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The Self is Dead – Alienation and Nihilism in Rick and Morty

Abstract

Drawing upon Erich Fromm's psychoanalytical-diagnosis of man in capitalism, this essay reflects upon some of the most political and philosophical themes of Cartoon Network's adult animated sitcom *Rick and Morty*. It focuses mainly in juxtaposing the nihilism and the alienation of the characters Rick and Jerry, respectively. Discussing the loss of agency due to the illusions and repressions of contemporary society, the essay concludes that capitalism benefits from both Jerry and Rick's self-destructive worldviews.

Keywords

Alienation, Nihilism, Rick and Morty

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Cover Page Footnote

Lucas Miranda has a Masters in Political Science at Florida International University. He aspires to get his PhD in political theory in order to keep exploring the concepts of anomie and individuality in the modern age. He has written book reviews for Marx & Philosophy Review of Books.

Nihilistic anguish of cosmic horror, philosophical questions deepened in existential crises, bankrupted politics entrenched in the pure dystopia of multi-universes, and the urge to laugh at the dismay of our lives: welcome to Dan Harmon (creator of *Community*) and Justin Roiland's *Rick and Morty*. Through crazy storylines, this animated adult sitcom tackles on a myriad of cultural, psychological, philosophical, and political topics in incredible, profound, and thoughtful ways alongside many fart jokes and other quite nonsensical tropes. The show focuses on the adventures of Rick—a narcissistic genius and alcoholic scientist who claims “I invent, transform, create, and destroy for a living, and when I don't like something about the world, I change it”—and his socially awkward grandson Morty who serves as Rick's sidekick because, according to Rick, “the best way to hide from an enemy's radar is to stand near someone with complementary brainwaves that make ours invisible—because, Morty, you're as dumb as I am smart!” Hence, the relationship of our protagonists doesn't even remotely resemble any traditional heroism and most of their adventures is intentionally purported to convey neither higher lessons nor characters' arcs. Rather, the series as a whole is supposed to be overtly dark and hilarious; profound and stupid. Indeed, to play in ludicrous ways with such dichotomies, the very ones showcased to depict the multifaceted nature of human life, is the quintessence of *Rick and Morty*.

In this essay, I will focus on what I consider the most central philosophical and political themes of the show: the burdens of nihilism and alienation in contemporary capitalist/postmodern society. This epochal conjunction leads us to a great thematic juxtaposition that runs through the show, which I want to also thematically emphasize in this piece, which is Rick's nihilistic lifestyle as opposed to Jerry's (Morty's dad) life and persona which represents what Erich Fromm depicted as “automatons who live under the illusion of being self-willing individuals.”¹ While Jerry is the common alienated and powerless individual of the working class, Rick is the existential-nihilist whom, despite knowing the inherent problems of the system, prefers to embrace the meaninglessness of life. My take is that capitalism benefits from both (though to different extents and in different ways). From this point on, I must warn the reader that there are many spoilers ahead. You've been warned. Now let's get into that green portal before Rick is no longer okay with me doing this.



(Source: https://i.kinja-img.com/gawker-media/image/upload/s--jdaufUyr-/c_scale,fl_progressive,q_80,w_800/wwkqrs6oph7bxxzqjpo8.jpg)

Alienation, Consumerism, and Capitalism's Flock of Jerrys

Drawing upon Fromm's diagnosis of man in capitalist society, I want to point out that the show makes a great service in showing how the psychological results of alienation is that man "loses his sense of self, becomes dependent of approval, [and] hence tends to conform and yet to feel insecure; he is dissatisfied, bored, and anxious."ⁱⁱ The readers familiar with the show should immediately see Jerry in these words; and beyond the show, we all know too many people who falls perfectly into this description.

Fromm explains that in capitalism there's no longer an overt source of authority except an invisible "*it*." He explains: "What is *It*? Profit, economic necessities, the market common sense, public opinion, what "*one*" does, thinks, feels. If I am ruled by an anonymous authority, I lose the sense of self, I became a "*one*," a part of the "*It*"ⁱⁱⁱ—thus leading to a systemic loss of agency; i.e., the loss of individuality and autonomy. This "*it*" could be understood as an ideal-typical concept which portrays a set of mental habits embodying the psychological traits which shall rule the social design of cultural norms and political rules—always with the aim to create such a condition that perpetuates the political system in power. *Rick and Morty* constantly plays with this notion of agency versus conditioning structures. Season 2 starts off with Rick making an obscure reference to make fun of Jerry to his grandchildren (Morty and Summer): "This guy really is the Red Grin Grumble to pretending what's going on"; and as they are laughing, Rick suddenly claims "You like that Red Grin Grumble reference, huh? Well guess what?! I made him up! You really are your father's children. Think for yourselves, don't be sheep." And of course, the joke is intended to mess with the audience as well who, in all likelihood, probably also fell for the made up reference since we have been *conditioned* by the first season to expect and laugh at Rick's clever and funny references (breaking the fourth wall without really doing it!).

In the second episode of season 3, Rick says: "To live is to risk it all. Otherwise, you're just an inert chunk of randomly assembled molecules drifting wherever the universe blows you." By the middle of the sentence we see him turning to someone, and by the end of it we see he has been looking at Jerry. Not just this moment defines how Rick perceives Jerry, but that statement is very informative in regards to how Rick responds to both the randomness of life and also, especially poking at Jerry, on how to retain one's agency and to be self-willing vis-à-vis the pressure of societal norms which Jerry, conversely, allows to define him. Jerry is deliberately portrayed as a pathetic loser throughout the series. He is unemployed and a bad father who is unaware of his failing marriage. However, these are not in-and-of-themselves what make Jerry a loser, but rather what these *mean* to him as a person. Jerry is fundamentally a loser precisely because he lives under the illusion of being self-willing while allowing the world to tell him what he is. Later in the same episode, even the wind whistles "looooooser" to him—that's how the world sees him and how it *conditions* him to see himself. The world gets to define both his successes and his failures.

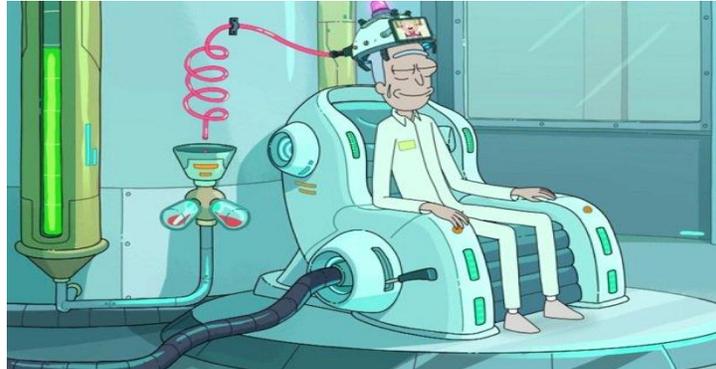
In another episode, Jerry accidentally gets inside a simulation of real life and he goes on his entire day without noticing the difference. But this is due not only to how oblivious he is, but mostly because how everything is working out (literally) unbelievably well in his job (since in this simulation most people around him can only react to anything by saying “My man!”). As he is receiving an award he says “this is the best day of my life. I’m finally complete!” And at that moment the simulation ends. It is hard to tell whether the whole thing is more tragic or pathetic. Moreover, Jerry has completely lost his sense of self. In Fromm’s words, “if the individual fails in a profitable investment of himself, he feels *he* is a failure; if he succeeds, *he* is a success.”^{iv} Ultimately, what Jerry fails to see the most is that he has become just an inert chunk of randomly assembled molecules drifting wherever the universe blows him. In short, in our “successes” and “failures” alike, *capitalism creates Jerrys out of all of us* as exploitation is essentially at every corner (be it psychological, emotional, or economic exploitation); as Rick says: “If you’re really that alienated, I’m as willing to exploit it as the next guy, church, army, or Olympic gymnastics trainer.”

Understanding the ideological concatenations at work in order for political systems to bring forth appropriate subjects and subjectivities aiming its own perpetuation in power, Fromm’s characterization of what capitalism does is applicable here: “Human qualities like friendliness, courtesy, kindness, are transformed into commodities, into assets of the “personality package,” conducive to a higher price on the personality market.”^v This is quite literally what happens in one of the densest episodes of the series so far, “Ricklantis Mixup” (episode 7 of the third season). We are presented with a “Citadel of Ricks and Mortys” where there’s a clear class struggle between the rich and the working class.¹ The interesting element of this is how the latter encompasses both versions of many Ricks *and* Mortys. At some point, a Rick who works in an assembly line rebels, kills his boss and yells at his coworkers: “They told us we were special because we were Ricks, but they stripped us of everything that made us unique!” Then we see him being deceived into believing he has earned his freedom right before being shot in the head. However, he was kept alive in a condition which he keeps relieving that moment of emancipation so that the factory can instill the chemicals of that feeling into the production of their “Simple Rick” cookies (see image below). Their new cookies’ commercial goes as this: “...he got a taste of real freedom. We captured that taste, and we keep givin’ it to him so he can give it right back to you, in every bite of NEW Simple Rick Freedom Wafer Selects. Come home to the unique flavor of shattering the grand illusion, come home to Simple Rick.”

Hence, just as Fromm tells us, the very quality of freedom or rebellion becomes a mere commodity to be bought with the money earned by working on jobs we only endure because we want more of that commodity. In such cyclical pattern, individuals execute their mechanical

¹ This episode is worthy of one entire piece only upon it. It also showcases politicians orchestrating their rise to power through populist uprisings, the complacent role of the media, and the ideological indoctrination in schools. But in this particular piece, the relevance of the episode is more about how most of both Ricks and Mortys of the citadel function as “Jerrys” in their daily lives.

activities thinking they are creating and living, but rather mistaking creation for reiteration and actual living for programmed conforming. The illusions that come with/from it are definitely sweet in content while pernicious in form—just like, I assume, “Simple Rick Freedom Wafer Selects.”



(Source: <https://www.thewrap.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/rick-and-morty-ricks-ranked-simple-rick.jpg>)

Freedom, Security, Revolution and other Illusions

Moreover, this embodies the very commodification of emancipation or (in Herbert Marcuse’s words) the counterrevolutionary phenomenon embedded in conformism—which comes in many forms, unconscious or not, besides consumerism. In many ways, this entire episode, through all its (many) subplots, seem to convey precisely the idea of how resistance has become futile (at least in regards to how they are planned and executed). Indeed, the current political climate in the US is a grand fertile soil for counterrevolution tactics. For instance, take how “protests” have become social events which folks attend (after confirming on Facebook) to take selfies and share them in their social media to show how “politically aware” they are (since just posting memes ain’t gonna do it). And nothing speaks more to the banality of all this than seeing Hillary Clinton saying she has joined #TheResistance...as Morty would say, “Geez...” Although Mortys cannot say much, given the carnival they have made of their own protest (does it look familiar?):



(Source: http://s2.dmcidn.net/mTq_o/x240-PHZ.jpg)

In the first episode of the third season (“The Rickshank Rickdemption”), earth has been taken over by the Galactic Federation and the result is a complete docile, tamed, and superficial

society. But Jerry, of course, celebrates it: “I tell ya, the Galactic Federation taking over Earth -- best thing that's ever happened to this family. I just got my sixth promotion this week, and I still don't know what I do!” Summer, showing to have a lot more agency than her father, responds: “Who cares how high they promote you? Everyone just gets paid in pills.” And pills are now not only the means of salary but also the only means of nourishment (thus replacing food). Beth, Jerry’s wife, is happy that her husband is now “pulling down a six-chewable figure income.” Hence, society is maintained docile and obedient through a literal overuse of pharmaceuticals. In short, this episode superbly and hilariously depicts how capitalist society alienates individuals from their labor, themselves, and from each other. And how does Rick topple the Galactic Federation Empire? By making their single centralized galactic currency going from being worth one of itself to zero of itself—thus, money being worthless, all hell breaks loose forcing the Galactic Federation to leave earth (in a state of social disintegration and anomic self-destruction). The irony that follows, on behalf of the continuity of the show, is that we are expected to assume that human civilization will re-establish their former currency system which works in the exact same way: individuals working meaninglessly for a system that pays them back with both the illusion of security and freedom—that is, the spectacle of consumerist society concealing the truth that “when the chips are down, these ‘civilized’ people will eat each other.”²

Coupled with the agency-structure dynamic of subjection and alienation, another theme that the show plays with is precisely that of the illusion of social order and norms of mental health provided by modern civilization. This is greatly exemplified in the episode “Rickmancing the Stone” in which Rick, Morty, and Summer find themselves in a post-apocalyptic reality (based on *Mad Max: Fury Road*). In the end of the episode, Rick introduces electricity to that society thus making it civilized, industrial, and modern; by doing so, apocalyptic-scavengers are now watching “blood dome playoffs” from the comfort of their homes instead of doing it themselves (while bickering with neighbors about recycling and other trivialities). After destroying (i.e., distorting, repressing, etc.) their ideals, Rick steals their source of electricity, and what once were independent individuals who didn’t need to rely on anything of modern society, they find themselves in sheer despair for no longer being able to watch TV. In short, they have been literally domesticated, and most importantly, are now dependent of it. To juxtapose this, we also see in this episode a Jerry from a reality where civilization has crumbled. And guess what: that version of Jerry is a badass clearly driven by self-assertion as he can thrive in the absence of repression.

Another theme tackled on this episode is automation. Morty and Summer being trapped in the “*Mad Max* reality,” Rick has to replace them back home with robotic versions of themselves. Beth is so used to Jerry that she lives with robots for three weeks without even noticing the difference (whether or not there even is a difference is open up to debate. Sometimes the episode suggests there is, sometimes it suggests there isn't). The more mechanical and utterly

² The Joker’s quote from Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*. The resemblances between the Joker and Rick are too many and too rich to discuss in the present essay.

meaningless our life activities become, we increasingly become more machines-alike. The intense experiences and deep disturbances of human emotions are foreign to the cold empiricism of bureaucratic-mechanization. As Max Weber's tells us: "Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized'... This is appraised as its special virtue by capitalism."^{vi}

Since the hegemonic order of capitalism is governed by rules such as utility over quality and expediency over goodness, then of course that loss of humanity and the ascension of a machine version of man are indeed appraised by capitalism as a special virtue. Machines do not feel either joy or pain. Turning man into machines is the killing of the individual, particularly, the individual as a sentient, emotive, subjective creature. Now turning our attention to Rick, it cannot be denied how much all of this applies particularly to Rick himself.

Existence is Pain; (but don't think about it)³

Fromm has said that "in the nineteenth century the problem was that *God is dead*; in the twentieth century the problem is that *man is dead*."^{vii} The entirety of this sentence explains Rick's existential crises. Rick's existentialist stance can be contextualized briefly by Nietzsche's famous aphorism: "God is dead and we have killed him" (ironically, the very foundation of postmodernism). It follows that individuals should now exhaust the possibilities of life hitherto concealed underneath the illusory pedestal of God. However, while God remains dead, now *the self is also dead*. And indeed, Rick is not any less dead inside than Jerry is.

Rick is the most complex character of the show. He is allegedly the smartest man in the universe, and he can travel through all the infinity of possible realities—and they are all possible. Case in point is when Rick confronts Morty: "What about the reality where Hitler cured cancer? The answer is: don't think about it!" Even more disturbingly, in this same episode, we see Rick and Morty having to leave their reality behind (after all humanity have become Cronenberg creatures) and moving on to a reality where they replace the versions of themselves from that reality, which they get to see dying by an explosion, and thus having to bury "their" own corpses in order to take their places in that reality. In short, Rick is too aware of the fragility and triviality of existence. Rick's bleak worldview is presented in a nutshell by Morty who provides in season 1 one of the most famous passages of the show: "Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody is gonna die. Come watch TV [i.e., "don't think about it"]." Rick sees through the meaninglessness of life and is only disposed to act upon his cynicism and to reduce everything to science. For instance, for him love is just "a chemical reaction that compels animals to breed." Even his relationship to Morty, as I showed above, he interprets by the interaction of inferior brainwaves cancelling out his superior ones. In his words: "you're a piece of shit, Morty! And I can prove it mathematically!" Yet, despite all this, the show has also suggested few times that Rick does in fact love Morty. In sum, the show truly presents the

³ "Existence is pain" has become a mantra of the show embodying its existentialists' overtones.

problem of nihilism as the imposition, by life itself, of a recalcitrant question of meaninglessness facing man's inexorable quest for meaning.

Rick's innermost complexity is epitomized in his own chosen catchphrase, introduced in the first season, as "Wubba lubba dub dub!!!" which he always expresses in great joy and excitement. But, in season 2 we find out that the true meaning of that phrase (in some alien language) actually means "help me! I'm in great pain!" Another moment when we have a glimpse of Rick's inward feelings, underneath his arrogance which disguises his anguish, is in the end of the third episode of season 2, when we see him genuinely angry and frustrated at life, mostly because his *heart was broken* (yes, the man has a heart after all), and then he fails to commit suicide in his garage only because he was too wasted to pull it off. So, while scientist Rick chooses to simply "not think about" the chaos and random injustices of the world, the rather existentialist Rick cannot help but *feel* about it all—especially about his own life and (lack thereof) meaning in it. As Fromm wisely puts it: "man is a unit; his thinking, feeling, and his practices of life are inseparably connected."^{viii}

We don't know where the show will be going with Rick's inner conflicts, but we do know that the smartest man in the universe lives in great pain and rather conceals it. He dismisses emotional attachments and believes in no social causes or higher goals in life.⁴ In fact, he doesn't believe in anything other than his genius. So, we must ask ourselves: how much is Rick any less of just an inert chunk of randomly assembled molecules drifting wherever the universe blows him than Jerry? While Rick clearly has more agency than Jerry, at the end of the day, his nihilism is just as self-destructive as Jerry's alienation. In many ways, the scavengers of the apocalyptic world resemble Rick's mentality that nobody should follow political or religious idols—in that world, individuals are free from the illusions, repressions, and distortions of civilization, but such a dystopia cannot be and should not be anyone's utopia.

Conclusion: Master of Both Worlds

In sum, *Rick and Morty* makes us face questions that are as perennial to the human existence as they are relevant to our current epoch, which amalgamates all alienating aspects and social pathologies of *both* capitalism's alienation and its postmodern symptoms of nihilism.⁵ From the cruelty and indifference of the universe to the commodification of revolution itself, the show simultaneously presents us with Jerry who is a victim of these issues and also, through Rick, the burdens of being aware of these issues. My take is that neither Jerry nor Rick should be our answers. That is, in trying to not be just another Jerry, we cannot ever allow ourselves to become a Rick. Indeed, we should fight both our illusions of "definitely" not being just another Jerry and,

⁴ In the "Rickshank Rickdemption," Rick reveals that he's only driven by finding McDonalds' Mulan Szechuan teriyaki Chicken Nuggets sauce because that's his "series' arc," "that's what this is all about." This is of course a joke about Rick's lack of innermost goals in his life.

⁵ As mentioned in the outset of the piece, the thematic juxtaposition of Jerry and Rick resembles the epochal conjunction of capitalism and postmodernism (which reciprocal relationship is a topic for another essay). For more on this topic, see Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism."

by the same token, also our possible will to want to be a Rick. We must cherish the totality of what makes us human: not just our self-awareness, reason, and imagination, but also our ability to have compassion, solidarity, and above everything else, to love the most important people in our lives and to try to inspire *everybody else* the universe randomly blows into our direction—it doesn't matter in how many universes or realities. Likewise, we must, in whatever capacity, always address the injustices of the world which are *not* random but rather cold calculations of true dehumanized individuals—the very special virtue of capitalism.

But, since this is a *Rick and Morty* review, this essay cannot end on such a traditional note (the fans surely get what I'm saying). Let's not get all romantic here: while just as "commendable," accomplishing these tasks is not as easy as decorating an academic essay by typing these words. The chances of getting trapped into counterrevolutionary tactics, falling into personal hypocrisies, or just meeting the utter frustration of the futility of it all—are all very real and most likely to happen. But such is the recalcitrant question of meaninglessness, facing our inexorable quest for meaning, which life constantly throws at us. We have no choice but the choice to decide on how to respond to this. There's no stepping aside of the always unfolding slate of random crossroads which is our lives. So, whenever you seek inward or outward change, and either the Jerry or the Rick inside of you asks "why even bother?" you should encompass and transcend both of those voices into a whole self who says: because I've decided so. Such decision requires the fullest vitality of our sense of self. So, if existence is pain, we shall endure it and stubbornly search for the cure. As a fitting way to conclude this review, I will leave you with these words spoken by the therapist Rick reluctantly meets in the third season:

The thing about repairing, maintaining, and cleaning is: it's not an adventure. There's no way to do it so wrong you might die. It's just work. And the bottom line is, some people are okay going to work, and some people well, some people would rather die. Each of us gets to choose.

Take that as *you* will. Know thyself.

ⁱ Fromm, (Escape from Freedom, p. 253)

ⁱⁱ Fromm, (Sane Society, p. 270)

ⁱⁱⁱ Fromm, (Sane Society, p. 153)

^{iv} Fromm, (Sane Society, p. 142)

^v Fromm, (Sane Society, p. 142)

^{vi} Weber, (Economy and Society, p. 975)

^{vii} Fromm, (Sane Society, p. 360)

^{viii} Fromm, (The Sane Society, p. 272)