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Why I think RMS is a fanatic, and why that matters

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One of my commenters reports that he showed my essay on evaluating the harm from closed-source software to Richard Stallman, who became upset by it. It shouldn?t be news to RMS or anyone else that I think he?s a fanatic and this is a problem, but it seems that every few years I have to explain the problem again. I make the effort not because of personal animus but because fanaticism does not serve us well ? we?ve made huge progress since 1998 by not repeating RMS?s mistakes, and I think it?s important that we continue not to replicate them.

When I was say that I judge RMS is a fanatic, I mean something very specific by that. I cite Santayana?s definition: ?Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim?. By his own account of his road-to-Damascus experience, RMS started out attempting to solve a problem; there was this broken printer driver that he couldn?t fix because he couldn?t get the source. RMS correctly identified source secrecy as a damaging practice leading to bad outcomes.

Unfortunately, RMS made an early decision to frame his advocacy as a moral crusade rather than a pragmatic argument about engineering practices and outcomes.

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OSS

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