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Caught Between This Age and the Next: Postmodernity, Narrative Knowledge, and the Search
for a Coherent System of Ethics

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Abstract

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By Nathan Reeder

Surveying various "postmodern" thinkers, this paper articulates similarities in various approaches to postmodern ethics, examining issues involving identity, relationships, and sociality. Attempting to explain the postmodern approach as an aesthetic approach to ethics, a categorical confusion, this paper not only challenges the possibility of such a form of ethics, but also, it asserts that postmodernity and modernity have similar aims. Concerning itself with a theory on moral knowledge production, it also draws from Bruno Latour, arguing that all knowledge can be categorized into various "narrative paradigms." This paper concludes with Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, using the text as concrete background for the discussion of narrative paradigms and arguing that biological survivalism is a necessary precondition of ethics.

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**CAUGHT BETWEEN THIS AGE AND THE NEXT:
POSTMODERNITY, NARRATIVE KNOWLEDGE, AND THE
SEARCH FOR A COHERENT SYSTEM OF ETHICS**

by
Nathan B. Reeder

Introduction

If the modern spirit has been fascinated with the sublime image of itself and its project to accumulate social, political, psychological, and moral knowledge, then we have entered an epoch of disillusionment. Our romanticism has become the fear that we are not great thinkers, and consciousness has radicalized itself into a peculiar stage of self-effacement, a belief in the constant flux and instability of its own identity. Do we still remember Superman? Ironically (given the Nietzschean connotation), the Man of Steel recalls the apotheosis of late modernity (if it still may be spoken of in the present) and perhaps, the zenith of its own imagination. Possibility defines Superman: imperviousness to sin, immaculately just, master of metal and time, and yes, even the dream of evading death. Modernity believes that the “messiness” of the human condition, its social, moral, and political problems, “is but a temporary and repairable state, sooner or later to be replaced by the orderly and systematic rule of reason” and an undeniable and inexhaustible morality.¹ The postmodern crisis has now supposedly laid an ethical choice before us: we must choose between the acceptance of a belief in the transcendental, in the false prospect of knowledge about ourselves, our world, and our condition or the acceptance of the very real moral secret that perhaps this quest has been fraught with brutality, and we were never really learning very much at all.

The term “modern” assumes a rupture with the past; it celebrates the “newness” of the present as something entirely different, though clearly the neoclassicism of the Renaissance implies that modernity to some extent has always considered “antiquity” as “a model to be recovered through some kind of imitation.”² The humanism, however, of this so-called new age is fascinated with self-consciousness, its form, its complexity, its spirit, its staggering capacities,

¹ Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 32.

² Habermas, “Modernity Versus Postmodernity,” 4

its seemingly boundless limits. The term “modern,” often ambiguous and immense, must be condensed into something a bit more manageable, for this project does not intend to account for all architecture, art, and music that might be considered “modern” (though much of “modern” aesthetic styles might fall into a philosophical definition). For the purposes of this paper, we can equate the “Project of Modernity” with the “Project of Enlightenment.” And, as Habermas details,

The project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality, and law...according to an inner logic...The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday society.

The possibility of knowledge, the breadth and depth, ethical, practical, natural, social, etc., defines this era – science and philosophy work to bring the possibility of a *better* age to fruition.

Postmodernity brings a new challenge previously overlooked: it undercuts the very methodology and autonomy of the system, challenging the very logic of “logic” being immanent, natural, steady, and self-sustaining. Does this mean we should abandon modernity’s project? In criticizing the modern project, postmodernity duly enters another dialogue – if postmodernity criticizes the structure of modern ethics, if it desires to be taken as a serious form of discourse ripe with potential, then it must enter into a discussion concerning its own ethical alternatives.

Simply stated, the thesis of this paper is that postmodern ethics is impossible, and while modernity has contributed to a great amount of violence, only modernist thought sets a foundation for a workable ethical system. In the first section, we will discuss in detail what ideas constitute postmodernity, working from the perspectives of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the second section, we will make a case against postmodern ethics by arguing that any attempt at such constitutes the juxtaposition of two mutually exclusive categories, the ethical and the aesthetic. In the third section, we will return to the postmodern critique in general and

discuss its contradictions. With this in mind, we will ponder whether postmodernity is *actually* a radical break from modernity. Additionally, drawing from Bruno Latour, the concept of “narrative paradigm” will be introduced and a discussion will follow on which narrative paradigms best precondition ethics (the specific definition of “narrative paradigm” will be elaborated in this section). Finally, in the last section, we will discuss how narrative paradigms affect ethics in *Watchmen*. The text may also be conceived of as a debate between postmodern ethics and modern ethics.

Written by Alan Moore and drawn by David Gibbons, *Watchmen* brings unparalleled depth to the graphic novel genre by focusing on themes never before thought to belong to comic books about superheroes. The novel begins with an investigation into one hero’s murder, The Comedian. The primal image of the novel, The Comedian’s smiley face pin stained with his own blood serves as an ironic aphorism. It symbolizes how *Watchmen* inverts the image of Superman – heroes hired by the government are now used as weapons. They fight as soldiers in Vietnam and disperse protests at home. Dr. Manhattan, weaponized science, the man who can change all being, mold any piece of plastic or metal into anything else, is worth more than thousand warheads to the United States, and so, in one way or another, self-improvement, security, and power have placed *Watchmen* (the text) on the brink of the end of the world. As modernity’s attempts at progress have turned fiercely inward against the very civilization it dreamed to better, The Comedian laughs at himself; he is that failed attempt, the joke of modernity’s violent vanity and the impossibility of its optimism.

The heroes of *Watchmen* read as an allegory to the modern vision – Dr. Manhattan, representing the capacities of science, moves to Mars in search of value for human life; Adrian Veidt, a self-made millionaire and philosopher, embodies supreme logic and intellect; Nite Owl,

a retired ornithologist who rediscovers his love for the superhero profession, symbolizes compassion and the search for morality in chaos. As these particular superheroes each embody a certain type of knowledge, each asks, “To what extent is that kind of knowledge possible?” and “What is the value of that kind of knowledge at all?”

As the question of modernity really very much concerns the status of knowledge, particularly moral knowledge, *Watchmen* intersects a primary debate between forms of postmodern and modern ethics. As stated before, the contention of this paper is that any postmodern ethical system is impossible, and an approach through modern narratives is the only way to lay a foundation for ethics.

Foundations of Postmodernity:
Lyotard and Nietzsche

There has been a certain rebellious trend in many architectural, aesthetic, and intellectual movements of the latter half of the twentieth century; a celebration has followed of what appears to be the demise of the great modernist movement, as if the limits of Western art, thought, and literature have finally been exposed. Whether these movements portray themselves as redemptive or critical, whether they are simply suspicious or seditious, together they might be called postmodern. But as historical shifts in cultural mood are difficult to detect, the term “postmodern” can easily become obscure. An imperative remains to define the core components of postmodernism. Nevertheless, even without a concrete definition, the effects of some transformation, some uprising, have been starkly manifest: Andy Warhol’s advertisements have become more popular than high modernist art; the brutality of Kathy Acker’s characters is no longer villainous.

If modern metanarratives have looked for the “end” of something (the Marxist end of history, the end of scientific ignorance, Kant’s everlasting peace), then postmodernity signals a radical break. Foremost, it might be said, postmodernism doubts such narratives by challenging how knowledge is legitimized. Postmodernism disparages reason, questioning its arrogance, pointing out its fallibility, but above all else, asserting that it always possesses a historicity. The image of the Cartesian hero, his mythical emergence from the poele, parallels the Platonic philosopher’s escape from the cave. In some way, this image backgrounds all Western metanarratives, which might only imply the existence of a single, grand metanarrative with only various divergent details and configurations. “Reason,” however, the driving engine of emancipation and enlightenment, is “not only a constituting power but a constituted power,”

which means that reason “is both a fabrication and a source of fabrication.”³ The Cartesian man, “the conception of man...at the core of Western humanism,” underlies the “self-assertive and self-aggrandizing notion of reason.”⁴ The lifeblood of metanarratives, reason acts as the philosopher’s crutch, always used to verify knowledge but never itself verified, always used to speculate but never itself the target of speculation.

Metanarratives sustain the social and hard sciences in the same way that philosophy employs them in its own projects – from the supposed manufacturing of the biological and social body to the hope for a unified theory of physics, there is always “progress,” an ongoing “project,” and a “better future.” Science tends to pride itself on a supposed objectivity. Observation, consensus, the reproduction of results, these are the sort of rules that guard against biases and the degradation of knowledge. The end justification for science, the first principle, however, is *not* reproducible, not based on empirical observation, and not even a matter of consensus: this is narrative knowledge.

The aim of this section is not to criticize postmodernism, but to firmly establish the meaning of the term. This section will primarily delineate postmodern foundations, so we can discuss postmodern ethics in the next section. Postmodernism spans multiple decades and informs numerous cultural fields – its authors work in isolation, hardly ever explicitly referencing contemporaries, and often times, even contradicting them. Even the term seems linguistically impossible: if “modern” refers to the ‘now,’ then “postmodern” refers in some way to its future. There are, however, certain principles embodied in early postmodern works presupposed by later critics. Even fragmented amongst various authors, artists, and architects, postmodernism maintains a coherent worldview that not only reaffirms Nietzsche’s

³ Rapp, *Fleeing the Universal*, 177.

⁴ McCarthy, *Twelve Lectures*, 2.

problematization of philosophy but also, the consistent complication of the search for truth, beauty, order, and of course, knowledge. At the very core of postmodernism is a dismembered, caricatured, or re-imagined picture of man – this is a man not only bereft of reason but also of his grand narrative (the means by which he valorizes reason).

There are two books that might be said to be founding documents of postmodernity. Both interrogate philosophy and morality; both offer analyses that resonate throughout all postmodern works. To discuss the entire movement would not only be a terrifying and time-consuming task, but also, too many digressions would cloud the crux of what must be said. Instead, these two books clarify the postmodern position on knowledge and morality. The first, Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, concerns the Western use of metanarratives in both science and philosophy, particularly within the context of Wittgenstein's notion of "language games." The second, Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*, more explicitly handles the problem of metanarratives in relation to morality.

Lyotard begins his analysis with a simple proposition: the social bond consists of language games. This term refers to how "the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put," much in the "same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces."⁵ Lyotard also underscores two important rules to the game. The first is that the rules are legitimated by consensus; they are the "object of a contract between players," and "if there are no rules, there is no game."⁶ Secondly, "every utterance should be thought of as a move," and "to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts."⁷ Even in ordinary discourse, in a debate between two friends, "the interlocutors use any available ammunition, changing

⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 10.

⁶ Ibid, 10.

⁷ Ibid, 10.

games from one utterance to the next: questions, requests, assertions, and narratives are launched pell-mell into battle.”⁸ Besides a simple conversation, certain language games are self-enclosed and critical to the survival of different institutions, such as a laboratory, a barracks, or a business office. These institutions are not so much spatially defined (by architecture) as they are linguistically guarded. Within institutions, types of language distribute power. For example, a private must obey an “order” from a higher ranking officer or face the consequences.

Though Lyotard never fully develops the concept of violence in isolated language games (he mentions the object of any game is success over a particular opponent), certain strategies benefit a player’s status and authority within an institution. A politician increases his chance for election by relying on eloquence and the clear enunciation of popular opinions. A boss promotes a subordinate because his charisma closes sales. Language games are key in the struggle for resources and power much in the same way brute strength would have operated before language.

Incorporating the concept of language games, Lyotard develops his thesis on the use of narrative knowledge in science and philosophy. Primitive societies have always been guided by myths and legends, and these narratives require no justification or external legitimation. They were self-legitimizing in a sense, perhaps, because, as Lyotard suggests, the narrative grants the listener the authority to repeat it, and narratives have always possessed a “vibratory, musical property.”⁹ Science, which has always cast a suspicious eye towards narrative, “requires one language game, denotation,” and “no particular competence is required of the addressee.”¹⁰ Science derives its authority from the self-enclosure of its language game, one that promotes itself as the foremost means to acquire knowledge. However, the language game of science concerns narrative knowledge. At times struggling to fight contradiction, science is an ever

⁸ Ibid, 17.

⁹ Ibid, 21.

¹⁰ Ibid, 25.

evolving discipline that requires a “narrative of knowledge...in the West to clarify its status.”¹¹ Society, in a way, validates science with both a purpose and direction by envisioning itself as the benefactor.

The Cartesian hero serves a dual metanarrational function. In much the same way that science relies upon narrative, philosophy’s entanglement with its own purpose, theme, and meaning co-opts logic and reason. In many ways, reason is itself a narrative. Just like myths of old, “reason, language, and historicity are conjoint,” and to attempt “to get beyond reason is also to get beyond language and history.”¹² Since madness, non-reason, can only be invoked through language, and language is culturally contingent, Derrida asserts “there is a common root between madness and reason.”¹³ The Cartesian project, representative of the “project behind the realist notion of truth, is mad” as it “aims to escape from historically determinate forms towards the infinite, which is towards the thought of God.”¹⁴ If postmodernism complicates reason’s presuppositions, then modernist metanarratives, such the Hegelian universal history of spirit, remain permanently devoid of “proof” in the traditional sense. Rather, Derrida and Lyotard ask, “Who proves the proof?” Philosophical language games demand certain moves, but the language games themselves are frail contracts; they exist, but except for arbitrary consensus, philosophy cannot account for why they exist the way they do. When narratives control the discourse on competence and even ethics in society, these objections are particularly important.

As an alternative to modern science, Lyotard offers the idea of a postmodern science, one that embraces dissension, allows for paradox, follows a sort of anti-evolutionary path, i.e., science would no longer be an absolute project of memory and accumulation but remain open to

¹¹ Ibid, 28.

¹² Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines*, 33.

¹³ Ibid, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid, 34.

new methods and possibilities that resist its tradition. Though Lyotard attempts to describe this process in great detail, he does not give all the pragmatics of such a science. Addressing the common man's resistance to the problems of language games, he proposes the idea of data banks open to every person, so all language games would "be games of perfect information at any given moment."¹⁵

What does one make of all this? While we will discuss arguments against postmodern claims at a later time, we should foreground a few arguments. First, while Lyotard chastises science for its tendency to mock narrative, he condemns the emancipatory narrative of science, ironically, with a scientific perspective: narratives are unreliable, non-empirical, and most certainly gibberish. Lyotard himself seems rather unsure of the status of narratives. Lyotard never questions whether modernism hardwires all narratives the same way – he simply assumes this as fact and proceeds. An important question to ask regarding Lyotard's disposition towards narratives would be, "Can some narratives be a product of discovery and not the impetus behind it?" Also, could modernism generate narratives to genuinely describe history rather than producing them to validate progress after the fact? If narratives can be legitimized, we could restart science and philosophy.

The second central problem of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* is that while criticizing metanarratives, the book is "obviously a master narrative, and, as such, it represents exactly the kind of knowledge that is now supposed to be meaningless."¹⁶ At the very least, Lyotard implicitly volunteers the idea that metanarratives may, after all, be inescapable or possible. Indeed, Lyotard undercuts himself by inviting the reader to look upon his own

¹⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 67.

¹⁶ Rapp, "Fleeing the Universal," 183.

argument with same incredulity one directs toward Western metanarratives. These arguments, of course, will be explicated more in a later section.

The complexities of metanarratives, language, and science aside, Lyotard does not confront the ethical implications of postmodernism, which remains, in part, the focus of this thesis. He assumes that open data banks and a postmodern science would help solve modernity's problems, but the ethics behind this are never fully clarified. Friedrich Nietzsche, however, addresses the problem of ethics eagerly, almost with a greedy pleasure. While playing God (in the sense of an objective guarantor of knowledge), Nietzsche berates Christianity as he unfolds a quasi-historical account of how ethics as a science (and as a good in itself) came to be. His *Genealogy* thus exposes the roots of reason and morality. To Nietzsche, philosophy is fundamentally a Christian project. His anger at this, also, is a well known fact.

However, even if Christianity expresses some sort of historical moral sickness, if it acts as a mask, even if its fragile and inverted notions of good and evil hijacked Western philosophy, whether these events are momentary or ongoing, this thesis will not dispute such claims. We must abstract Nietzsche's argument from the context of Christianity if we are to recognize it as a general postmodern assertion. While Nietzsche's "Superman" underscores his own romanticization of the brutality of the premodern period, his critique of the development of ethics challenges Western philosophical moral knowledge (and the ethos of the West/ cultural aesthetic), and thus, it might be considered as a genuinely "postmodern" argument.

Christianity aside, Nietzsche declares ethics a socio-historical product, arguably the most important contribution of *The Genealogy of Morals*. Just as Derrida and Lyotard maintain that reason is culturally contingent, Western moral science cannot escape various presuppositions about what it means to be "good" and "bad;" the provenance of morality relies on events long

ago, before philosophy itself began. In this way, Nietzsche interrogates the Cartesian notion of a priori and all subsequent manifestations. Nietzsche argues in *The Genealogy* that:

“The judgment ‘good’ does not originate with those to whom the good has been done. Rather, it was the ‘good’ themselves, that is to say the noble, mighty, highly placed, and high-minded who decreed themselves and their actions to be good, i.e., belonging to the highest rank, in contradistinction to all that was base, low-minded, and plebian [the bad].”¹⁷

For Nietzsche, the concepts of good and evil were originally informed by power in the sense of social rank and wealth. Nature dictates the strong could label themselves and the conquered underclass. The ones who held the power, however, were a minority, and the majority dreamed of finally oppressing the oppressors. Nietzsche uses the metaphor (almost in a literal sense) of a “slave revolt” to describe the ensuing moral transformation – “deprived of the direct outlet of action,” the weak minority “compensate[d] by an imaginary vengeance.”¹⁸ The qualities the weak embodied (and benefited from) – humility, charity, meekness, and kindness – suddenly became the new moral “good,” and selfishness, wealth, and power, qualities of the strong, became the new “evil.” With this criticism, Nietzsche in all likelihood targets Descartes, Kant, and other German idealists; Kant’s categorical imperative, after all, suspiciously sounds like a gilded, intellectual re-mastering of the Christian golden rule.

Even if Christianity is the secret, primal metanarrative of the West, Nietzsche turns Lyotard’s questions on the legitimization of knowledge into a question on the legitimization of *moral knowledge*. As Nietzsche implies, however, if historical processes have intractably damaged reason, this problematizes all philosophy, and after Nietzsche’s time, as postmodernity later unfolds, various thinkers deploy this very same thesis in a variety of ways. Famously, Foucault’s historicism tracks the development of sexuality, madness, and punishment. While Nietzsche probably would not align himself with Foucault or many other postmodernists (his

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 160.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 170.

ethical solutions ultimately harken back to Rome), he shares a similar thread of thought in how he attacks modern morality (as a culturally contingent product). Postmodernism, in general, contends that modern morality is irrational and permanently non-universalizable, but this is a discussion for the next section.

The postmodern challenge to morality occurs in a variety of ways, but this engenders several questions. First, is morality still impossible, and even if morality remains culturally and historically contingent, are there better alternatives, is society possible at all without a modernist morality? Modernity follows a course of self-correction, and this after all, philosophy calls dialectic. This implicit reply, in way, portends the contest: modern dialectic versus the postmodern abandonment.

By analyzing Nietzsche and Lyotard, we have established a foundation for postmodernity. The next section will develop a better picture, however, of postmodern ethics and specifically how different authors have advocated a genuinely proactive stance towards the problems modernity offers.

“The Darkness of Mere Being:”
Postmodern Ethics and Response

“The sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.”
 - Carl Jung

In this upcoming section, drawing from our previous discussion on Lyotard and Nietzsche, we will establish a connection between metanarrative and ethics. After this, we will form generalizations about postmodern ethics and identity, introducing the “aesthetic being” as postmodernity’s concept of an ethical human being. Employing the aesthetic being as a means of critique, we will review the postmodern ethical systems of Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman.

Any attempt to account for all of history will inescapably produce metanarrative. As the Christian would have it, God created Earth from darkness and man from clay; man fell down but then God salvaged him. The Darwinian likewise: Earth born in stars; flesh from mud, man from flesh, politics from man – ethics defines the final chapter of both stories, how man might save himself from all the passion, anger, and cleverness that allowed him to survive (for this long). As a discipline (though not an exact science), ethics aspires to discover enduring principles, that is, they should be empirical, and ideally, a feeling of inevitability should accompany this process as we should be able to eventually predict the “right” action in any conflict. Modern metanarratives necessarily generate approaches to ethics, but modern ethics may also be a metanarrative in its own right: the discipline itself always dreams of maxims for a more perfect peace and attempts to fashion universal practices for happiness. In the same way that reason guides the structure of science (both “hard” and “social”) – organizing data, inferring connections, mapping results, anticipating variables, standardizing repetition – it insists upon a similar standard for ethics. As such, Lyotard’s claims against science, metanarrative, and reason implicate modern ethics, for

which reason, moreover, acts as a prerequisite to first approaching the discipline. From the perspective of Lyotard and Nietzsche, everything becomes more precarious: responsibility, beauty, love, friendship, economics, justice, treatment of the body. Ethics does not merely shape how we think about these things but rises in principle from them as *the* necessary condition of all relationships.

The postmodern critique of knowledge doubtlessly poses a fierce and unusual threat to the Western tradition, and even with Hegel's anticipation of this kind of radical skepticism, one cannot help but wonder why so much philosophy for so long has acted on careless presuppositions without precaution, evading a confrontation with serious questions on the legitimacy of its knowledge. If reason and science were never universal and actually might have helped create a number of tragedies that now fill the ledgers of history with cruelty, postmodernity must also suppose a way out of this if it indeed wants to separate itself from modern practice. Postmodern ethics, generally, does not run concurrent with traditional ideas of praxis, but this is not to say postmodernity accepts nothingness or radical pluralism as its alternative. Indeed, Zygmunt Bauman, a classically postmodern thinker, maintains that "the great issues of ethics" like "human rights," "peaceful co-operation," and "collective welfare...have not lost their topicality," and only need to be "dealt with in a novel way."¹⁹

In that postmodern ethics supposedly refuses metanarratives, basic assumptions about modern morality shape its perspective: 1) Humans are "morally ambivalent" because "human togetherness"²⁰ is ambivalent; relationships constantly wax, wane, twist, or fade altogether. The behavior of individuals is still unpredictable for science, and "distinct properties of the Enlightenment self," including "privileged insight into its own processes and the laws of nature"

¹⁹ Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 9-10.

are emphatically rejected.²¹ 2) Morality is “not universalizable” because no mind or method frees society from “irremovable contradictions,” and any final, “correct solution” always finds itself transcended by another. Also, moral conduct “practiced so far happens to be relative to its time and place, affected by vagaries of local or tribal histories and cultural inventions.”²² 3) Most “moral choices are made between contradictory impulses.” For example, someone sick with sores/ a skin disease can simultaneously elicit sympathy and repulsion.

When approaching an understanding of postmodern ethics, we might also say that postmodernity has a constant fear of social digestion, that is, that the formal institutions and relationships of civil society will gobble up identity in an increasingly complex network. Ethical relations between people condense into a system of labels (e.g., a patient to a doctor). Like a growing rhizome, the individual’s context within community becomes so interwoven and convoluted that identity itself begins to become indistinguishable from the larger ideological backgrounds of society, like capitalism (worker, consumer, subordinate) or democracy (voter, activist, grizzly mom). This is probably a well grounded fear. In order to repudiate this problem, the postmodern impulse thus turns to the lowest common denominator, one-on-one relationships, small communities, thus restarting ethics outside any sort of modern associations. Micro-identity, or the postmodern identity, refuses the multiplicity of metanarratives about its philosophical purpose or responsibility and discards knowledge about the body, or even, perhaps notions of economic and social strategic worth (e.g., class, race, sex, etc.). The postmodern identity is also vague, flexible, and resistant to labels. This is not to say that the self within the postmodern context cannot change into something better than before; since after all, even without external

²¹ Flax, *Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory*, 624.

²² Bauman, 12.

knowledge, learning through the ups and downs of life always implies that there remains something in transition.

Perhaps, for postmodernity, body sheds identity altogether, and becomes a thing of immanence, resistant to external interpretation and autotelic – the body outside of knowledge is *merely* a body (it may not even be a “body” since this is a biological concept). In general, the postmodern moral self seems rather close to an aesthetic phenomenon, and consequently, it acts upon feeling and pure experience, unchallenged and without social knowledge; it also embraces disinterest and ontological futility. Because of this, we might be able to call the postmodern moral self an “aesthetic being.” With neither philosophical significance nor cultural context, the aesthetic being understands itself through sense alone; it does not attempt to impose meaning (identity or purpose) upon itself, its own actions, or others by interpreting sense through reason. Anything aesthetic in a vacuum is imprecise; it exists but lacks theme, goal, and history, all of which reason provides when it contacts sense itself. But as postmodernity rejects this synthesis, choosing the naked aesthetic being, the body, as the starting point for ethics, it cannot rid itself of natural power in human relationships and the pragmatic limitations of its own vision.

Even if, what does postmodern ethics actually look like? Various thinkers endeavor to answer this question perhaps because they too see postmodernity’s incompleteness, political impotence, and even that certain quality of aesthetic nothingness at its very heart. The modernist urge to correct gaps is all too latent even for those who protest its eccentric overreach. However, this does not mean that postmodernity has not had its heroes. Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman have contributed tremendously to their respective fields, and both drawing from Lyotard and Nietzsche, they turn to their own approaches and theories for solutions.

In his last decade, Foucault's thoughts on ethics seem to take a more serious and concrete direction away from the more flagrantly dramatic ethical statements in his previous works like *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish* – perhaps too, Foucault wanted to address the alleged gaps between his theories and actual praxis on the ground. The reduction of modern subjects to “bodies and pleasures” as a “rallying point for counterattack” shifts calmly to a more thoughtful approach of ascesis in his later interviews.²³ How his two conceptions of ethics interact with one another is still part of an ongoing debate.²⁴

In his early work on genealogy, Foucault contends that history fractures, and before modernity, power manifested itself as a spectacle: the exhibition of a fragile body, tortured, burned, stabbed, drowned, and this sort of public cruelty acted as an effort to deter future incursions against the sovereign. In de-centering the body, modernity also invented a new form of power that “exercised [itself] spontaneously without noise” and “without any physical instrument other than architecture and geometry.” It “gives power of mind over mind” and ensures a “tight economy (in material, personnel, and time)” by its own “preventative character.”²⁵ Modern power disciplines, as Foucault remarks. It unfurls through a complex hierarchy, always exerting pressure, binding populations, and sometimes grouping identities together wholesale.

Foucault offers a sociological perspective to Lyotard's concept of language games, shifting from a strict approach of communicative action to the intertwining of discipline with various signs, symbols, and representations. We can replace language with a stop sign or property fence, and these sorts of things issue directives, not because they are direct manifestations of force, but because they are phantasms. They exist, in part, as a complex, ever

²³ *The History of Sexuality*, 157.

²⁴ Meighoo, Interview

²⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 206

vigilant gaze. The actual, technical project of the prison, for Foucault, served to create a body of knowledge about prisoners and produce “delinquency,” which tended to tacitly underpin the ambitions of the bourgeoisie and in part, perpetuate class struggle. But, Foucault’s theory of discipline does not merely concern the law, though historical formations of criminality are the subject of *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault also engages the peripheral institutions of power, especially ones concerned with knowledge production: sexology, psychiatry, pedagogy, and even the workplace, all of which rely on a system of self-monitoring. The actions of docile subjects reflect knowledge “found” (e.g., a patient will often follow a psychiatrist’s proscribed treatment). The panopticon, the model for a prison that sought to perfectly discipline its subjects, encompasses all society.

Foucault’s concern with the application of the panopticon to nearly all aspects of life presents a major hurdle for ethics in his early work. Because power also flaunts its own infinity, one cannot remove one’s self from power as if it were simply a matter of stepping inside/outside. So, “resistance” as “counter-power” externalizes itself as “agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions – anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions.”²⁶ Foucault does not admit limits to the aggregate of reversals of power, so one must wonder exactly how to act ethically other than obviously joining the unyielding insurgency against discipline.

Foucault writes extensively about the intertwining of the penal system with the other institutions of power relations, particularly with the deployment of sexuality, and Foucault understands that ultimately within the tangential networks of discipline lies some actual legal force – the law would not allow a gun in the hands of a labeled schizophrenic just as security guards would stop fights in schools. While Foucault’s legacy has certainly led us to reevaluate a great many socially constructed ideas (and some deserve our censure), at every effort to undercut

²⁶ Ibid, 220.

discipline, we also undercut the ability to limit the natural laws of power. By seeing power leveled against the system as noble but the power of the system as dangerous, this creates a somewhat untenable contradiction. The extreme of Foucault's ethical alternative leaves modern structures nearly incapable of producing *any* kind of regulation, so instead, power exists as *simply* power, unregulated, unmapped, and able to be exercised by all parties and independent systems with few mechanisms of justice. The "anarchists," Foucault mentions near the end of *Discipline and Punish*, "posed the political problem of delinquency," and tried to "disentangle delinquency from the bourgeois legality and illegality that had colonized it."²⁷ Foucault does not advocate anarchy, but the romantic appeal of its disposition does not receive his condemnation either.

In the sociological theories of his earlier work, Foucault's ethics are very unspecific, often suggesting vague ideas about the "pleasures" of the body as an ethical starting point, the immediacy of which suggests embracing one's self as something aesthetic.²⁸ In the 1980's, Foucault begins to either clarify or reinvent solutions to problems discussed in later interviews. For Foucault, "freedom" is "the ontological condition of ethics," and "ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection."²⁹ Foucault still does not qualify how one exactly disinvests from institutions of power (to become "free"), and other than recognizing the existence of these power relations and protesting against them, the actual procedural pragmatic remains absent. Foucault redefines truth for the self as something unstable and always in flux, and these particular moments of clarity are ephemeral, owing themselves to the constant, internal process of discovery and self-care. Specifically, Foucault's "care of self" concerns an attentiveness to one's own desires, beliefs, and needs, which entails a rejection of modern forms

²⁷ Ibid, 292

²⁸ *The History of Sexuality*, 157

²⁹ Foucault, "The Ethics of The Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 286.

of knowledge. Actual ethics (how one interacts with someone or something else) enters the picture as one learns “to have power over one’s self...that thus regulates one’s power over others.”³⁰ By understanding the “principles [of self-care] in such a constant way that whenever your desires, appetites, and fears awake like barking dogs,” you can control them, “like the voice of a master who silences his dogs with a single cry.”³¹

However, though Foucault details to some extent the methodology of self-care, regulation cannot rely entirely on self-determination, and by this, Foucault’s ethical ascesis consists of an aesthetic move. The idea of a flux of truths turns truth into something merely sensory, aesthetic. Foucault’s postmodern moral self (the aesthetic being), marked by the constant rise and fall of emotive searches and self-satisfying urges, denies regulation, which demands external pressure, demands consequence, and without such, the untouched space of the aesthetic being keeps its inborn, fixed quality. Foucault’s self-care wants to capitalize on the capacity for change and growth, but in his tapping of this resource, he might overlook gaps. Regulation produces political knowledge (I am a citizen and therefore subject to the benefits and protections of the law), which inevitably has ties to other centers of discipline (prison, university, and the human sciences). Politics is produced by society enacting itself, by the creation of an identity, in the spatial arrangement of discipline, and while *every* institution may not be necessary to the existence of a society (psychiatry in particular), a common knowledge of things (and even Foucault’s beloved Greeks knew this too) forms the social bond.³² Foucault implies at points that he wants to nuance

³⁰ Ibid, 288

³¹ Ibid, 288

³² Foucault’s romanticization of the Greeks is a bit obscure at times. He admires their care of the self but despises the institution of slavery. Though the Greeks had no institutions of psychology or psychiatry, “madness” was not a concept entirely unknown. Now, though madness was sometimes viewed as a natural gift or curse from the gods (and something that could be momentary and not mobile), in *The Republic* Socrates’ first thought experiment ponders the injustice of giving a madman a weapon. Conversely as well, Pentheus’ confrontation with the maenads

power differently, that relations can be conducted in a “non-authoritarian manner,” but a society, in many ways, needs a hierarchy, a structure of power relations and discipline to avoid its own disintegration.³³ Also, desire complicates Foucault’s position on freedom (the extent of this freedom is also unqualified). Foucault somewhat disregards desire’s double nature – that is, as free, one can desire to exact his aggression. Pain, fear, and doubt, the aptitude for cruelty, the prospects for malevolence, all of this can just as likely spring up within the “freed” self’s condition as the potentiality for ethical contact. Without discipline, without strict power relations, the aesthetic being (particularly, Foucault’s moral self) cannot be guaranteed to act in a non-authoritarian manner.

Foucault’s ambiguity, in any event, might hamper the deployment of many of his ethical conceptions. Over the course of his work, Foucault’s claims shift, twist into extremes, and then fall back sometimes to everyday situations where postmodern ethics seem feasible. Other critics have also conceived of Foucault as implicitly (and explicitly at times) supporting an “ethics of curiosity,” where the constant embrace of otherness helps us realize the false neutrality of “human science knowledge and expert practice” and makes us refuse “a central position in the modern, rational mode of organizing.”³⁴ We should resist articulating “universal images of ourselves” because these produce “asymmetrical power relations,” the stuff of “domination and totalitarianism.”³⁵

However, even with this seemingly responsible, coherent portrait of ethics, we must still ask the most pragmatic question: how far? If logic and sensory perception occupy two different

in *The Bacchae* suggests that some Greeks may have thought it *unnatural* not to enter states of madness/ecstasy at the appropriate times (or at least have a healthy balance of Dionysus and Apollo).

³³ Foucault, “Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 294

³⁴ Keleman and Peltonen, “Ethics, Morality and the Subject: the Contribution of Zygmunt Bauman and Michel Foucault to ‘Postmodern’ Business Ethics,” 160-1

³⁵ *Ibid*, 160

extremes on a spectrum, and at any particular moment, both are more or less in combination with one other (reason interpreting sense into meaning: I am writing at a desk in a dorm room on a laptop and this means I am a student being studious), then the refusal of all imposed reason is really the only path to true freedom. If reason is tied to culture, then refusing culture entirely is the only way to really begin generating self-care and imagining a myriad of ever changing self-truths, which constitutes living an aesthetic life.³⁶ The presence of modern institutions permeates media, linguistics, all relationships, and general society. If discipline conditions us at any point to understand the social and biological body as something knowable, then for the most moral person, total freedom, comes from resistance against all related institutions, including punitive ones. If Foucault limits resistance, the exact stipulations for this are not made clear, and if counter-power is really the only method for leveling various stratagems of power relations, a free man practices constant counter-power against modern institutions.

This also concerns the matter of agency in Foucault's early work. Foucault never verifies the status of agency within modernity, though he inclines one to believe that the answer to this puzzle is either unknowable or irrelevant, as one only "knows" herself through external knowledge. Agency has become so entangled with outside power that the only action performed as agency might be to realize this very fact, and then move on – but how does this set a man "free" if he still remains subject to knowledge? Knowledge about the self manifests at every level of society: we often seek healthcare when we are very sick or dangerously sick (all medicine, even traditional medicine, claims knowledge about the body), census data informs all subjects within the nation of its own identity, a policeman supposedly has moral knowledge about what human beings ought to do and not do. One can still recognize that knowledge is false

³⁶ Reason's contingency, however, is still a discussion for the next section, but for Foucault, this is not a question. I am taking Foucault's argument to the extreme according to his beliefs/ value system.

but not resist embracing and accepting this knowledge every day, at every instance. Total freedom would arguably have to be the equivalent of an asocial existence, and this, all human relationships out of the equation, would mean one would not have a chance to act ethically with others, severely limiting the scope of ethics in general (besides, caring for the self would be reduced to bare survival, something aesthetic, senses used for the accumulation of resources).

Even if Foucault's ethics were possible, he does not offer any pragmatics or details for an effective transition out of modernity. In this, his postmodern ethics, the possibility of becoming an aesthetic being seems almost to belong entirely to the imagination. It simply is an impossible task. *How* does one undertake Foucault's ethics? *How* is the free man really free?

Foucault readily admits he has "not got[ten] very far" on developing the ethical subject in the context of "the current political problematic," and he supposes that "contemporary political thought allows little room for the question of the ethical subject."³⁷ Foucault never really situates his conception of ethics within a law/ anti-law framework, so every abstraction easily becomes slippery when disputed (this also would characterize any sort of implementation). Foucault never makes clear under what conditions care of self operates optimally, and while care of self would be marvelous in a limited context, if this occurs, Foucault cannot entirely depart from modernity. Truly achieving care of self might imply conceiving of one's self as an aesthetic being, but spontaneity spirals out of control and crashes backward, and ideal self-introspection falls away as soon as it collides with the social. The idea of self-regulation within the system cannot separate itself from relations of power. When Foucault admits to the political limitations of his system, he implicitly acknowledges the practical barriers to "care of self" within any social situation, and thus the pragmatic obstacles.

³⁷ Foucault, "Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 294.

While postmodern thought has impacted the way we conceive of identity, academia, knowledge, and art, because of difficulties in implementation, postmodern *ethics* has not been able to achieve a full reversal of current trends in politics (though *thought* on *social* politics has dramatically shifted). As Foucault himself sees the limitations in the possibility of such an ethics, Zygmunt Bauman, a very recent thinker, understands the pragmatic problems as well as the postmodern tendency to lack an alternative that harmonizes well with any conceivable social situation. Attempting to tackle this problem outright, Bauman attempts to create a feasible postmodern social theory of morals by redefining what it means to be social. Similar to Foucault, Bauman responds to Emile Durkheim's conception of social morality: a modern society "fosters" morality "by negatively sanctioning deviants."³⁸

Bauman moves back even further, however, and challenges morality as a phenomenon of social transaction. In redefining ethics, Bauman invents to new rules (though he claims these rules as naturally disturbed by modernity). As Bauman emphasizes early on, "being *for* the Other" must come "before one can be *with* the Other."³⁹ Bauman wants to create structure by imagining counter-structure, and to disrupt socialization by challenging how history itself is made: reject the "cumulative process" of leaning on "yesterday's accomplishments to reach the targets of tomorrow," much like technological and scientific progress constantly looks for the next breakthrough. If "socialization" moves forward, then "sociality," Bauman's alternative, stagnates (purposefully) because "it has no objective" and "is an instrument of nothing but itself." It "is vociferous when it erupts but cannot be reported or retold in its original truth," living only in "fits" and "spasms."⁴⁰ This habit of systemic existential fluctuation is made

³⁸ Junge, "Zygmunt Bauman's Poisoned Gift of Morality," 106

³⁹ Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 13

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 129

possible because morality for Bauman is a *pre-social* impulse, a need; it is the spontaneous result of the constant asymmetry of the self with alterity. Bauman draws from Levinas in this manner.

The proximity of an Other inherently makes a demand for action and through this, a moral responsibility emerges, spontaneously and inevitably; and, there are no rules that guide this – it simply happens. Bauman says that proximity does not constitute a preamble to action because it imposes a responsibility that may be acted upon or rejected, but always it “arrives before the Other herself had the time to demand anything,” beyond “‘intentionality’” even, and responsibility is “never completed, never exhausted, never past.”⁴¹ The moral action that follows from this new “responsibility” is not triggered “by fear of sanction or promise of reward, it does not bring success or help survival.”⁴² Bauman’s moral action takes place in what he calls a “moral party.” Bauman uses the analogy of love to describe this situation, how it feeds on mystery, curiosity, a desire to satisfy, propelled by its restlessness and bound to continually search for a way to surmount itself, to transcend its own final step. Bauman on several occasions admits that within responsibility, an individual might often misread the Other’s feelings, and this leads to domination, totalitarianism, and even violence against the Other. A potent argument, Bauman never really substantially answers this difficulty, always assuming the pain of the Other can be read clearly (and thus responded to).

Bauman also admits that this love is ephemeral and unstable, but its uncertain existence only makes morality itself possible as modernity has turned man into something unnaturally asocial. Bauman makes two important arguments for this claim: 1) “The Third” (“norms, laws, ethical rules and courts of justice”) is “marked by distance” from the moral party, which consists of I and the face of the Other. The Third’s “‘disinterestedness’ rebounds as ‘objectivity,’” and

⁴¹ Ibid, 86-88

⁴² Ibid, 124

through this, it not only prioritizes its own interests and advantages (judges are often more interested in their own biases than the subjects before their court), but “partners are now equal, and exchangeable, and replaceable.”⁴³ Relying on the role of the Third to serve morality, citizens displace their moral urges with rules and procedures, thus gently effacing their own capacity for moral judgment. The idea of social programs for Bauman reflects his distaste for the third, since the moral impulse finds itself satisfied in the displacement of responsibility on others. 2) Bauman also argues that reason within a highly socialized system countermands passion, and reason always has the survival of the group in mind. When reason’s obligation is the group,

the Other dissolves into the Many, [and] the first thing to dissolve is the Face. The Other(s) is (are) now faceless. They are persons (persona means the mask that – like masks do – hides, not reveals the face), [and] I am dealing now with masks (classes of masks, stereotypes to which the masks/uniforms send me) not faces. It is the mask which determines who am I dealing with and what my responses ought to be.⁴⁴

Duty for the Other turns into duty for a mask through the social lens, and this necessarily erodes any opportunity for morality.

Drawing together his assumptions about the moral party, Bauman attempts to demonstrate the possibility of social situation with his concept of the crowd. The crowd, however, has no formal identity; it does not involve itself in the production of knowledge, culture, or political identity. The crowd is not *for* anything but *with* each other, and so the crowd “wipes out distance without effort” and instantaneously becomes “a counter-structure to socialization’s structure.”⁴⁵ Because the crowd does not constitute a society, the crowd is fragile, subject to rupture at any moment, and it does not have “a history” – “once it comes together, the crowd has accomplished everything there was to be obtained.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid, 114

⁴⁴ Ibid, 114-5

⁴⁵ Ibid, 130-1

⁴⁶ Ibid, 131

By removing purpose from the crowd, Bauman hopes to “out-aesthetize” modern morality. As Bauman observes, “[the crowd’s] only mode of being is the momentary synchronization of sentiments.” Unlike Foucault, Bauman’s morality admits to the creation of an aesthetic being a bit more obviously. Bauman wants to step outside of society and reason by abandoning anything that reason hungers for: its own survival, the manipulation of the environment for its betterment, and even in this, Bauman still creates a “better” individual, which strikes an odd note since judgment seems impossible without reason. At many points, Bauman flirts with the idea of stepping outside of language, the grounding of reason. In Bauman’s crowd, “feelings are shared before having been articulated and instead of being spelled out, the sharing of itself is foremost among the feelings shared.”⁴⁷ By removing language and culture, Bauman places a bet on the idea that these processes (language, group identity, etc.) do not appear spontaneously in a crowd, which seems a rather flimsy wager to make since culture and language appear in all human civilizations.

In conceiving of the crowd outside of modern social action, he has also removed the very possibility of social interaction. If a social situation requires “at least a minimum [amount] of mutual orientation,” the Other “is not part of a social relationship...because only one side takes the Other into account,” and “the Other is not commanded to do the same.”⁴⁸ Bauman never clarifies the conditions of being *with* the Other; he only steadfastly adheres to the possibility of such an occurrence happening. And, even though Bauman guarantees the moral impulse for both individuals within the moral party, he offers no recourse when the impulse stops short of action. This then also presents problems for the manifestation of the crowd. Responsibility for the Other might be an impulse, but action to fulfill the responsibility never finds itself guaranteed. Since

⁴⁷ Ibid, 130

⁴⁸ Junge, “Zygmunt Bauman’s Poisoned Gift of Morality,” 110

“Derrida pointed out that an ethics of alterity is impossible... [given that] every attempt to think about the Other is every time entangled in the language and tradition,”⁴⁹ this problematizes responsibility further. If we were to implement Bauman’s ethics, how would we stop thinking about the Other’s culture? The term “Other” necessitates the idea of difference, and even recognizing a being outside of our own bodies automatically raises the uncertain idea of a different *something*. So, “moral action will never constitute a social situation” if it “disregard[s] the necessity of ‘connectibility,’”⁵⁰ The sort of asymmetric moral impulse Bauman proposes cannot be sufficiently thought of as moral – the aesthetic existence he imagines seems to fall short of ethical action.

Within the moral party or crowd, Bauman also allows for the possibility of all human relations decaying into unchecked power relations. The impulse created by the Other’s face could just as likely capture a violent gaze, and being outside of formal society, this would lead to the exertion of unregulated power. While Bauman’s claims against modernity for short-circuiting the moral impulse are substantial, the Third, in any event, with very mixed results, allows for some semblance of a moral society – Peace Corps, Americorps, private charity, to name a few. Also, even if modernity has displaced the moral impulse, the Third never operates alone – duty or not, it often depends upon the time given by average persons to accomplish its mission. Though there will always be faults with the Third, there will never be a complete inability to solve social, economic, or political problems, whereas Bauman attempts to imagine morality with unregulated acts. Misinterpretation of the Other’s signals, whether deliberate or accidental, can lead to clasping her too tightly, embracing him brutally. The potential for this finds itself at least hedged a bit by modern discipline, followed by penalty in modern law.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 111

⁵⁰ Ibid, 110

Bauman, in many ways, understands that postmodern ethics lies beyond reach. He conceives of what might be considered ethical realities, but he makes no apparent proscriptions, accounting in no way for the various potentialities in human behavior. At the beginning of the final chapter in *Postmodern Ethics*, Bauman says, “the reader was warned at the start of this book that no neat inventory of ethical precepts or other props of moral self-confidence are likely to emerge from the consideration of the moral person’s plight in the postmodern world. I guess that this negative promise has been faithfully kept.”⁵¹

In his pursuit of the aesthetic being, he has also implicitly affirmed the impossibility of such a being, or perhaps the impossibility of an *ethical* aesthetic being. Like Foucault, Bauman radically envisions an ethical alternative alien to what we know now, and if we are living “here” and “now” in modernity, what would be the steps for making anything Bauman speaks of actual? Because the postmodern critique of culture and knowledge is *so* powerful, postmodern ethics always comes down to an either/or situation. Attempts to realize postmodern ethics within modernity become inevitably co-opted by the resources of modernity itself. For Bauman, one cannot work with the Third because Bauman totally problematizes the Third, rendering any attempt at postmodern ethics to work within the modern system relatively futile. Bauman’s argument all along relies upon the idea that modernity has created a program so terrible, it is almost inherently amoral (through its imposition of duty and the effacement of the natural moral impulse). If postmodernity emphasizes working within the system for ethical solutions, it begins to deny its own radical breaks from modernity – through this, postmodernity loses its distinctiveness and difference as modernity reabsorbs it.

The challenge of ethics demands that we attempt praxis outside of theory. Ethics demands a practical approach to human relationships. As Foucault and Bauman demonstrate, in

⁵¹ *Postmodern Ethics*, 223

that postmodern ethics tries to conflate the aesthetic with the philosophical (the very mode of thinking that allows for the possibility of ethics), it denies ethics as a practical system. However, even within this analysis, the postmodern critique of knowledge has not lost its flavor – the challenge to modern society and metanarrative in general stay fervent. The status of ethics after considering postmodernity still encounters a challenge.

The Status of Knowledge after Postmodernity

In this upcoming section, keeping the inadequacies of postmodern ethics in mind, we will look at the shortcomings and contradictions of the general postmodern critique of knowledge as well as what Habermas calls the “performative contradiction” of postmodernity. We will be able to highlight parallels between postmodernity and modernity, eventually assuming that postmodernity constitutes a narrative “paradigm” of modernity rather than a radical break entirely. In our discussion of paradigms, we will discuss which paradigms best lay the foundation for ethics, or at least, which best supports the survival of our species.

We should return to the subject of metanarrative. Lyotard’s conceptualization of metanarrative as a teleological phenomenon arguably narrows the field too much as mythos-related narratives and narrative self-consciousness seem to disturb a strict interpretation of this category. With this objection in mind, another question arises: what is the relation of metanarrative to the supposedly minor narrative in general (quantifiable, qualitative, etc.)? The idea that within a group of narratives a clearly articulated relationship appears is a rather complex event, and metanarratives borrow, shift, twist, redeploy themselves as time moves on, always subject to rearrangement by competing thinkers in the same field or adaptable in response to criticism. That metanarratives are total, rigid projects, that they “belong” to a particular space and always seek the same “ends” seems counterintuitive to philosophy as an organic practice. A dispute like the one that occurred between the left and right Hegelians would indicate the insufficiency of a counter-claim. Even disregarding the metanarrative as something not entirely coherent, on a macro-political scale, contingencies and the exchange of ideas are inevitable,

making metanarratives even more deeply mutable within the realities of a faster, more globalized world.⁵²

Lyotard probably realizes that metanarratives are not self-enclosed, but he also does not seem to give much credit to modernity for appreciating this feature of its own project. Even if we were to discount the problematization of metanarrative as concept and accept Lyotard's very abstract contention that all metanarratives presuppose a certain telos, an end to be reached, a discovery of final truth, we might have to forget, in part, the history of philosophy itself, which has always concerned itself with speculation, self-doubt, exceptions, limitations, and uncertainty. The Enlightenment dialectic has not been a stable system, and science too possesses a general consciousness about its own progressive development and reorganization of procedures – we know the “best” science always finds itself transcended. And, even the claim that science only exists as an isolated, privileged discourse loses traction when science itself begins using philosophy at the highest levels of physics, and the barriers between the hard and the social sciences begin to blur.

Modernity constantly moves outside of its own boundaries, redefines itself, and then explodes these parameters yet again. As Habermas says, “Modernity revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition,” neutralizing previous standards of “morality and utility...modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative.”⁵³

A simple transition out of modernity seems inconceivable if only because the project itself acts like a moving target, expanding, collapsing, blooming, again and again. Thus, Lyotard's attempt to account for all modernity seems like a nearly impossible task. And, if we stop equating

⁵² The Marxist “metanarrative” provides an excellent example. Communism has undergone many changes that led to a variety of different subsets: Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, Anarcho-Communism, etc. Arguably, these different brands of communism do not reflect Marx's original method or the “end” (withering away of the state and the end of history) he sought after.

⁵³ “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” 5.

modern thought with metanarrative, if we define the notion of “progress” as something “better than before,” if we condense modernist ambition into “we can know,” modernity begins to share similarities with both Lyotard’s “open data banks” and Foucault’s “care of the self.”

However, even with the idea of metanarrative so fully questioned, we cannot readily dissolve Lyotard’s equation of it with the modern habit to call some unverifiable process or principle universal. But, even assuming Lyotard’s analysis of both science and philosophy, we can still understand modernity as a game of competing narratives and metanarratives, neither verifiably true nor false, some individual and others communal, some redemptive or pessimistic or catastrophic, but all a part of a grand modern constellation of fictions that seek to explain this or that (e.g., debates on human “nature,” debates on the “needs” of human beings, debates on the “right” economic or political policies).⁵⁴ Simply because a narrative is unverifiable does not mean that it is useless. Now, of course, the distribution of narratives as “knowledge” within power relations very much concerns the postmodern critique, and even within a multiplicity of narratives, any narrative can hijack or obscure identity (or being before identity) at any given moment – or so, postmodernity would claim. The body itself, as Foucault would say, is a cultural invention. So, in the aesthetic being’s resistance to knowledge, it refuses all narratives (narratives about the “facts” of human body, narratives about its education or psychological “needs”). For this to be feasible, however, narratives themselves would have to somehow cease to exist because in any sort of social situation, one is constantly bombarded with various narratives.

⁵⁴Ignoring the postmodern critique, we could readily call these debates over facts. But, given Lyotard’s argument, if we choose a particular perspective or side in a debate, we are supposedly assuming to believe in a narrative. Also, choosing a narrative does not have to take place in the context of a debate. If we momentarily assume Lyotard’s argument, anytime someone chooses to believe something to be “true,” we might call this a belief in a certain narrative, which may, in reality, be neither verifiably true or false.

Once investigated, postmodernity's serious *discursive* challenges to reason and language meet a curious turn. *The Postmodern Condition* is "most obviously a master narrative, and, as such, it represents exactly the kind of knowledge that is now supposed to be meaningless."⁵⁵ Not only does Lyotard presuppose he has found the proper mode of discourse for abstracting and undermining philosophy, but also, he invents his own counter-narratives, alleging capitalism will continue to alter technological language games and of course, that the supposed ultimate "goals" of science and philosophy are ultimately futile. Lyotard's grandest claim, however, perhaps far more specific and complex than modernity's general infatuation with metanarrative, concerns the idea that two fundamentally different forms of thought, two different forms of knowledge production (narrative and science/philosophy), share a secret synthetic thread. Accidentally or purposefully, Lyotard has collapsed all metanarratives, all forms of Western knowledge, and the cultural "past, present, and future" into a single postmodern metanarrative, and so, "to have understood that these forms can be brought into relation by means of an analysis of them as language games, to have reduced them to this common principle, is to have made a scientific [and philosophic] analysis of them."⁵⁶

When Lyotard develops the idea of science as something that could be unstable, unpredictable, spontaneous, and defiant to consensus, he still envisions a type of science that serves a purpose, still driven by the anti-narrative narrative, and in this respect, his solution to the modern telos-driven metanarrative links back to the supposed instigating problem. In so far as *The Postmodern Condition* irreducibly conforms to the "speculative narrative," it becomes "congruent" "with the emancipation narrative."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Rapp, *Fleeing the Universal*, 183

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 184

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 186.

Besides the danger of being reconstituted into dialectic, Lyotard's argument, in part, hinges on the very specific *sui generis* claim, that stories of progress have been produced independently of the practices they analyze, not reliant on the trends and performances in science and philosophy. Here, yet again, Lyotard implicitly produces a metanarrative, only it concerns the nature of narrative itself. If Lyotard's argument against metanarrative cannot itself escape the status of a narrative, then at the very outset of his argument, he implicitly agrees with the idea that science and philosophy (and the Enlightenment too) really may have a stake in achieving a system better than the one we inhabit – Lyotard's argument is as unverifiable as the narratives of the institutions he critiques.

Various postmodern authors conceive of metanarrative differently, and though many still presuppose narrative knowledge as *sui generis*, thinkers like Foucault have written convincingly about the non-inevitability of certain institutions. However, postmodernity as a mode of critique cannot escape the same ambivalences and contradictions, the same fetters of language and omnipresent difficulties that Lyotard encounters in *The Postmodern Condition*. Perhaps, postmodernity, incapable of escaping paradox, reaches the farthest point it can without still traversing into that open space, that mysterious blackness outside of all things modern.

In attempting to break away, postmodernity foils its own plan with a “performative contradiction,” as Habermas argues.⁵⁸ Postmodernity, “the totalizing self-critique of reason gets caught in a performative contradiction since subject-centered reason can only be convicted” of being “authoritarian” or insufficient in nature “only by recourse to its own tools.”⁵⁹ With every attempt that postmodern art, architecture, and even discourse make to revise their theoretical model and elude the one they supposedly repudiate, postmodernity always encounters the need

⁵⁸ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, 185

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 185

for a “labor of deciphering.” However, the process of deciphering itself necessitates the use of reason, and so, “philosophy sucks up that paradoxical trust [and distrust] in reason” and the “performative contradiction.”⁶⁰ Nietzsche’s genealogy, Foucault’s genealogy, and Bauman’s sociology all rely upon some sort of linear system of logic, the intertwining of various pieces of history into patterns; they cannot escape the very logic they critique and the act of philosophy itself. Their judgment is just as dependent on culture or tempo-historical circumstance, but the judgment itself flowers out of an ability to analyze, synthesize, project implications, etc. In its very own language, postmodernity cannot shed the trappings of its supposed opposite (modern) axis of thinking. And, postmodernity has never denied this problem; nay, it embraces this sort of central irony as something more wholly postmodern, the double-layered objection to logic itself. In this act, postmodernity ceases to understand what its own critique means (if anything), which qualifies the ultimate gap between postmodern aesthetics and reality.

Grappling with its dilemma, postmodernity tries to assume some zone of quasi-truth, a degree of truth, like a piece of literature that claims both to be fictitious and to have some metaphysical value. But, by trying to occupy the categories of both truth and fiction, postmodernity still makes one fatal error: the “tellability” (a tale’s reason to be told) removes most fictive elements from the postmodern text’s state of ““archi-literature;”” that is, the text’s assumption of its own value even if it is not entirely truthful or coherent.⁶¹ In the case of all narratives, “the tellable tale reaches beyond the local context of the immediate speech situation and is open to further elaboration: ‘as might be expected these two features – contextual

⁶⁰ Ibid, 186

⁶¹ Ibid, 191 and 203

detachability and susceptibility to elaboration – are equally important characteristics of literature.’’⁶²

Attempts at postmodern ethics encounter similar limitations. In some vague attempt to reduce man to an aesthetic being, postmodernity refuses to describe its own approach with any sort of narrative other than a simple antithesis to modernity’s strict and totalizing methodology. Postmodernity embraces spontaneity, simple pleasures with impulses, but even when shedding the ethical metanarrative, it cannot efface that very key aspect it hopes to avoid – namely, that ethics, *all* ethics irreducibly and uncompromisingly strives to improve the human condition (whether this concerns a single individual or a group). As modern ethics predicates itself, in part, on judging one situation (political, social, individual) or state of being versus another, postmodernity cannot escape this concern, because to do so would remove the very idea of ethics from ethics. If philosophy and science rely upon narrative fantasies, certain parallels seem to show that postmodernity hypocritically embraces narrative as well. If postmodernity engages dialectic (the ever flowing motion of philosophical thought to confide in and build upon itself), if it leaps gaps in thought and generates techniques for the eventual and quintessential hope that something might be better than it once was, and if this occurs on nothing more than unfounded imagination, then postmodernity too cannot flee what is universal to all thought.

In contradiction, perhaps postmodernity shapes some linguistic connection to truth, not entirely transcendental, but observing a modicum of trends that now seem almost undeniable about the very ecology of metanarrative within existence – narratives are ubiquitous, spontaneous, and indefinitely produced; not even postmodernity can abandon this practice entirely. Also, Lyotard critiques narrative through narrative. Narratives have cropped up across various regions and cultures and have developed simultaneously or at various points in time at

⁶² Ibid, 203

different locales of the globe unknown to each other. Human beings have always produced narratives of some sort (and always will). This might indicate the insistence to speak or write a story that explains, because any story aims to make a point about reality. In that superstitions or faith in the divine or notions of a purely chaotic and absurd universe supersede the narrative itself, there might be, after all, some innate impulse to order and clarify mystery, a persistent stab at philosophical reasoning.⁶³ If modernity has all along been a game of competing narratives, to get outside of modernity and its supposed metanarrational telos is to get outside of narrative itself (in effect, to get outside of language). Zygmunt Bauman has at least sought this much with his conception of postmodern ethics, though the attempt finds itself written through language and unable to break this final re-defined boundary. In a journey to someplace or thing postmodern, “we wander around lost in the discursive zone; and yet, it is only the insistent force of a groundless reflection turned against itself that preserves our connection with the utopia of a long since lost, uncoerced and intuitive knowledge belonging to the primal past.”⁶⁴ Perhaps, we might be able to consider that postmodernity does not constitute a radical break.

Postmodernity against its explicit intentions suggests that knowledge might still be possible, but the subject of narrative, specifically narrative competition, necessitates more attention. In *Were We Ever Modern?*, Bruno Latour argues that “critics have developed three distinct approaches to talking about our world: naturalization, socialization, and deconstruction,” and “each of these is powerful in itself but impossible to combine with the other.”⁶⁵ While these axes are mutually exclusive, they are not mutually canceling: we can explain reality (events,

⁶³ This also problematizes the relationship of narrative to metanarrative. If metanarrative concerns the conjunction of various narratives in accordance to some end, can a singular narrative not also present a philosophical end? Can narratives exist without being a part of a larger philosophy? Do the messages of narratives make sense without a philosophical context or assumption? The answer may be “no.”

⁶⁴ Ibid, 186

⁶⁵ Latour, *Were We Ever Modern?*, 6

processes, ideas, institutions, trends, etc) as “simultaneously real, like nature,” constructed “like discourse,” and “collective, like society.”⁶⁶ For example, we might conceive of science as both real (as it interacts with reality it changes the structure of reality) and constructed (as in Lyotard’s concept of a self-constituted language game). As various modes of discourse seeking to explain something, we might be able also to call these “narrative paradigms.” A narrative paradigm refers to a type of method or perspective we assume when we produce, receive, or transmit “knowledge.” To clarify the function of these paradigms, we could also argue that the first concerns naturalized phenomena (“natural” facts), the second, culture and constructed power relations (“socialized” or “social”), and the third, a critical or skeptical stance towards the general artificiality in the first two (“deconstructive” or what we think of as “postmodern”). Perhaps, we could trade the word “epistemology” for “narrative paradigm,” but the latter term makes no assumptions about knowledge: a narrative can be true or false. Narratives, even if they do not constitute true or transcendental knowledge, may still be useful.

Returning yet again to the problem of metanarrative, Latour’s claim allows for a multiplicity of “truths” and non-truths to occur at the same time along different axes. We can take from this that a narrative would not be able to account for the contents of a narrative within a different paradigm (e.g., the “deconstructive” paradigm in biology would not be able to comment on the existence of white blood cells). The question within Latour’s title suggests that we have never been really able to construct a totally coherent anthropology. However, perhaps, in the moment that we view the complexities and exceptions of the idea of narrative itself, we also might realize that consciousness moving outside of the multiplicity can also see the multiplicity as a whole, and when this happens we beg not only for an explanation of the tapestry but also, a direction, purpose, meaning, and also, a method of choosing which paradigm to adopt,

⁶⁶ Ibid, 7

which may, in any event, constitute some semblance of a metanarrative. Inspired by Latour's question, we could also suppose "Were we ever *not* modern?" or "Is it even possible to never be modern?" As Latour predicts, this also necessarily entails a reexamination of "what does it mean to be modern [at all]?"⁶⁷

Ethics fits Latour's model. We can discuss the nature of ethics through certain paradigms. For example, ethics simultaneously can be a prerequisite to social relations (natural), and in also being a socialized phenomenon, become the arbiter of power relations (and then possibly deconstructed as such). This is not to say we transform "narrative paradigms" into "ethical paradigms," but instead, certain narrative paradigms *allow* for (or necessitate) the creation of different types of ethical systems. The postmodern would have us change the nature of ethics itself, which in any case, poses some very challenging questions which have already been discussed. However, even if an abstract concept like ethics can be implemented through multiple paradigms, as a matter of practicality and politics, which narrative paradigm should we choose to base our society on?⁶⁸ Of course this question also presupposes that we must choose at all, and there is probably a value in telling congruent narrative paradigms if only because they often keep each other in check (by reminding each other of its limitations). Nevertheless, politics would demand a dominant category necessarily to clarify its own function and implementation, and this would not alter the idea that narratives within a certain category constantly compete with each other.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 8

⁶⁸ This really concerns all relationality as well, but in the interest of space we might be able to collapse all relationality into the term "politics." Though it might also be subject to debate and discussion, we may be able to presuppose a "society" of some sort as a context for human relations for several reasons: 1) Society of some sort is a feature of human development (at least what we have observed through anthropology so far). 2) Society has practical benefits (easier accumulation of resources, problem solving divided amongst multiple brains, allows for group defense, etc.) 3) Society can be constituted on a number of different levels, like a family for instance.

With the idea of politics, we perhaps have already excluded the “natural” paradigm – we do not typically think of ethics (or even another form politics) taking place outside of human relationality, e.g., in a discussion of purely the “natural” world. However, telling about the world “inside” (through understanding of the “socialized”) does not necessarily exclude “natural.” For example, through “natural” observation, one could still see certain power relations (parents – child, man – woman, or even the general equality of women and men), and then desire to see these ideas formalized into law. When they become law, we can understand them through a “socialized” or cultural lens (and how this lens also alters our original “natural” observations). Also, if one were practicing philosophy, he could use formal logic as a “natural” phenomenon and then particularize it within a culturally-based system (like language), again combining the same two axes. Science too – we might see progress as both rooted in fact and the projection of theory (only limited to those with the standing to make theory). Along the same lines, facts about the human body would lead to rules and prohibitions for certain institutions like medicine (a hospital could not feed a patient poison), for a fourth time uniting “natural” and “socialized.”

As such, narrative competition within a certain paradigm also seeks to control the disposition of that category (most narratives in any given category claim themselves as knowledge). And, unfortunately, discussing the right combination of these narratives for the “best” political situation would amount to trying to pinpoint the “right” kind of ethics for a society, which once taken out of abstraction, amounts to an immense task (one that has been the subject of much of the history of philosophy). Instead, as postmodernity represents a paradigmatic narrative challenge (to ethics and other forms of knowledge), itself the “deconstructive” category, we can contest it on a categorical level with both the “natural” and “socialized” in mind or some combination thereof.

“Natural” and “socialized” represent the two predominant status quo (traditionally modern) categories used within politics and knowledge production. We use these narrative paradigms interchangeably at any given moment and sometimes in juxtaposition (perhaps, the aforementioned examples indicate that they must always work in some combination). Science and philosophy constitute two subsets within these paradigms, though also within these subsets, an ever growing number of narratives contest one another. Whether the “deconstructive” paradigm exists outside of modernity has already been discussed to some extent (it probably does not). However, if we assume the “deconstructive” paradigm is really not modern or at least mostly not modern, choosing this category would be the acceptance of a postmodern politics. As the “deconstructive” paradigm only critiques the other two categories (exposing contradictions, underscoring the subjectivity of their narratives, etc), any attempt at ethics within this paradigm would amount to implementing a postmodern form of ethics. If we were to weigh the two status quo paradigms against the “deconstructive” in the context of ethics, we might suggest a simple rubric composed of two parts: the first investigates the general ethical alternatives and the second suggests that we might ponder the ethical and ultimate impacts of each paradigm. The first part of this rubric has already been discussed to a very large extent in the last section, so it probably requires no further comment at the moment.

As a side note, the assumption of narrative paradigm (or a combination of paradigms) does not translate to understanding any sort of knowledge in the true or transcendental sense. All narrative paradigms place parameters on knowledge, and one could say that each category calling itself a narrative paradigm realizes that it is involved in the production of “knowledge.” Ethics necessitates relationships (to other beings, to the environment, etc.), and so, in producing knowledge about these relationships, it demands the assumption of a narrative paradigm. Ethics

represents an inescapable condition of our world. To uphold this claim, we could even suggest that a completely amoral person takes a stance on ethics by rejecting it altogether. With this in mind, we should move on to discussing the consequences of assuming a particular paradigm.

The postmodern has always been concerned with the violence of modernity: the atomic bomb, inequality in social systems, the power of capitalism, armies and technologies organized en masse, the imperialistic and brutal tendencies of European “exploration,” etc. Modernity also concerns itself with its own violence, but its solutions (the ever number of competing narratives within the categories of “natural” and “socialized”) never move outside a passive stance towards knowledge production and always seem to involve the accidental or inevitable reliance on principles that worsen its problems: the bigger bomb in the case of peace, more Western science, money, and education to pull Africa out of the colonial wreck modernity caused (and thus making Africa dependent again). The “deconstructive” paradigm, postmodernity, supposedly rejects modernity’s configurations and systems. In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault equates the Western impulse with the tendency towards self-destruction. Foucault passionately charges,

Since the classical age the West has undergone a very profound transformation of these mechanisms of power...a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them...And through a turn that closes the circle, as the technology of wars has caused them to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiated them and the one that terminates them are in fact increasingly informed by the naked question of survival. The atomic situation is now at the end point of this process: the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual’s continued existence.⁶⁹

In this particular case, the “deconstructive” paradigm exposes the contradictory logic of survival.

We might also say this quote comments on the “natural” paradigm insofar as the impulse for survival might be said to arise out of an examination of what is “natural” about a human being.

While Foucault does not challenge the “natural” paradigm per se, he rejects the *necessary ethics* that arises out of such a paradigm (therefore “deconstructing” and revealing what the paradigm

⁶⁹ *The History of Sexuality*, 135-7

implies); that is, a people or society or state guarantee their continued existence by, unfortunately, constantly creating bigger weapons (and these leads also to weapons of mass destruction, like the atomic bomb).

The technologies of modern powers have no doubt transformed and endangered the state of survival, but mass slaughter is not new historically (and certainly not unique to the modern period). In the pre-modern, the Classical age (again, Foucault's beloved Greeks), war was carried out in the same manner, and cities had the power to (and sometimes did) wipe out or enslave the entire population of foreign neighbors. The principle of survival has never changed, and states have always sought more fantastic weapons with which to destroy one another.⁷⁰ To reject this principle is to reject the state and society, which constitutes effacing the possibility of ethics as previously discussed.

By equating both science and philosophy with the means for tools of mass destruction (if Western reason is linked to knowledge production and knowledge production to discipline and discipline to the catastrophic powers of the state), Foucault also poses the danger of disregarding the flipside to the "underside:" a longer life expectancy, a more stable system of governance, a law interested in the distribution of justice, etc. Modernity for all its cruelty and decadence, for all its hardship and blood, has still produced narratives that "liberate:" civil rights and democratic movements, cures and vaccines for disease, etc. The "natural" and "socialized" paradigms produce these benefits; humanism, for example, relying on "natural" commonalities between human beings, might desire to see human beings treated equally before the law.⁷¹ Modernity is

⁷⁰ Foucault's quote comes from 1975, a time obviously when the idea of mutually assured destruction had not really been fleshed out in the context of deterrence. Foucault might have had something else to say about the "atomic situation" if he had lived long to see the end of the Cold War.

⁷¹ Equally, of course, one could argue that the "natural" and "socialized" paradigms produce these problems as well. For example, one could produce a narrative purporting there is a "natural" difference in race (and say one race is not equal to another). Consequently, culture can produce this same narrative by implying a state of inequality (as in the case of denying one race voting rights). Formal resistance, however, also takes place within these paradigms: one

dynamic, inventive, and always follows a self-correcting course; it moves the Earth forward, the late manifestation of that undeniable, obvious, and ferocious desire for discovery.

Though the “deconstructive” paradigm challenges science as a limited and privileged construct, it cannot deny the accumulated results of the “natural.” Knowledge created (the different narratives within science) may be either true or false, but postmodernity ascribes no standards for this sort of verdict.

Even with this mind, a trend within the “natural” paradigm for some time has turned outward toward the cosmos, the unification of laws, the conversion of energy, the intrinsic and substantial violence of being within a universe forever in flux. The “natural” paradigm has produced knowledge about our relative insignificant place in the grander scheme of the universe’s history. We have “learned” that our tiny Earth is but a fragile mote of dust in an increasingly hostile cosmos, and the annihilation of the species might be a real possibility: the sun’s ticking clock, a Milky Way collision with Andromeda, near-Earth objects, etc. As Carl Sagan writes,

There must be a point of diminishing returns: clearly, some flux (motions of the universe) for the continuance of any civilization. One consequence of this train of argument is that, even if civilizations commonly arise on planets throughout the Galaxy, few of them will be both long-lived and nontechnological. Since hazards from asteroids and comets must apply to inhabited planets all over the Galaxy, if there are such, intelligent beings...[would have to] leave their planets, and move small nearby worlds around. Their eventual choice, as ours, is spaceflight or extinction.⁷²

The postmodern alternative to science is Lyotard’s science, a science celebrating the disorder, instability, and the wholly noncumulative nature of its project (which might show why the

could argue that there is a “natural” equality in the races. In fact, as science improves itself, it is more than likely to result in liberation: the current anthropological consensus is that race does not actually exist. Also, within the “socialized” paradigm, we can discuss leveling power relationships to make races equal.

⁷² Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 327

“deconstructive” cannot intersect the “natural” narrative paradigm). With the stakes so high, we cannot trust this over a science dedicated to order, stability, and accumulation.⁷³

Knowledge produced in modern paradigms might not achieve “truth” in the absolute or transcendental sense (after all we would still have to the dispute of the New Pragmatists, which Carl Rapp classifies as post-rationalists along with the postmodern). Modern narrative paradigms have empirical uses and allow for the very possibility of ethical engagement, or at the very least, they imply the essential nature of biological survivalism, which might be a precondition to ethics. Only the “socialized” and “natural” narrative paradigms make sense within the scheme of politics. In modernity, we have the capacity to produce ethical realities by our narratives. Modern metanarratives look for an end of something in also the same capacity that they hope for the best, work to produce the best ethics, the best science, perhaps even the best humans (which could be a multiplicity of identities and narratives).

We cannot discount the postmodern movement, however, though we might say that at least when it comes to ethics, the trends of this movement return back to the modern origins from whence they first came: we realize that once the postmodernity attempts to cover the responsibilities of the collective interchange between “natural” and “socialized,” it too becomes reabsorbed as speculative philosophy (and thus becomes the “deconstructive” paradigm). But, at the very same time, speculative philosophy alone does not allow for the creation of ethics – it takes work from both the “natural” and “socialized” paradigms. Perhaps, all three working in conjunction work the best.

⁷³ Even if Foucault critiques only the supposed “humanistic sciences,” they are intrinsically tied to the natural sciences: the “reason” of science comes out of the Cartesian project to understand the limits of human knowledge. To challenge the reason and the production of knowledge, as Foucault does, challenges scientific knowledge at least indirectly.

Watchmen, a story about the ethics of modernity and postmodernity, in many ways gives a very concrete grounding for our discussion of narrative paradigms. Particularly, it helps discuss limitations and possibilities of each category through the internal debates amongst characters.

Who Watches the Watchmen?

A Look at Ethics and Narrative Paradigms When Faced With the End of the World

“My name is Ozymandias
 King of kings
 Look upon my works, ye mighty,
 And despair!”
 -Percy Shelley

Detached from the idealized dyad of good and evil, Alan Moore’s costumed adventurers invert the traditional mythos of Superman by entering a world governed by the brutality of realpolitik. No longer merely an aggregate of local crime fighters, many superheroes over the years have become embroiled in imperialistic domination, violent crowd control, assassination plots, and capitalistic schemes; others have retired. At the imaginary apex of the Cold War, the United States scales to the precipice of nuclear obliteration, and President Nixon, inaugurated for a third term, sits in a bunker at some unknown location ready to push the “first strike” button, an act that will surely cause the end of the world. “Mr. President, our analysis shows good percentages on a first strike,” urges Ford coolly.⁷⁴ Apart from international conflict, American society itself has entered a state of precarious uncertainty: the New York police force hires mercenaries off the street; gang warfare reaches an uncontrollable high; a man murders his family under the duress of impending doom, and a whole city cannot forget that when (and not if) the first bomb drops, it will be their homes, hospitals, schools, and families swept away in a single, bright flash of nuclear heat.

Moral certainties in the novel evaporate in the face of realism, and it remains difficult to divide hero from villain. *Watchmen*, for the most part, centers on a discussion on the politics of annihilation; it concerns the most extreme ethical predicament: what should one value on the brink of death, on the cusp of a seemingly unalterable fate? At the end of every chapter, an

⁷⁴ Moore, *Watchmen*, Chapter X: 3

ominous clock appears in front of a black backdrop, and with each successive appearance, the minute hand ticks closer to midnight, as if by this final stroke, the end of something (salvation or extinction) will finally be achieved.

Initially spurred by an investigation into The Comedian's death, Rorschach (a zealous and almost psychotic vigilante) gradually introduces the reader to the major characters of the novel by warning his colleagues of a "mask killer." These figures include Adrian Veidt (Ozymandias, a self-made millionaire and obsessive humanist deemed the "smartest man in the world"), Dan Drieberg (Nite Owl, a compassionate and quiet ornithologist who has retired out of disgust over the superhero image), Laurie Juspezyk (Silk Spectre II, a woman angrily living in the shadow of her mother, the original Silk Spectre), Dr. Manhattan (a blue-skinned physicist who acquired his powers of teleportation and near omnipotence in a radiation accident), and The Comedian (a man who lives in everyone else's memory as a nefarious, horribly cruel government employee). The Comedian's sadistic cynicism drives the ethical debate within *Watchmen*: he doubts the worth of humanity; he deplores human nature; he values nothing more than his own lustful and violent drives. Perhaps, in this way, he is the closest to becoming a postmodern aesthetic being. Of course, this is in part because The Comedian realizes "the joke" of modern civilization: after centuries of philosophical "enlightenment," scientific "progress," after a thousand modern quests to seek "true" and immortal knowledge, he realizes that all of this has only produced the power to annihilate our species and humans only operate on the basest of drives: the fear of death. For The Comedian, power is the only unalterable value. Once mocking Veidt for his suggestion that his "intelligence" will solve the "world's problems," the Comedian said, "You think all that matters? You think that solves anything? It don't matter squat because

inside thirty years the nukes are gonna be flyin' like maybugs...and then Ozzy here is gonna be the smartest man on the cinder.”⁷⁵

In *Watchmen*, an ethical debate occurs as various narrative paradigms clash with one another – certain characters (and their deeds and sentiments) personify these paradigms. To ground this claim fully, we should summarize much of what has been discussed so far. So, in the course of this paper, we have sought to demonstrate several aspects of postmodern ethics. First, the postmodern ethical system is a practical impossibility (it de-regulates power and deprives man of both sociality and culture). Second, if its claims parallel the same logic of “knowledge” it critiques, if it uses mere narratives just like modernity to establish “knowledge”, then postmodernity constitutes a modern narrative paradigm whose function is to *deconstruct* values acquired through the “natural” and “socialized” paradigms, which, at times, has its uses. For example, when modernity seeks to deploy its own constructed narratives – for example, sexuality strictly consists of a relationship between a man and a woman (and anything outside of this is abnormal and must be prohibited) – the strength of the postmodern narrative paradigm can be used to curtail modern ethical excess. Third, though the postmodern narrative paradigm has its uses, if it becomes dominant in all forms of relations, it problematizes a grounding for ethical engagement. This section will reinforce the third claim by providing concrete examples within literature. Each character represents a specific narrative paradigm or combination of paradigms: Ozymandias, Dr. Manhattan, Nite Owl, and Silk Spectre II embody the “natural” and “socialized” – Rorschach and The Comedian form the “deconstructive.” To assert *Watchmen* plays upon narrative paradigms is also to say, in part, it concerns a competition between modern and postmodern ethics. The competition of paradigms takes place under the backdrop of the most

⁷⁵ Ibid, Chapter II:11

significant ethical decision imaginable, a decision to embrace a lie that could lead to world peace or reveal the truth and plunge the world back into nuclear stalemate.

“I did it!” yells Ozymandias, raising his arms in glory and triumph. Ozymandias’ explicative emphasizes the central question of the novel: whether a very morally questionable act will be justified by its end results. Specifically, Ozymandias has orchestrated a sham alien attack to avoid nuclear war. At the cost of millions of lives, including much of New York’s population, Ozymandias succeeds in shocking the Soviet Union and the United States into immediate negotiations for joint defense and promises of mutual aid in the face of such a dramatic and terrible threat to the global population. Following a trail of clues from The Comedian’s death, Rorschach and Nite Owl have followed Ozymandias to his Antarctic lair and have just watched the news unfold on a panel of different television stations. Dr. Manhattan (accompanied by Silk Spectre II), having followed a trail of tachyons, now stands with the group as well. Rorschach is the only hero who wants to expose Ozymandias’ ploy. Ozymandias, the nefarious plotter, claims the title of brutal savior – he is both hero and villain, an example of power at the very top making a judgment that deceives the entire population.

Relying on a fanatically humanist value system, Ozymanias’ ethics employs a combination of both the “natural” and “socialized” paradigms. The “socialized,” narrating power and human relations, elicits “knowledge” concerning *how* to protect human society, and likewise, the narrative that empowers Ozymandias to assume the role of defender or savior only exists on this axis of thinking. Also, Ozymandias’ impulse for survival correlates with a symbiotic instinct, a feeling of connected community with the rest of humanity – this “knowledge” is courtesy of the “natural” paradigm. Ozymandias regards himself as a human paragon, and Moore in many places (such as the creation of the “Ozymandias Toy” line) implies

his repugnant arrogance. His modern sentiments are also indubious. Ozymandias exalts the future, in part, because he is fascinated with human progress, not just human survival. Human life itself concerns constant expansion and redefinition of the limits to intelligence, technology, and knowledge. In an interview, when asked, “What sort of world...do you [see] in the future?,” he says,

That depends on us...each and every one of us. Futurology interests me perhaps more than any other single subject...Technology is progressing at an ever-accelerating pace, and by the next century, I would hesitate to predict *any* limitations upon what we might be capable of. I would say without hesitation that a new world is within our grasp, filled with unimaginable experiences and possibilities, if only we want it badly enough. Not a utopia...I don't believe that any species could continue to grow and keep from stagnation without some adversity...but a society with a more human basis, where problems that beset us are at least *new* problems.⁷⁶

Likewise, the “Veidt Method,” a mental and physical self-improvement program intended to help the common man realize his latent but powerful potentials, depicts Ozymandias’ commitment to the betterment of the species (even if he gains profit from its sales). The “Veidt Method” promises absolute knowledge about the “self” by techniques for “a strong and healthy mind and body,” helping men and women gain the “will,” “confidence,” and “magnetism,” so they can “change” and “influence...the world...in a positive way.”⁷⁷

Praised as the “smartest man in the world,” Ozymandias’ standard of ethics relies upon the simple pragmatics of a human being; that is, rationality predicates man’s approach to reality; reason is his instrument to continued existence. When Ozymandias’ says that the “twentieth century” is “a race between enlightenment and extinction,” he emphasizes two different concepts: first, human societies have always been inclined to destroy one another, an undeniable aspect of reality. Second, only narrative paradigms that can inform one on “knowledge” about reality, morality, and society allow us to value life and keep the threat of extinction at bay. Ozymandias’ decision to execute his alien ploy is an example of using both the “natural” and

⁷⁶ Ibid, Chapter XI: 31

⁷⁷ Ibid, Chapter X: 32

“socialized” paradigms, and only these paradigms permit the kind of “knowledge” that allows for judgment necessary to avoid catastrophe. However, in the same way Ozymandias celebrates himself, Rorschach seems to despise himself. Rorschach also represents the “deconstructive” paradigm opposite to Ozymandias’ “socialized” and “natural.” As Rorschach will demonstrate, the logical end of a “deconstructive” paradigm culminates in a postmodern ethics, which undercuts the other two “modern” categories, erasing the very same knowledge that allows for the protection of human life.

Upon Ozymandias’ revelation, Rorschach storms out of the Antarctic fortress planning to expose the alien ruse to the whole world. While one might see this action as Rorschach’s noblest feat, Rorschach’s shady past, his complex, ambivalent, and often contradictory views on justice and human nature lead one to second guess whether he acts on his own moral impulse or the sudden urge to expose the patent lie. This may also be spurred by his belief that moral purpose does not exist, that justice is an ambiguous and meaningless concept (and both should be deconstructed as such).

In the first frames of the novel, Rorschach appears as a voice, a silhouette – his mask then appears as a Rorschach blot, which obscures any intelligible signs of humanness in his face. Deriving his name from the psychological blot test (a test that can produce a multiplicity of interpretations for different patients), Rorschach himself resists meaning: the labels of “hero” and “villain” no longer apply as his warped sense of “justice” is contradicted by his draconian enthusiasm for making criminals suffer his often extraordinary and outrageous violent retributions. Wanted by the police, Rorschach evades attempts to regulate his conduct. He tries to disown his past as the bullied son of a prostitute: he calls the mask “his face.”⁷⁸ Rorschach even

⁷⁸ Ibid, V: 28

resists meaning in philosophy. In the first few lines of *Watchmen*, Rorschach writes in his journal,

The streets are extended gutters, and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look and up and shout “save us!” and I will answer no...They followed the droppings of lechers and communists and didn’t realize that the trail led over a precipice until it was too late. Don’t tell me they didn’t have a choice.⁷⁹

While “choice” suggests that he might believe in a moral duty, Rorschach himself disobeys this duty, and his desire for violence undeniably overshadows his moral judgment, undercutting his own philosophy on criminality. For example, when recalling his investigation into the kidnapping of Blaire Roche to another, a bus driver’s daughter mistaken for an heir to an entrepreneur’s fortune, Rorschach enters a visual flashback where a tip leads him to an old, grimy and isolated house. Inside, he finds a piece of fabric belonging to a little girl, a cabinet of knives and other sharp implements, and “attack dogs fighting over a knob of bone” outside – with all of this, he then quickly assumes the girl’s kidnapper butchered her body to feed to his dogs.⁸⁰ In the simple manner of evaluating these details alone, even circumstantial evidence seems entirely convincing, but visual information clues the reader into the instability of Rorschach’s claims: he finds the piece of fabric in an *old dress shop* and the supposed ferocious and brutal dogs only appear so in Rorschach’s subjective memory, clearly separated in orange and red pastels – the objective memory, painted in neutral colors, shows the dogs as calm, wide-eyed creatures. Believing he may have in fact solved the case, Rorschach kills the dogs and when his suspect returns, Rorschach locks the man to a pipe and lights his house on fire amidst pleas of innocence. Whether or not Rorschach finds the culprit is largely immaterial given that Rorschach’s conception of “justice” never separates itself from the satisfaction of his desire for aggression, making him unable to fulfill the moral duty he demands of others.

⁷⁹ Ibid, I: 1

⁸⁰ Ibid, VI: 18

In that Rorschach resists regulation and defies all narratives imposed upon him (his past, common notions of “justice”), Rorschach, in a way, parallels a possible example of the postmodern aesthetic being. Within several different frames of the novel, a bottle of “Nostalgia” cologne appears alongside his journal; he carries it in his coat when he fights crime. The eroticization of his violence reinforces the idea that sensory pleasure might direct his actions. Like the unstable postmodern identity, Rorschach’s identity never moves beyond “the [indecipherable] mask” as “his face.” Any truths he postulates about human nature often contradict one another, rendering each assertion meaningless: Rorschach seems to marvel at the irremovable absurdity of the human condition (when he discusses the inexplicable murder of Kitty Genovese) but also, condemn villainy as a choice. When his psychiatrist tries to administer an actual Rorschach test, every ink blot inevitably produces a violent or disturbing image: a fight he once had at school, the realization of his mother’s prostitution, and a dog’s skull he cut open.⁸¹ If Rorschach parallels the postmodern aesthetic being, then he also embodies the poor ethics that results from such a being.

Assuming that postmodernity is not a separate break from modernity and actually a “deconstructive” narrative paradigm, we might look further at Rorschach’s psychiatrist for elaboration. The last scene in Chapter Six shows Rorschach’s psychiatrist enigmatically sitting on his bed in the dark holding an ink blot up to his face. Dazed and depressed from working with such an awful patient, the psychiatrist seems to make a connection to Rorschach’s befuddling philosophy:

I sat on the bed. I looked at the Rorschach blot. I tried to pretend it looked like a spreading tree, shadows pooled beneath it, but it didn’t. It looked more like a dead cat I once found, the fat, glistening grubs writhing blindly, squirming over each other, frantically tunneling away from the light. But even that is avoiding the real horror. The horror is this: in the end, it is simply a picture of empty, meaningless blackness. We are alone. There is nothing else.⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid, VI: 3-16

⁸² Ibid, VI: 28

The psychiatrist's evaluation of the Rorschach "blot" illustrates Rorschach as the "character." Representing the "deconstructive paradigm," he exposes ambiguity, reveals contradiction, and undermines absolutes of morality. For example, when Ozymandias alleges that The Comedian "was practically a Nazi," Rorschach fires back, underscoring his interlocutor's own questionable acts, "He stood up for his country, Veidt. He never cashed in on his reputation. Never set up a company selling posters and diet books and toy soldiers of himself."⁸³

Because Rorschach himself is ultimately an utterly enigmatic superhero, because no single ideology captures his motivations, he might be said to be truly postmodern. When Rorschach discovers Ozymandias' hoax of an alien attack, he leaves the lair, intending to return to New York to expose the lie. However, there is another contradiction here. There is an arrest warrant out for Rorschach, so presumably, he would be handcuffed before he could reveal the "truth," and as a wanted murderer, who would believe Rorschach over the word of Ozymandias, the much adored businessman and great philanthropist? Whatever would have happened, Dr. Manhattan stops Rorschach by killing him. Nevertheless, in his final words, "one more body amongst foundations makes little difference," Rorschach indicates that he does not necessarily believe he has discovered a moral "truth" that supersedes and condemns Ozymandias' actions.⁸⁴ In the end, Rorschach's "ethics," if they can be called such, only amount to deconstructing hidden implications and contradictions in the actions of others, exposing as Foucault would say, the underside of Ozymandias' survivalist logic.

Moore probably situates the chapter on Rorschach's history in the middle of the novel for a very specific reason: to place the psychiatrists' sad and terrible declarations of "meaninglessness" in dialogue with the next image of the novel. Moore challenges Rorschach's

⁸³ Ibid, I: 17

⁸⁴ Ibid, XII: 24

attitude on the first pages of the very next chapter. In the first frame, the reader recognizes “Artie,” Nite Owl’s helicopter, a symbol of his heroism, technical ingenuity, and compassionate disposition. Artie takes his name from “Pallas Athene,” or Athena, goddess of wisdom (emphasizing Nite Owl’s proximity to philosophy), who often was seen with an owl “waiting patiently by her ear” in “Ancient Greek carvings.”⁸⁵ If Rorschach embodies the “deconstructive” narrative paradigm, then Nite Owl (like Ozymandias) forgoes this axis and aligns himself the “socialized” thread of narrative thought.

Nite Owl, teaming up with Silk Spectre II, assumes a mode of discourse, a narrative paradigm, that allows him to construct a power relationship with the rest of the city, which in turn, imbues him with the responsibility to take care of that city. If the “socialized” informs one on human relations, then, arguably, narratives within the “socialized” category can ascribe value to those relations. Perhaps, also, only discourse from the “socialized” paradigm allows one to understand the concept of “superhero;” that is, the term concerns a relationship predisposed to certain rights and benefits that manifest themselves above the law. With this in mind, Nite Owl and Silk Spectre II commit the only fully recognizable heroic (and indisputably ethical) act of the novel: he uses the Artie to help rescue tenants from a burning apartment building. Understanding his superhero identity as philosophical purpose, even though manufactured through the manipulation of social relations, Nite Owl begins to realize that his self-envisioned superhero image might be just as “real” or “true” as a biological conception of his body – the “superhero” narrative is just as legitimate as scientific fact. As such, Dan dreams a dream where he and Laurie shed their skin like clothes a moment before they kiss, revealing a costume beneath.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid, Chapter VII: 32

⁸⁶ Ibid, Chapter VII: 16

Dr. Manhattan, the immortal scientist, cannot understand the meaning of the “socialized” category at all. Spending much of his time away from human beings, including his fellow superheroes Rorschach, Nite Owl, and Silk Spectre II, the blue-skinned physicist spends much of his time daydreaming and building castles on Mars – his capacity for the manipulation of all matter represents the potential of science and the zenith of its project.

As a human being distilled into pure scientific power, he struggles to find meaning for human life. Driven to Mars by an allegation that he gave a former lover cancer, Dr. Manhattan contemplates the “natural” paradigm devoid of anthropocentric bias, at first employing the narrative that human life, the mere arrangement of organic particles, is of no more significance than the mountains or hills or dirt of distant planets. When Dr. Manhattan entreats Silk Spectre II to finally join him on Mars, she pleads that he must return to Earth to help avoid nuclear war. Dr. Manhattan calmly responds,

“You attempted to compare the mere uncertainty of your existence with the chaos of the world beneath us...but where are the pinnacles rival to Olympus? The Valles Marineris...stretches more than three thousand miles, so that one end knows day while the other endures night. Temperature differences breed shrieking winds that herd oceans of fog along a canyon four miles deep. Does the human heart know chasms so abysmal?”⁸⁷

Former lovers, Silk Spectre II and Dr. Manhattan have a complicated past, and as their conversation progresses, he becomes susceptible to her emotional displays, no matter what distance from human relations his powers imply. He tries to explain the conviction in her tears from a “natural” perspective. When this occurs, he suddenly realizes that the “natural” paradigm, while it devalues human life, it also revalues it. Amidst Laurie’s tears, he begins to see human life as a pure mathematic miracle: “A thousand million sperm vie for a single egg. Multiply those odds by countless generations...To distill so specific a form from that chaos of

⁸⁷ Ibid, Chapter VIII: 18

improbability...astronomical odds....like turning air into gold.”⁸⁸ Soon after this realization, Dr. Manhattan departs to confront Ozymandias.

When Dr. Manhattan, Silk Spectre II, and Nite Owl confront Ozymandias, he reveals his master plan, and not much to their surprise, America and the Soviet Union have entered negotiations for mutual defense immediately, effectively ending the possibility of nuclear war for the moment. From our discussion on the possibility of narrative paradigms within *Watchmen*, we have established that the “socialized” (Nite Owl and Silk Spectre II) and the “natural” (Dr. Manhattan) might constitute forms of “knowledge” that allow for the possibility of ethics. Together, however, embodied in Ozymandias, these two paradigms have also justified a catastrophic act in the name of vicious utilitarianism. Though Rorschach might employ the “deconstructive” paradigm, he does not clearly articulate his intentions at the end of the novel, which is not really a surprise since his dialogue often consists of vague fragments and lingering, obscure allusions anyway. We could say, perhaps, Rorschach wants the world to realize what the logic of survival has cost them. We could also say, perhaps, Rorschach despises that a new utopia has been founded upon a supposedly noble lie, a narrative purported at the crude price of millions. However, above all else, Rorschach’s move to escape Ozymandias implies a serious question concerning authority: what right does Ozymandias have to repair society on the foundation of blood? Who has the authority to judge the world? After all, “Who Watches the Watchmen?”⁸⁹

While the “deconstructive” paradigm has its uses, many of which have already been discussed, *Watchmen* presents us with the most extreme ethical problem imaginable – it forces us to make a definitive paradigm choice. In a way, Rorschach’s indecipherable intentions at the end

⁸⁸ Ibid, Chapter VIII: 26

⁸⁹ Chapter VIII: 28

of the novel also indicate the “deconstructive” paradigm’s paralysis in the face of such radical events. If we assume that postmodernity separates itself ideologically from modernity (contrary to evidence that it does not), Rorschach’s character encapsulates the failure of postmodern ethics: its violence, its asociality, and ultimate despair faced with the loss of meaning. “Who Watches the Watchmen?” has always been a question for modernity in general, but by the same token, and this does not merely concern a legal question, “Is a world devoid of modernity, where modern all institutions have disappeared, even feasible?” “Do we even know what such a world might look like?”

Employing the “deconstructive” paradigm, Rorschach’s actions would have brought the United States and Soviet Union back to the brink of nuclear annihilation, and most likely, the factual “truth” of Ozymandias plot would produce more sacrificial blood than the lie. We must realize that modernity has unavoidably produced violence to stop violence, and though we might understand that both the “socialized” and “natural” paradigms have produced ethics for the heroes of *Watchmen* in the past, in this particular situation, where so much rests on the shoulders of a decision to kill so many, the true ethics of this situation may be unknowable. Ozymandias has “corrected” modernity’s danger of producing the most fantastic weapon thinkable, the atomic bomb, but this has only been replaced by another weapon: wealth, power, and especially intelligence for Ozymandias, in part, endows him with the ability to save a life at the expense of another life. At the end of the novel, Ozymandias sits alone a room when Dr. Manhattan enters to tell him, “Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.”⁹⁰ And so, Dr. Manhattan leaves Ozymandias with a cryptic message – has he really averted the end of the world? What will the future hold?

⁹⁰ Chapter XII: 26

Amidst so much confusion, Ozymandias, a clear embodiment of modernity, does enable one particular strategy for ethics: biological survivalism. This concept necessitates violence; it also gives value to human life. With no recourse to certain kinds of knowledge that allow for the creation of value, the “deconstructive” paradigm’s sole function often exposes that nasty truth on how we “value” life, but this does not mean that narratives produced out of this paradigm will ever produce a reliable system of ethics. Attempts to create such ethics, a *postmodern ethics*, encounter immovable barriers; they fail to defy impossible odds. The term “modern ethics” itself allows for a wide variety of interpretations, but we must remember that this ambivalency persists as an incurable condition, a capacity for acts that inspire, a capacity for acts that disgust. The intention of this paper all along has never been to establish the “right” kind of ethics – rather, it has made two points: 1) there is no other alternative to “modern” ethics 2) the modern tradition, allowing for a great number of ways to develop “knowledge” through competing narrative paradigms also generates a plethora of techniques with which to tackle the problem of ethics.

At its very core, modernity celebrates humanity, and out of this, comes the impulse for survival. We should not fear such a principle, though this type of thinking (as demonstrated by Ozymandias) also possesses an extraordinary capacity for violence. Perhaps, in that community survivalism necessitates care of others, urging one to create a stronger bond between the members of our species, we might say it also lays down a foundation for an ethical framework. With survivalism as a basis for ethics, we might also realize the necessity of the “deconstructive” narrative paradigm for certain situations – in the past, postmodernity has always been in a strategic position to challenge oppressing social constructions. Nevertheless, the “deconstructive” paradigm must also compete with the other traditionally “modern” paradigms

(“socialized” and “natural”), and with this in mind, we might also say that only these two paradigms allow for a stable system of ethics.

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