practice of war propagates “unnecessary death” in a variety of ways and shifts the focus away what ought to be crucial humanitarian endeavors (22). Through his use of blunt lyrics in the song, Tankian identifies the attitudes that allow the military-industrial complex to flourish as an intricate, cultural dilemma:

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Matador corporations,
puppeting your frustrations
with the blinded flag.
Manufacturing consent
Is the name of the game;
the bottom line is money,
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nobody gives a fuck.
4,000 hungry children leave us
per hour from starvation,
While billions are spent on bombs,
Creating death showers; (“Boom!,” 23-33)

Stylistically, the moral dilemma he emphatically voices in this verse is so evident that listeners are forced to confront it. Again the band incorporates its overarching theme of awareness.

However, as the listener descends the band’s moral hierarchy, he or she will begin to notice that the aforementioned ambiguity appears more rapidly in accordance with the complexities of each moral topic. Whereas genocide is essentially the greatest evil and should be plainly identified as such, the causes and effects of the military-industrial complex, though also regarded as immense transgressions of morality, merit more detailed discussion for their intricacies. Some works such as “Boom!” identify such systematic subjugation with necessarily brusque urgency, while other songs such as “B.Y.O.B.” demonstrate a combination of overt commentary with enigmatic descriptions. The former approach manifests itself in the song’s title, “Bring Your Own Bombs” and its repeated lines “Everybody’s going to the party, have a real good time / Dancing in the desert, blowing up the sunshine” and “Why don’t presidents fight the war / Why do they always send the poor?” (10-11, 33-34). Such phrases evidently expose the several facets of the military-industrial complex, which seeks to falsely portray the experience of war as favorable to certain citizens in order to enlist them, whom inevitably belong to the lower economic classes.

Thus, the more labyrinthine lyrics in “B.Y.O.B.” serve as complements to the patent utterances, and the band utilizes such complexity in the three primary cryptic formats that appear in most of their songs: pliable line breaks, gerunds and the implied pairing of references. These three lyrical devices evidence the aforementioned concept of an envelope of awareness by
creating multiple potential interpretations, all of which move the listener closer to an appropriate prioritization of morals. For instance, instead of simply stating that financial gain is the objective of the war industry as the band had previously done in “Boom!”, Malakian and Tankian choose the more veiled wording, “Breaking into Fort Knox / stealing our intentions” (14-15). The subsequent line “Hangers sitting dripped in oil” could be understood to state that oil is the intention of engaging in warfare, but considering that the line begins a new stanza and arguably a new sentence, it may be more appropriately viewed with connection to the phrase “crying freedom” that directly follows it (16-17). Yet the verb “crying” would trace itself back to the subject “hangars” with such an interpretation, and because the verb is so removed from another potential subject, it is not clear who is “crying freedom,” and thus the verb takes on the form of a gerund. Those who cry “freedom” could be proponents of the military-industrial complex seeking justification for their actions, or the plea could be more genuine on behalf of the unknowingly subjugated citizens mentioned in the song. The lines in the verses of “B.Y.O.B” especially tend to flow into one another and obscure the notion of one, palpable meaning. Such an approach therefore allows the songwriters to address multiple concerns all while using artistic subtlety so as to maintain an audience by not becoming unattractively, singularly didactic with their work.

The band especially delves into the relationship between systematic injustice toward the poor and violence on their second album *Toxicity*, where “Prison Song” and “Deer Dance” further depict the use of political power against American citizens. In “Prison Song,” the band considers a systematic agenda in the war on drugs: “Following the right’s movements / you clamped down with your iron fists / Drugs became conveniently / available for all the kids” (3-6). System of a Down seeks to expose the recent history of political power: “Minor drug
offenders fill your prisoners / you don’t even flinch / all our taxes paying for your wars / against
the new non-rich” (20-23). Research plays a pivotal role in the band’s recognition of the link
between drugs and incarceration, for Tankian chants, “Nearly two million Americans are
incarcerated in the prison system of the U.S.” and “The percentage of American in the prison
system has doubled since 1985” (12-13, 30-31). Foucault’s analysis of the prison system may
function primarily as metaphor for society at large, but it also includes valid explorations of the
system itself; similarly, the band identifies the carceral as a cog in the wheel of systematic
injustice that subjugates the poor and enables warfare.

“Deer Dance” seems to invoke specific protest movements in the Los Angeles area to
offer a more expansive condemnation of systematic subjugation at the law enforcement level. In
the song, law enforcement purports to be the protagonist of sorts, providing the public with order
as “Battalions of riot police / with rubber bullet kisses” offer “baton courtesy / service with a
smile” (4-7). Tankian depicts the police satirically as loving actors in the verse then juxtaposes
such poetic tone with the genuine chorus, in which he proclaims, “Beyond the Staples Center
you can see America / with its tired poor, avenging disgrace / peaceful, loving youth against the
brutality / of plastic existence” (8-11). These protesters resist the falseness of the culture industry
and seek economic justice as Marxist scholars would intend, but they are met by those armed
with “fully automatics” who “like to push the weak around” (13-14). While the previous
mentions of war entail the more conventional use of the word, this scene is a form of war as well,
as the freedom to protest, a seeming “invitation to peace,” is really “war staring you in the face,
dressed in black / with a helmet, fierce / trained and appropriate for the disproportioned
malcontent” (36-40). Governmental power vectors at multiple levels control citizens in order to
uphold political and economic practices that enable systematic injustices such as the military-
industrial complex and other forms of economic, carceral and local subjugation.

While the protesters in “Deer Dance” cannot bring about change in their physical space, they at least resist power vectors on the cognitive level; System of a Down demonstrates great concern that most cannot even reach this level of awareness. Instead, forces of power utilize the culture industry as distraction. With its ability to address numerous aspects of moral obligation, “B.Y.O.B” serves a pivotal role in the System of a Down discography because it bridges together the military-industrial complex with another indispensable realization: distraction. Distraction may be the most recurring concern in the discography because it influences and propels misunderstanding of all components of moral responsibility. Genocide, the military-industrial complex and distraction comprise the band’s condemnation of violence that emerges as the highest concern of the moral hierarchy. Similarly to monitoring, which amplifies the effects of regulation and codification in the Foucaultian panopticon, distraction serves as a catalyst for violence and oppression in the System of a Down discography.

Thus, with the ideas of “overbearing advertising” and the “god of consumerism” that governs the culture firmly established from “Boom!,” “B.Y.O.B.” further delineates how the ploys of capitalist culture enable the military industrial complex (“Boom!” 8-9). “Pointed heels” and “brand new spankin’ deals” emerge at the opening of the song, and they are considered “barbarisms by Barbarus,” a clever way of using biblical allusion to imply that the true criminal is not being punished justly or reciprocally for his crimes (1-4). Instead, the will of the people has inadvertently dictated that someone else, the poor, receive the tragic outcome. Thus, the band indicts first and foremost those in power who uphold systematic subjugation but also the populous that is complicit in the injustice, culminating in the cry, “Where the fuck are you?” which can be intended for either or both of the guilty parties (29).
Elsewhere in the discography, System of a Down portrays the link between consumerism and distraction in further detail. “Chic ‘N Stu,” a song dedicated entirely to exposing advertising, repeats that “advertising causes therapy,” presumably because it “causes need” to attain more, which results in dissatisfaction and insecurity from hearing “Every minute, every second / buy, buy, buy, buy, buy (7-8, 17-18). The insular phenomenon that advertising initiates is diametrically opposed to the band’s prioritization of morals, which implies that a responsibility for others is inherent in a moral conversation. By contrast, advertising turns those who do not resist it inward, eliminating their chance to fulfill their moral obligation and causing them to become complicit in the culture industry.

Thus, power-holders in such a system contribute to the “fetish of commodities,” by which they can either distract the proletariat from realizing the reason for their unnecessarily difficult lives or enforce propaganda that achieves a similar effect (Marx and Engels 776). In “CUBEr,” “canned, cliché people cannot dare” to resist the appeal entertainment and are bound by lure of distraction, which essentially commands, “Don’t leave your seats now” (Tankian 14-18). A consumerist culture does not only market tangible products through advertising but also instills its objectives through entertainment.

In addition to inimical consumerism, pervasive religion functions as another enabler of violence in the System of a Down discography. Misguided religion may be an subset of distraction even more dangerous than the aforementioned distractions, because it brings about negative action instead of inaction. Specifically, in “War?,” Tankian asserts that “history teaches us… man needs a reason to kill man,” and this “reason he must attain – must be approved by his God” (26-29). “War?” deems “beliefs” to be “bullets of the wicked,” which, like other statements in the discography, deconstructs the clarity of a popular dichotomy between
processed, destructive organized religion and genuine, acceptable faith (21).

The complicated presentation of religion in System of a Down’s songs raises the issue of whether the prominent religious order of Christianity has been distorted to allow violence or is innately violent. Nick Mansfield argues that Christian belief without acquiescence to violence is essentially nonexistent. To Mansfield, the myriad deaths of the Bible are attributed to God, the greatest killer; the Christian concept of God’s sovereignty and inability to be wrong, then, results in the acceptance of violence (138). However, sovereignty becomes a dually defined, intricate matter in Mansfieldian thought, as he recognizes the unique and nuanced sense of subjectivity that belongs to humanity. To Mansfield, unlike ruled animals, humans all have a sense of subjectivity, and though power balances (or imbalances) will grant significantly more subjectivity to some than others, less privileged humans still aspire to attain a greater level of subjectivity (132). Additionally, and after articulating the presence of human sovereignty, Mansfield discusses how that sense of freedom applies to determining whether to partake in violence. Essentially, it is by sovereignty that killing can either be perpetuated or avoided, and the control of death is a byproduct of sovereignty. Thus, the power balance of perceived divinity is diametrically opposed to true humanity and autonomy.

System of a Down voices concern for the Christian religion’s effect on human subjectivity, for if the human sense of sovereignty can potentially curb violence-associated death as Mansfield posits, then any cause that debilitates or misguides that ability to rightly practice morality should thence be opposed. Benedikt Kranemann establishes an innate, pervasive sense of violence in Christianity that should be approached with such wariness, as he examines the biblical theme of sacrifice in the person of Christ and in biblical anecdotes and commands. Kranemann’s case study most prominently examines the context of World War I and the
presence of the saint as a model for the soldier. Christian principles can therefore grant legitimacy to the political and military spheres and their objectives, for “War… becomes a school of the cross and suffering” and thus, not only the abuse of liturgies, but rituals and teachings themselves can readily pave a pathway toward war (Kranemann 248).

Whereas Mansfield asserts there is an inseparable relationship between violence and Christianity and Kranemann’s study leans toward indicating humans may never know any different between the pairing of the two, other scholars posit that there could be Christian practice that resists violence done towards humanity. Dacian But-Capusan’s initial explorations of persecution and martyrdom in the early church, the killing of heretics in Western Christianity and the Crusades and Inquisition further the notion that “violence is a constant presence in the history of Christianity”, but to But-Capusan, there is an irreconcilable dissonance between the bloodshed of Christendom and the “patristic message of the Church” (219, 224). If the manifestation of widespread killing is actually recalcitrant to true Christian practice, then the moral system itself would not actually promote the wrongful prioritization of morals by the standards of the band and other scholarship.

Depending on how one reads the line breaks at the opening of “Sugar,” the listener could derive that the religious forces are so harmful that it is outrageous to allow them. One could surmise that the lyric “Who can believe you / let your mother pray” condemns the allowance of the religiosity of a past generation to plague present culture (3-5). Yet the line could just as easily be read as an interrogative followed by an imperative, which would actually esteem a spiritual sense because the addressee’s credibility is tarnished because he did not let his mother pray.

Like in other areas, System of a Down creates commentary that could deliver listeners to a variety of conclusions, but all views the listener could acquire will emphasize a vast history of
oppression and killing and the need for extreme caution with the Christian religion. Moreover, not only do Christian teachings or their teachers enable violence and so present an opposable moral order, but their combination with the culture industry becomes a monumentally deleterious force. While John Piper’s views on entertainment do not promote rapid consumption by any means, Piper’s sentiments are a microcosm of a generally Christian view that the band seeks to subvert. In regard to film, Piper remarks that he “has a high tolerance for violence” because “the violence is make-believe” (Piper).

The studies of Tambourini et al. not only provide understandings that undergird the idea of a “moral subculture,” but the analysts consider how the mores of a subculture can result in violence seeming acceptable to its members. However, before specifying results of their findings to the particulars of a subculture’s propensity to accept violence, Tambourini et al. assert “enjoyment is largely dependent on the outcome of events and whether or not consequences seem morally justified” (137). The analysts’ findings contextualize both the band’s and Piper’s commentaries by providing a social formula that asserts the thoughts that comprise the responses of a majority of viewers of a film or piece of entertainment. Essentially, if a character commits violence for reasons the film suggests are pardonable for a greater purpose, that violence generally will not be met with opposition from the audience.

If such violence was ultimately “make-believe” as Piper posits, then there would not be moral principles at stake, but the unmistakable correlation between the trajectories of a film and the military-industrial complex privilege System of a Down’s concerns (Piper). In regard to violence, the objective of the filmmaker in this scenario is essentially the same as those wielding power atop the war industry: the violence must be made justifiable. Moreover, Piper continues his assertion of moral priorities in art by voicing his “zero tolerance for nudity” and sexuality,
and these views of violence and sexual content in film greatly contrast the levels of importance in the System of a Down discography (Piper).

Furthermore, if belief in the transcendental signified is what drives the moral ordering of thinkers such as Piper and Ramsey, the allowance for war-related violence is actually counter-productive toward their moral epistemology because it kills the idea of god. Notions of metaphysics inevitably influence epistemology as previously discussed, and the band’s work shows that a transcendental signified will definitely not be attained if warfare persists. Specifically, Malakian and Tankian consider focus on the presence of the bomb in war culture for their commentary on religious principles that could order morality. In “Boom!”, they repeat “Every time you drop the bomb you kill the god your child has born,” thus asserting that any epistemological ground that might be able to be gained in the present and future is debilitated by bombings, which convince humanity God is dead (17). The victims being bombed in “Tentative” cry, “No one, no one’s gonna save us now / not even God / no one saved us (16-17). To Tankian, the bomb is a mesmerizing horror, as he spoke from personal experience when he asserted, “If you ever hear a bomb fall, it’s something you will never, ever forget it” (Tankian).

The young men going off to war in “Soldier Side” are “wondering when Jesus comes, are they gonna be saved,” but because of the horrors of war, “God is wearing black / he’s gone so far to find no hope / he’s never coming back” (5-7, 14). The search for moral truth that could be associated with the transcendental signified cannot transpire amidst this mournful disarray, in which listeners, like the characters in the song, feel they’ve “come so far to find no truth” (11). Oppressive and murderous violence from warfare in turn obscures epistemology and those who are complicit in condoning the violence have eviscerate their own ethical constructs.

Entertainment, violence and sexuality culminate in the band’s pivotal song “Violent
Pornography,” which bridges together the concerns of the moral hierarchy and provides a holistic reassessment and reversal of traditionally Christian values. It is no coincidence that before performing the song Malakian proclaimed, “Jesus, save us from your followers,” for after saying this, he and the band then proceeded to play a song that is diametrically opposed to consensus Christian morality that becomes conflated with the culture industry. While it is unclear who is the speaker of the verses – Malakian himself or an embodiment of another ideology – the repeated verses emphasize that sexual behavior occurs amidst all humans and is not an aberration. Moreover, the song posits that the true violation of nature and the real filth and degradation is not sexuality itself but rather the pornography of “brainwashing” violence shown on television, which the band refers to in explicit, sexual terms (82). The chorus, “It’s non-stop disco / Bet you it’s Nabisco, bet you didn’t know” describes the ploys of the culture industry and how they adroitly entangle the consumer in a downward spiral (9-11). The symbol of a disco connotes rampant disorientation and distraction, and the fact that it is unceasing emphasizes that the “trends of the culture industry are profoundly embedded in the public” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1229). The line “Bet you it’s Nabisco, bet you didn’t know” follows to tonally demonstrate that advertising and other programming without substance acts as if it were providing the viewer with some valuable knowledge that he or she does not yet have and needs.

Moreover, while an exploration of Piper, Tambourini et al. and the moral subculture of Christianity primarily entails film or fictional entertainment, the “kind of shit you get on your TV” that the band is referring to is not necessarily fictional programming. In fact, as songs such as “Hypnotize” suggest, the programming may very likely be real footage and news reporting. When referring to the coverage of the Tiananmen Square protests as a microcosm of the practice of world news coverage, Malakian and Tankian claim “They disguise it, hypnotize it / Television
made you buy it” and that such coverage will “Mesmerize the simple minded / Propaganda leaves us blinded” (3-4, 8-9). Thus, when at the end of “Violent Pornography” the band instructs its listeners to “turn off your TV,” they do so realizing that it is not only the fictional, action-oriented programs that are harmful, but the stations that purport to air reality are the more imminent threat (81).

However, one cannot deem the assertions in “Violent Pornography” or the remainder of the discography as epistemologically valid merely by the songs’ condemnation of the culture industry’s enabling of the military-industrial complex, for the question still remains as to whether their utilization of profanity and sexuality has merit. A key principle that drives a seemingly lax stance on explicit language and sexuality is the fluid, malleable progression with which cultures have historically treated such subjects, particularly sexuality. Foucault argues that sexual behavior’s organic existence without stigma subsided due to the watchful social eye and the terming of behaviors by which “a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified” (1648).

Furthermore, in “Out of Time: The Moral Temporality of Sex, Crime and Taboo,” Sharon Hayes and Belinda Carpenter emphasize that the relationship between morality and law can be congruent, cyclical or dissonant, thus privileging the notion of social construction insofar as the regulation of nations and cultures is concerned. The majority of Hayes and Carpenter’s analysis considers the specific ways in which views of sexuality – specifically, child sexuality – are dependent on and derived from a variety of shifting cultural contexts. For instance, a contrast between the historical definition of young persons as “small adults” with the more recent understanding of children as “vulnerable” and in need of protection depends on a variety of societal factors (144). Some of the factors in the past included the inability to develop strong emotional attachment to children due to high child mortality rates and the cultural expectation for
children to exhibit adult-like behavior in manners and responsibility. Contrarily, the analysts assert that industrialization allowed the perception of children to be modified to “objects of affection and care, rather than objects of labour and economic benefit” (144). Even over the course of the last century, the concept of childhood or adolescence has further emphasized the adult/child binaries of comprehension, responsibility, power and consent while expanding the age groups encompassed by childhood, which is increasingly sacredized.

The extensive context with which Hayes and Carpenter ground their observations illuminates their assertions regarding the inconsistencies of “legal moralism,” which creates taboos to protect children from the incessant adult gaze. In regard to sexual practice, sexuality between young persons is often seen as experimentation and therefore not seen nearly as harmful as a sexual encounter between an adult and child, in which the former holds command over the latter, who cannot fully understand the sexual action despite being biologically mature and being considered able to understand it when interacting with another underage peer. Hayes and Carpenter further call the institutions of law and moral legalism into question through the study of a young teenage student’s relationship with his teacher, aged 34; the two continually persisted on their relationship despite legal ramifications and, after the teacher’s sentence and the student’s adulthood, married and had two children.

With the exception of the lyric “In this world of make believe / your children are sexualized” in Malakian’s song “Fucking,” Malakian or Tankian do not comment on child sexuality in their songs, which makes the connection between Hayes and Carpenter and the band’s discography initially appear insufficient. However, while a detailed and substantive understanding of Hayes and Carpenter is necessary, it does not function only for the end purpose of child sexuality itself but rather for the realization of the fleetingness of sexuality mores. The critics’ clearly evaluate their theory to be able to exceed sex in realizing that the processes of
disciplining and protecting “young people extends beyond sex and sexuality, to include almost all areas of life” (150). A Hayesian and Carpenterian formula for moral and societal analysis deconstructs all areas taken for granted to allow them to be reevaluated again, especially in light of contingent, changing cultural factors. If the subcategory of child sexuality – which is a rather extreme example in comparison to all other stigmatized forms of sexual practice, especially those emphasized by conventional Christianity – can be exposed as uncertain, then a wide variety of sexual behaviors merit a similar reluctance to form epistemological absolutes. Malakian echoed such a sentiment during an interview about “Fucking,” when he stated that the song considers a “changing society and the next generation of values and morals. The song is not for or against it; it’s just an observation.” (Malakian).

Thus, if an expansive approach to the logic of sexual morals indicates much of the taboo they receive has little to no epistemological foundation, System of a Down’s use of sexuality can not only be considered correct moral prioritization, but also an artistic tactic that includes blunt sexuality’s close cousin, profanity. In opposition to a hierarchy that frequently views sex and profanity as more dangerous evils than violence or systematic oppression, the band cleverly not only reorders the moral tenets but uses one to oppose the other. Deeming sexuality and profanity as indefinite entities may lead some in a disillusioned, Post-Enlightenment culture to wildly and recklessly flaunt these behaviors, but for the band, explicit language is a tool for exposing the violence and oppression. The song “Vicinity of Obscenity” may function on a more basic level of simply using profanity to emphasize its acceptability, but the great majority of songs in the discography aim obscene content at an evident enemy. While “Suite-Pee” certainly chronicles philosophical progression as previously discussed, it utilizes sexual language to emphasize religion’s clutches of its subjects, who “lie naked on the floor / and let the Messiah go all through our souls” (26-27). Sexual metaphor no longer refers to sex itself at all but instead warns of the
dangers of blind submission to an ideology. The condemnation of calamitous religious forces culminates in the line “I want to fuck my way to the garden,” which invokes a wide variety of references but can be interpreted to mean the speaker who submits to the destructive discourse seeks to attain a better state (i.e. the Garden of Eden) by appeasing the religious power vector and following its tenets (31). Similarly, in “Cigaro,” Malakian and Tankian use sexual concepts associated with male pride to capture the attitudes of tyrannical rulers and regulators.

Richard Beck provides helpful analyses for discerning whether the band’s use of profanity is morally acceptable. For Beck, profanity “remains a mystery to psychological science as we have little understanding as to why obscene speech tends to cluster around body-related subject matter,” and System of a Down’s work highlights the conflation of the sexual with the profane (Beck 294). Due to the fact that “profanity highlights the animal nature,” it may be “experienced differently in Christian populations depending upon the degree to which the body is viewed suspiciously, a lingering influence of Gnostic thought” (294). Beck also traces the origination of the word “vulgar” to economic and societal constructs of higher classes trying to separate their appropriate practice from supposedly less civilized people. Thus, the System of a Down’s use of profanity is not only permissible but may indirectly be a way of communicating a sense of class equality. The band seeks to redefine what is civil against lingering aristocratic sentiments; contrary to the belief that obscene words reveal “body parts and actions that should remain concealed according to the dictates of civility,” true uncivilized behavior can be characterized by allowing all the aforementioned injustices associated with violence and distraction (Mohr 272). However, System of a Down by no means requires their Christian opposition to use profane and sexual language as they do, and therefore these elements are remarkably lower on the moral hierarchy than widespread acts of violence.
While sexuality becomes a lyrical device in Malakian’s and Tankian’s writing, the lyricists certainly also realize sexual topics are real matters that affect humans and incorporate more than the poetic realm. System of a Down abundantly observes the ways sexual practice transpires in a desperate world. The continued similarities between Horkheimer and Adorno and System of a Down are eerie when considering that the theorists’ assertion “Everyone knows that he is now helpless in the system” encapsulates not only the manifestations of the culture industry in the band’s work but also the general uncanny forlornness that pervades society (Horkheimer and Adorno 1234). The band particularly articulates their emotional exploration of this phenomenon of bleakness through singing about sexual behavior and drug use. While, as previously mentioned, System of a Down demotes the taboo placed on sexual vices, their work also asserts that sex can be an agent of disarray in society.

A significant body of Malakian’s work, including songs such as “Psycho,” “She’s Like Heroin,” “Whoring Streets,” and “Chemicals,” offer captivating depictions of sexual practice gone awry. The demoting of taboo placed on sexuality, profanity and the “lesser” vices of the discography may lead one to believe that the band promotes a free-for-all mentality, but this is not at all the case. In fact, because sex and narcotics become so intertwined in “Chemicals,” “She’s Like Heroin” and other works, the two topics essentially function at the same level of the moral hierarchy. Such songs delve into how cultural manifestations of sex and drugs are difficult to escape and emerge from a sense of degradative chagrin and existential defeat. In “Chemicals,” the couple is disillusioned by “Madness, feeling scared / Looking around and nobody's there,” so they “say ‘fuck the world, let’s get ready to rock’” and amidst their cycle of sexual behavior and drug use (12-15). As previously stated, Malakian does not didactically instruct that such a culture is inherently evil – likely because he cannot epistemologically do so as Hayes and Carpenter
would imply – but rather, he presents captivating stories that lead listeners to form views that such a lifestyle is frighteningly representative of a lost human condition.

In “Psycho,” Malakian and Tankian again demonstrate conjoined substance use and sexuality, for the groupie referred to in the song takes cocaine and acts promiscuously. The band asserts to the groupie, “You really don’t have to be a ho,” so there is one imperative associated with sexuality and drug use. However, the depiction of these topics is altogether significantly less instructive and more experiential than their discussion of violence, partly because Malakian evidently has significant personal experience with drug use, but mostly for the reason that other greater evils require either plain identification (genocide) or a different sense of ambiguity (the practice of warfare). Underneath the envelope of awareness, a listener may arrive at different conclusions about violence from the lyrics, but all these conclusions will, in simple terms, depict violence negatively in some way. When listeners receive the band’s portrayal of sexual behavior and drug use, not only may they arrive at different conclusions, but such conclusions are not even guaranteed to identify these practices with admonition.

There almost seems to be an odd humor, or more assuredly, an embrace of the bizarre when the band sings about drug use. While disorientation and an oblique, peculiar style pervade the band’s lyrics altogether, they particularly manifest themselves in songs about drug use. “Sugar,” “This Cocaine Makes Me Feel Like I’m On This Song,” and “Vicinity of Obscenity” do not treat drug use lightly, as the songs indirectly warn about the excessive instability that envelops substance users, but the capricious amusement listeners can derive from Tankian’s tone demonstrates an evident departure from the higher concerns of the hierarchy that demand rigid seriousness.

However, the subtopic of drug use that does demand seriousness is the widespread
political subjugation that pertains to drug use, punishment and sales. The odd disorientation that befalls different songs’ speakers due to drug use does not leave listeners with a lasting humor but rather a sense that something needs to change to lift the speaker out of his use. Thus, in response to the need Malakian and Tankian have evidenced, the lyricists declare in “Prison Song” that “All research and successful drug policy shows / that treatment should be increased / and law enforcement decreased / While abolishing mandatory minimum sentences” (48-51).

However, like the military-industrial complex, the governmental power structure’s mistreatment does not just encompass people of the home country, but Tankian and Malakian accuse the American government of “Utilizing drugs to pay for secret wars around the world / Drugs are now your global policy / now you police the globe” (56-58). As the band continually attests to, America’s policing of the world is synonymous with subjugation abroad.

The final injustice involving drugs is that “Drug money is used to rig elections / and train brutal, corporate-sponsored / dictators around the world” (61-63). Some may argue such claims are unfounded, and geopolitical details cannot be explored here, though Tankian would especially pose a well-researched adversary to his opposition. However, what can be certain in regard to the ordering of morals is that altogether, the band subverts a typical representation of drugs’ morality, turning most of the blame in the culture of narcotics away from users and on to the users of the users.

If drug use does at all imply admonishment in the discography, it is because it can detract from rightly ordering the hierarchy as a whole. One could argue that cocaine use in “Sugar” causes the speaker to abuse his girlfriend and enter into an insular world of despair in which he is unsure what to do and all life’s answers and feelings “go away,” so harder drugs could potentially debilitate the search for epistemological truth and therefore impede correct morality.
Similarly, in “Needles,” the speaker’s drug use sends him into a solitary world in which he is just “sitting in my room with a needle in my hand / waiting for the tomb of some old dying man” (41-45). In “Stealing Society,” an ideology emerges that “crack pipes, needles, PCP and fast cars / kind of mix real well in a dead movie star,”; under this strange consciousness, the power vector of entertainment does not necessarily idealize drug culture but depicts a sort of recklessness by which people inevitably relate through action (24-25). The speaker is not looking to provide any positive change to the destructive moral ordering that makes violence permissible, but he is only looking for something “that will get me high” and passively thinks “if I die, I die” (32, 34). Thus, drug use can contribute to an insular world of despair that impedes a proper ordering of morals.

Drug use is not definitively wrong in the band’s discography, but it can become oddly grafted into the culture industry or can ensue in individualistic mindsets. System of a Down’s moral assertions undoubtedly evidence a more collective philosophy, and while not entirely utilitarian, the number of those negatively impacted does influence the weight of a moral concern. Thus, drug’s ability to turn one’s focus inward is only a microcosm of the greater cultural plague of a focus on the self. Moreover, the drug user often does not set out to act selfishly but when caught in his or her cycle of use is physiologically limited; by stark contrast, those with fully functioning cognitive abilities who embrace individualism are much more culpable.

System of a Down’s collectivist concerns portray how the recent cultural epidemic of individualism has swallowed Christendom and therefore ensued in a misappropriation of morals. Andrew Suderman outlines the distinction between violence and systematic violence, and concerns for the later can be associated with a moral epistemology that accounts for all the
ramifications and differing forms of pervasive violence (1). A vast amount of Christian thought has not yet shaken the shackles of contemporary individualism and Enlightenment fallout (2).

While this analysis explores the ordering of morals in System of a Down’s music, certain aspects of the band’s priorities could be discussed in significantly more detail. Particularly, the environmental concerns that the band voices in songs such as “ATWA” and Tankian sings about on his records merit a profound discussion. Moreover, while human rights emerge as the chief concern of this exploration, war and economic-related subjugation, sexuality, drug use and profanity by no means encompass the issues that abound in the human experience. Those who study the band’s discography can sanguinely illuminate its many facets.

System of a Down’s songs demonstrate Fraserian thought, for morality implies weight of an action. The band elucidates the epistemological merit of their discography by accounting for the realities of the culture industry, power structures and the shifting nature of cultural conceptions of sexuality and profanity. The purpose of moral hierarchy is to identity the non-negotiables of ethics, and the band posits that systematic violence ultimately cannot be excused or even deemphasized, for stances such Ramsey’s and Piper’s that do not tirelessly resist the ploys of power structures will inevitably allow the persistence their injustice. System of a Down’s moral hierarchy is partly linear but is not only linear, and therefore the horizontal depth expands as one descends the moral concerns. Whereas many forms of sexuality and profanity are considered taboo in Christian moral subcultures, the pyramid-like philosophical structure of the band enables a variety of different commentaries on these lower-order issues. In scholarship and society, variant views will always abound, but explorations into more accurate epistemologies should confine these differences to alleviate economic servitude and bloodshed. As philosophers and ethicists of the past have dually lamented the tragedies of their age and called for reform, so
System of a Down serves as prophets to a fragmented world. When the rubble of debate has settled, the question still remains, “What is in us that turns a deaf ear to the cries of human suffering?” (“Sad Statue” 40). Listeners are compelled to wonder if “you and me will all go down in history” as “a generation that didn’t agree.”

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