ETHICS AND COMPLEXITY
Exploring the significance and application of complexity thinking in ethical theory with special reference to the graphic novel *Watchmen*.

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Abstract

The current era, or postmodern context, is characterized by an overwhelming amount of anxiety concerning humanity’s future, tied to a general perception of the postmodern context as one that is defined by ‘crisis.’ This anxiety-provoking sense of crisis is, I believe, the product of a much more significant destabilization of the paradigmatic base upon which the human worldview is established. The period that extends from the Newtonian era to the late Twentieth Century has been informed by what Edgar Morin calls a ‘paradigm of simplicity’ in terms of which the universe was understood as a perfectly knowable, deterministic system. Following a series of revolutionizing discoveries throughout the Twentieth Century, however, it has come to light that this deterministic paradigm is no longer suitable as a way of understanding the universe. Instead, a ‘paradigm of complexity,’ in which the universe is understood as a complex, self-organizing system that is never totally knowable, has been posited by thinkers such as Morin and Paul Cilliers. Further, both of these thinkers, among others, argue that the acknowledgment of complexity is an inherently ethical matter, since complex systems (such as human communities) present one with difficult choices to make in uncertain situations, rather than determinate sets of rules to follow.

This study aims to show that a complexity view of the human lifeworld, does not cast the uncertainty of humanity’s future as a threatening cause of anxiety and dread, but offers us a valuable opportunity for growth, adaptation and the creation of new ethical values. Certainly, an inability to come to grips with this new paradigm has led to desperately reactionary measures on the part of some to secure a semblance of the stability and control that the ‘paradigm of simplicity’ made normative. As a result, the complex reality of the human lifeworld is negated in favour of the misleading belief in the certainty and security provided by a particular metanarrative. By contrast, Jacques Lacan’s fecund poststructuralist theory of subjectivity and Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist logic offer useful heuristics for the navigation of complexity thinking that neither mistakenly negate moments of uncertainty, anomaly and paradox for the sake of certainty, nor swing to the opposite, equally unacceptable, extreme of absolute relativism. Poststructuralist logic points to the notion of a ‘complexity ethics’ which issues a challenge to the idea, stemming from the ‘paradigm of simplicity’, that it is ever possible for agents to adopt an uncompromised ethical stance. The upshot of this is to argue that it is essential for contemporary
humans to learn to live with ethical uncertainty, paradox, compromise, contamination and other figures of complexity, rather than search for an impossible certainty, since this strategy leads to more realistic, moderate, and therefore less dangerous, ethical reasoning.

Good popular culture texts, such as the graphic novel *Watchmen*, which represent the reality of a complex human lifeworld, have the power to communicate these rather difficult philosophical ideas concerning the complexity of the human lifeworld to a wide audience in a very accessible format. An analysis of the varying ethical stances taken by certain characters demonstrates, in concrete terms, just how precisely the novel confirms the poststructuralist argument concerning inescapable ethical contamination. Thus, it is with recourse to such texts that one might begin to answer more concretely the questions, ‘what does complexity imply for ethical theory?’ and ‘what might an ethics for the complex lifeworld entail?’

**Keywords:** Crisis, Complexity, Poststructuralism, Ethics, *Watchmen*. 
Introduction

Our societies are non-trivial machines in that they will incessantly know political, economic, and social crises. Every crisis is an increase in uncertainty. Predictability is reduced. Disorder becomes menacing.

– Morin

‘I believe that the world is totally connected: that is to say that there are no events anywhere in the universe which are not tied to every other event in the universe.’ In other words, as soon as one is aware of the potential of his or her actions to affect others and other events, an awareness of the potentiality of the reverberations gives one pause.

– Bloch & Nordstrom

One shouldn’t complicate things for the pleasure of complicating [...] but one should also never simplify or pretend to be sure of such simplicity where there is none. If things were simple, word would have gotten around.

– Derrida

It has come to light that anxiety ranks as the foremost mental health problem currently afflicting the Western world. Approximately 40 million Americans and over 10 million Britons are diagnosed sufferers. This can hardly come as a surprise when one considers the events that have defined the last decade; a global economic recession, growing concern regarding climate change (met with ostensible apathy from high-powered governments and corporations), rising living expenses, epidemics, terrorist activity, and what seems to be a proliferation of crippling natural disasters such as droughts, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions. It is safe to say that these are valid reasons to feel anxious, but it is not as if such things did not occur before the turn of the Twenty-First Century. Why then is it that our current era – or what I will later call the ‘postmodern context’ – is characterised by this overwhelming sense of ‘crisis’?

Perhaps understanding anxiety as a product of uncertainty, or an encounter with the unknown, will make the situation clearer. One could say that whilst fear is a response that is “proportionate to the immediate threat a person is facing,” anxiety is, in contrast, “a disproportionate reaction to what is often an imaginary future danger.” Thus, although the

5 Martin, ‘Anxiety Overload’.
number of events or ‘crises’ that stand as indications that human sciences and technology – advanced as they are – are not able predict the future with certainty may not necessarily have increased in the last decade, the idea that human development automatically gives us greater control over our lifeworld, has been severely discredited by the continued occurrence of such ‘crises.’ The ‘root’ of contemporary anxiety is therefore plausibly the power of crises to undermine the long-standing confidence in humanity’s ability to predict and control its environment. The Newtonian ideal of a deterministic universe has entrenched a fundamental belief in the mechanistic causality of a perfectly created cosmos that unfolds like clockwork. This brings with it the illusion that when (not if) we are able to gather enough knowledge and develop the right tools, the universe and all its workings will be perfectly understandable. As a result, the dominant conviction is that all apparently ‘random’, ‘unexpected’ or ‘paradoxical’ occurrences are merely blemishes, or a façades that mask an ultimately simple and totally knowable universe. The essentially unavoidable existence of contradiction, paradox and uncertainty is therefore not incorporated into theory or practice, but erroneously ignored, or reduced out of the picture. Throughout this dissertation I will show how misguided and potentially dangerous this conviction – otherwise known as “the paradigm of simplicity” – really is, and argue for the crucial importance of acknowledging, and incorporating the irreducible complexity of the human lifeworld. As Edgar Morin, one of the leading complexity thinkers whose work informs much of my argument, asserts

this mutilating, one dimensional vision is taking a cruel toll on human phenomena […] The inability to conceive of the complexity of anthroposocial reality, both in its micro dimension (the individual being), and in its macro dimension (the planetary collectivity of humanity), has led us to infinite tragedies and is leading us to supreme tragedy.

The field of complexity theory is still relatively young, but it draws upon revolutionary discoveries that have been made over the past two centuries, across a number of varied disciplines such as microbiology, astrophysics, thermodynamics, quantum physics, and ecology. Simply put, complexity theory is the study of open systems and their dynamic interactions with the environment, which allow for transformation and the emergence of new properties. Complexity theory comes to the verdict that a purely deterministic, clockwork universe is

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7 Ibid., 5.
impossible, as all open systems are reliant upon the presence of disorder (entropy, thermodynamic instability, chaos) as the condition of the possibility of change, adaptation, invention and creation. This does not, however, imply that the universe exists in total entropy and dispersion either, as this would make it impossible to account for the phenomena of life and organization. Rather, complexity thinkers insist that, for open systems to live, grow, adapt and create, both chaos and cosmos are essential. If the universe was a purely ordered system “there would be no innovation, no creation, no evolution,” and human life would be impossible. But, on the other hand, the same would be true of a purely disordered or chaotic universe, as there would be no hint of stability upon which organizational forms could develop. Therefore, in complexity theory, these two opposing concepts are paradoxically bound to one another as co-creators of the complex lifeworld – a paradoxical co-implication that underpins many other aspects of living organizations.

Furthermore, the study of complex systems defines them as systems in which there are more possibilities than could ever be actualised, and due to the non-linearity of the rich relationships between their multiple elements, it becomes clear that it is incredibly difficult to predict with certainty how the system will develop or how it will react under specific conditions. Uncertainty, then, is not only unavoidable, but it is the cornerstone of a complex system’s ability to adapt and incorporate change. If a system operates according to a rigid, predictable and totally knowable developmental trajectory, the conditions in which it exists would have to meet its needs exactly and remain unchangingly stable for healthy development to occur; any change or unexpected occurrence would prove to be life-threatening: hence, Paul Cilliers’ assertion that “to yearn for a state of complete equilibrium is to yearn for a sarcophagus.” Human beings and the lifeworld we inhabit are, however undeniably complex systems, which means that we cannot employ such rigid programs as the conditions for their success cannot be guaranteed. Because humanity is a network of complex, adaptive systems, our theories and plans of action need to work responsively and incorporate uncertainty and change.

Nevertheless, “the paradigm of simplicity,” together with the enormous technological advances made in the past century, seems to have instilled within the collective Western psyche the idea that uncertainty and disorder are anathema to human development; that they are

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8 Ibid., 2.
9 Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, 120.
disturbing realities that humans should guard themselves against until we have enough knowledge and sophisticated tools to dispel them from the universe forever. Small wonder, then, that the growing evidence that uncertainty and disorder are not only unavoidable, but inevitable, has led to a heightened state of anxiety.

Morin speculates that “[w]e are, perhaps, living through a great paradigm shift.” But he cannot be completely certain since “a great revolution in the principles of thinking takes a long time.”10 If this is the case, and paradigm of simplicity is crumbling slowly, one of the most pressing corollaries that demands attention is the possible implications of the recognition of a complex lifeworld for ethical theorizing. Ethics as it is traditionally known seems almost impossible without the ability to make definite predictions and forecasts concerning the future. The implications of complexity theory, with its focus on non-linearity and feedback, undermine this practice entirely as the ‘under-determined’ complex system “does not provide sufficient information to individuals such that they can only take a single path forwards.”11 Thus it may seem that the study of complexity heralds the demise of ethics. But the argument developed in this dissertation eschews this declaration of the ‘death’ of ethics. Instead, I argue, along with Zygmunt Bauman that, “if anything does matter, it is the redemption of moral capacity” and the “re-moralization of human space.” And to the objection that such a project is ‘unrealistic,’ I echo his riposte that “it had better be realistic.”12 The main purpose of this study is therefore to explore how complexity can be identified as the condition of the possibility of ethics, and what a practically applicable ethics for the complex lifeworld might entail.

Ethical life in contemporary postmodern reality is marked by confusion and contradiction. There remains a tendency to reduce ethical ambiguity to the simplicity of right and wrong actions; good and evil persons. However, such reductive attempts to simplify ethical life according to binary dyads detrimentally negate the inherent complexity of human interactions, along with the healthy ambivalence that underpins ethical decisions. Furthermore, as I will show, any hope of imposing a universal ethical consensus is misguided as those who tend to act under the ostensibly ethical banner of an ‘objectively founded’ ethics often achieve nothing more than the unthinking application of a predetermined law.

10 Morin, On Complexity, 97.
But, it is more than likely that many of those who are feeling the effects of the aforementioned paradigm shift are largely unaware of the theorizations that explain it. As a result, the individual living in the postmodern context is not only more anxious but less likely to be able to identify the cause of this anxiety. What this has arguably resulted in is a reactionary response to the ‘atmosphere of crisis’ instead of an attempt to identify anxiety’s ‘root’ cause, namely, the inability to come to terms with the complexity of the human lifeworld. Thus, the inhabitants of the postmodern context appear to be stuck between the twin impasses of relativistic apathy (brought about by the realization that nothing is certain), and a kind of nostalgia-driven modernist commitment to ethical ‘strongholds’ of certainty and stability such as religion. As I will show, neither of these options is a viably ‘ethical’ choice as they both reach the dead end of ethical impotence. However, if one follows Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist mode of thinking, it is possible to forge a ‘just’ path by negotiating a way between the two, where the tendency to prefer one is always tempered by the existence of the other. It is therefore with reference to Derrida, along with fellow poststructuralist, Jacques Lacan, that I will attempt to merge the ostensibly incongruous domains of complexity and ethics.

Yet, it remains rather short-sighted to come to any type of theoretical conclusion (tentative as it may be) regarding these issues without addressing the problem of how such demanding concepts might be communicated to a lay-audience. Morin ardently asserts that “[n]ever before in the history of humanity have the responsibilities of thinking weighed so crushingly on us.” But if one is to take up this responsibility, then surely there must be a wider audience in mind. To this effect, it is arguably only by incorporating popular culture, by evaluating certain texts in terms of the theory with which one is concerned, that the concepts of a ‘responsible thinking’ become accessible to those who are not familiar with philosophical discourse. Moreover, in using various popular culture texts as hermeneutic tools, it becomes clear that many of the philosophical concepts find very eloquent (albeit indirect) articulation in these mediums. Hence Julia Kristeva’s suggestion that one of the most important tasks for which the contemporary thinker or critic is responsible is the task of translation; of taking valuable cultural artifacts that are representative of some or other form of cultural revolt, and elaborating their mutually hermeneutic significance for those who would otherwise not have engaged in such a

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reading.\textsuperscript{14} It is with this, together with Andrea Hurst’s assertion that philosophers are now “called to configure not methods but heuristics to talk about the complexity of events,”\textsuperscript{15} in mind that I turn to Alan Moore’s and Dave Gibbons’ \textit{Watchmen}.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Watchmen}, a graphic novel that has challenged the conventions of its genre and traversed the comic-literature divide, is by most standards a classic, and is widely celebrated as the most famous graphic novel of all time. In addition to this status, it also accomplishes the articulate communication of some incredibly complex philosophical concepts, a number of which are central to the argument of this study. By incorporating a close textual analysis of \textit{Watchmen}, I hope to show, among other things, that such popular texts which have the potential to engage their readers critically are pivotal in providing the conceptual groundwork for a shift into a new paradigm of complexity, or, that is, a more responsible way of thinking about ethical issues.

In the following chapters, I hope to address all of the aforementioned issues in more detail. The first chapter, entitled ‘The Postmodern Context’, will address the current ethical milieu, with special focus on the experience of ‘crisis.’ This will be elaborated with constant reference to the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard – whose explanation of the \textit{Postmodern Condition}\textsuperscript{17} has become central to any study that addresses postmodern reality – and Friedrich Nietzsche’s theorization of nihilism, which opens up the possibility for the life-affirming creation of new meaning rather than the mere destruction of meaning for which it often damagingly mistaken.\textsuperscript{18} The importance of this chapter lies in its contextualization of the contemporary ethical issues for the argument to follow.

The second chapter, which is called, ‘The Paradigm of Complexity’ takes issue with the notion of a deterministic and causal universe, and accounts for the emergence of complexity theory. With reference to Morin and Cilliers, I endeavour to explain what the effects of a complex reality have been upon contemporary Western thinking and knowledge, whilst arguing that the acknowledgment and incorporation of a more generalised complexity is now a matter of ethical concern.

\textsuperscript{16} Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, \textit{Watchmen}. (New York: DC Comics, 1986.)
\textsuperscript{17} Jean-Francois Lyotard, \textit{The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge}. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.)
\textsuperscript{18} Walter Kaufman ed.\textit{The Portable Nietzsche}. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.)
Third, in the chapter entitled ‘Ethics for a Complex Lifeworld,’ the focus falls on how the experience of anxiety linked to the postmodern context’s atmosphere of crisis, can act as an inducement to the kind of ethical action elaborated by Lacan.\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, Lacan’s conviction that the trauma caused by an experience of “the Real” can lead to an affirmative creation of new meaning, resonates quite strongly with Nietzsche’s ‘active nihilism’. The second part of this chapter deals with what particularly, an ethics of complexity would entail. Here I turn to Derrida’s quasi-transcendental thinking in order to bridge the gap between what is essentially the ‘prescriptive’ domain of ethics and the ‘descriptive’ domain of complexity theory.

In the fourth and final chapter entitled “The Ethical Challenge Issued in Watchmen,” I will elaborate on how complexity is represented throughout the graphic novel’s plot. Specifically, I will pay attention to how the central ‘hero’ characters’ inability to come to terms with complexity seems to undermine their hero status. Furthermore, the one character who does actually act in a way that could plausibly be identified as ethically ‘heroic,’ namely Ozymandias, is immensely ambiguous in his heroism, and I will evaluate his actions according to the ethical outline developed in Chapter Three. Thus, the question of Ozymandias’s status as an ethical ‘hero’ will address the idea of ‘what it takes’ to be an ethical ‘hero’ in a complex lifeworld. The outcome of this analysis will show the extent to which Moore and Gibbons have problematized the notion of the ‘hero’ and entered into a poignantly self-reflexive critique of the entire super-hero genre, showing precisely how the complexity of the human lifeworld can paradoxically undermine even the best intentions and potentially validate some of the worst.

To conclude, this study aims to show that the reality of the complex lifeworld need not be met with fear or resistance, and that an acceptance of complexity will reinforce our ability to incorporate uncertainty in an ethically meaningful manner. The anxiety caused by the postmodern context’s atmosphere of crisis can therefore be construed as an induction into the paradigmatic shift between an unsuitable paradigm of simplicity and the emerging paradigm of complexity. And it is only once this acknowledgment of complexity has come about that one may begin to accept what the implications are for ethics. By coming to terms with the aporetic nature of ethical decision-making in a complex lifeworld, it becomes clear that it is precisely the moment of anguish and undecidability preceding the decision that makes ‘ethical’ action possible as more

than just the application of a predetermined law. Lastly, to communicate these difficult concepts to a wider audience, contemporary intellectuals and critics are indebted to pop cultural texts such as *Watchmen* as they represent these complex ideas in a vivid and accessible manner. Thus, reflecting on Bauman’s assertion that “[i]t remains to be seen whether the time of postmodernity will go down in history as the twilight, or the renaissance, of morality,”20 I would respond that the latter is only possible if the complexity of the human lifeworld is acknowledged.

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1. The Postmodern Context

In a society that is ever more complex, conflicts will not diminish in number and seriousness, but will multiply and deepen. For the same reason, the free access of the pluralism of opinions to public expression is neither an accident nor an illness nor a misfortune; it is the expression of the fact that the public good cannot be decided in a scientific or dogmatic manner. There is no place from which this good can be viewed and determined in a manner so absolute that discussion can be held to be closed.

– Ricouer 21

No logically coherent ethical code can ‘fit’ the essentially ambivalent condition of morality. Neither can rationality ‘override’ moral impulse; at the utmost, it can silence it and paralyze, thereby rendering the chances of the ‘good being done’ no stronger, perhaps weaker, than they otherwise would have been.

– Bauman 22

Never was so much power coupled with so little guidance for its use … We need wisdom most when we believe in it least.

– Jonas 23

To describe all of the influences in postmodern ethics, that is, to attempt a ‘brief overview’ of all available ethical theory, would amount to getting lost down a rabbit-hole of detail. To avoid this delay, I will narrow my scope to a discussion of the postmodern context as one that is largely constituted by the ubiquitous experience of crisis. The theoretical anchoring for this discussion will be provided by Nietzsche and Lyotard, two seminal thinkers whose work has many implications for both the postmodern context and the notion of crisis. Allan Megill rightly labels such thinkers ‘agenda-setters’, saying that “they set the order of intellectual priorities for those who follow.” 24 But that is not to say that the influence of their thought is limited to the boundaries of academic discourse. On the contrary, throughout this chapter, I will attempt to show how the concepts and phenomena explored in their work – most specifically, those which diagnose or contribute to the understanding of postmodernity as an era of ‘crisis’ – are widely applicable to the contemporary social context. It is even plausible to suggest that the trauma of established values that Nietzsche infamously predicted in the Nineteenth Century, Lyotard famously diagnosed towards the end of the Twentiethth.

22 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 10.
While the manifest social consequences of this ‘crisis’ have arguably ranged from the burgeoning of religious and cultural fundamentalism to an equally invidious ethical relativism, I would like to argue that there is yet an extraordinary opportunity to be seized in the wake of it; one that compels the acknowledgment of complexity and its repercussions for ethical theorizing. Hence, this chapter takes on a heuristic function, in the hope that an understanding of the crisis-induced anxiety that underpins the ethical confusion of the postmodern context will demonstrate the necessity of acknowledging the new paradigm of complexity and, in turn, the significance of the shift in ethical thinking that it occasions.

1.1 Can One Define Postmodern Ethics?

The term ‘postmodernity’ is widely used to denote the period ranging from approximately the middle of the Twentieth Century up until the current time. According to Terry Eagleton, the difference between postmodernity (a paradigmatic perspective) and postmodernism (the cultural movement) may be summarized as follows:

Postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives, or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities … Postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of the epochal change, in a depthless, decentred, un-grounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture.25

That contemporary society is constituted via an immense catalog of past and present trends in thought almost goes without saying. Speaking generally, however, relatively few people are aware of this diagnosis. For the most part, contemporary ethical ‘agents’ are impervious to the implications of this multi-faceted condition – which I shall express as the ‘postmodern context’ – when it comes to the ethical decision-making process. My use of the term ‘postmodern context’ therefore designates a situation in which the multiple paradigms of the postmodern era are understood to have manifest influences on the ethical decision-making processes of individuals in

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a given society, even though many people may not be familiar with the concept of the ‘postmodern.’ In other words, there are a great many ethical ‘agents’ who operate either within, or in response to, the paradigms of postmodernity, who have little or no understanding of the extent to which their actions are determined by these paradigms, and are sometimes altogether ignorant that such paradigms even exist. This in no way assumes that the myriad of ethical persuasions which emerge out of the postmodern context share some fundamental isomorphic accord. Instead, the many influences can be acknowledged as acutely subjective, and often contradictory, which results in the increased likelihood of ethical stalemates and conflicts.

Given this diversity, a practical hermeneutic heuristic is necessary in order to discuss the postmodern context gainfully; one that will address the diversity and contradiction of the postmodern context, rather than simply reducing it out of the picture. Thus, I will characterize the prevailing tone of the postmodern context as one of ‘crisis’ or aporia, where both the stability ethic of modernity, and the opposing freedom ethic of postmodernity, eventually undermine the possibility of ethical practice by producing ethically impotent subjects.

The universalist, ‘objectively founded’ systems of the modernist ethical theorists (well-intended as they were) have been severely discredited in the last century, causing formal ethics to lose some prestige in the contemporary era. According to David Harvey, the modernist project is commonly characterized as “positivistic, technocratic, and rationalistic,” and is often identified with the “belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge and production.”

Furthermore, it is closely associated with the Enlightenment doctrines of “equality, liberty, faith in human intelligence… and universal reason.” Condorcet’s famous axiom that a good law should be good for all, just as a true proposition is true for all, is a fairly representative example of the outlook of the modernist project. Harvey adds that Condorcet and his contemporaries were inspired by what Jurgen Habermas refers to as the “extravagant expectation” that the ongoing development of the human arts and sciences would inevitably result in an increased power over the natural world, “the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings.” But, these optimistic hopes regarding human progress have been irrevocably dashed by the horrors of two

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 13.
29 Ibid.
World Wars, death camps, death squads and the possibility of nuclear devastation. This was the final nail in the coffin regarding such enlightenment ideals, as the universalist modernist project came under censure for its role as the fundamental ideological support underpinning the unspeakable traumas that befell human society in the Twentieth Century.

Bauman explains that the notions of ‘ethics’ and ‘modernism’ have lately been damagingly conflated. As a result, the reactionary postmodernist approach to ethics is often characterized as a celebration of the “demise of the ethical,” where “ethics itself is denigrated or derided as one of the typically modern constraints now broken and destined for the dustbin of history, another illusion the postmodern men and women can well do without.”  

As the term ‘post-modernity’ duly suggests, the break away from the restrictive and repressive ‘universal’ moral codes of modernity constituted a new (and ostensibly better) age in which the solemn prescriptives of old could be deflated.

As a corollary, though, postmodernity is now widely criticized for facilitating too large a number of varying and contradictory ethical pursuits. This discursive proliferation, together with the supposed postmodern ‘liberation’ of the individual subject from modernist exile, is seen to have resulted in an era of ethical relativism, where all are free to subscribe to the moral credos of their own making, as long as they do not presume them to be more credible than the next person’s. By forgoing all judgment, relativism allows one to relinquish ethical responsibility and adopt a ‘live and let live’ stance, which only serves to reinforce the status quo – whatever that may be. Relativism annuls one’s basis for criticism by rendering notions of reasoned argument and negotiated agreement obsolete. Thus, it is only those with significant rhetorical power who are able to manipulate the normative discourses that dictate daily life, and there is little chance that a reasoned argument for change could affect a shift from one ethic to another. Yet, there is the misleading belief that this kind of relativism is a greater expression of freedom and individuality. Giovanna Borradori addresses this sternly, asserting that one must acknowledge that “the idea that people can be left alone to make their own choices without interference by others does not make them free; on the contrary, it leaves them at the mercy of the dominant forces of their time,” as “individual choices are formed in permanent negotiation with external forces.”

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30 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 2.
leaders seems to confirm, the dominant forces are not necessarily the ones with the most constructive mindset, the necessary knowledge, or the best intentions. Therefore, if one is to participate in the on-going discussion of ethics in postmodernity and challenge the ‘dogmatism’ Paul Ricoeur warns against, one cannot look to relativism as the pinnacle of accomplishment in postmodernity’s ethical revolution, even though some may paint it as such. It would seem that postmodernity is in need of a new paradigm for understanding the complex nature of the ethical reality that faces it.

The ease with which one can now access various forms of information has produced the idea that the postmodern perspective seems to ‘offer more wisdom,’ than the modernist mode of ethical action. This is due to the fact that the modernist belief in authoritative standards for human behaviour was fortified by constant reference to a superior narrative such as reason or religion. It was thought that, once guided by these metanarratives, astute ethical theoreticians would be able to formulate a universally applicable set of moral and legal prescriptions so that, in the final, perfect society, regular citizens would simply have to obey laws and apply moral maxims, or face the unpleasant consequences of failing to do so. But, instead of realizing the Kantian ideal of a perfectly autonomous decision making process, the modernist version of ethical action simply amounts to an avoidance of choice by upholding the normative way of life and applying a set of predetermined laws.

However, as Borradori noted, despite the convincing illusion of choice, the same may be said of postmodernity’s reactionary relativism. Whether one chooses to follow the rules set out by any modernist agenda or whether one is romanced by postmodern relativism’s celebration of ethical plurality, the result is inevitably the same. Both produce an uncritical, disengaged and ethically impotent subject. So if the postmodern context is seen as one in which there is ‘more wisdom’, certainly, as Hans Jonas has argued, the context has made it much more difficult to act upon that wisdom. The postmodern context is definitely saturated with information, and yet, very rarely does this translate into a significant development of applicable knowledge and critical engagement that would help resolve the quandaries of the aporetic ethical reality it faces. “This is why,” Bauman asserts, “the postmodern time is experienced as living through a crisis.”

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1.2 Crisis!

Alan Megill explains that the first rumblings of crisis as it is experienced in the postmodern context emerged with Nietzsche, at the end of the Nineteenth Century. He links it to “the loss of authoritative standards of the good, the true, and the beautiful to which reason [had] access, coupled with the loss of the word of God.” Resonating with Eagleton’s analysis of postmodernity in the previous section, crisis is also associated “with the collapse, circa 1880-1920… of the faith in progress.” Notably, Megill suggests that “an ‘age of transition’ entails a limited crisis, a crisis contained by a unifying dialectic or some similar promise of return,” but in this case, with the definitive characteristic of postmodernity being its devaluation of unifying dialectics in general, crisis may be seen to hold a place of permanence in the postmodern context.

The mood of crisis is expressed via different metaphors according to the context in which it is evoked. “In the ‘theological’ view,” explains Megill, “the dominant metaphor for crisis is the abyss: the metaphor of humanity stranded in a world without God or other absolutes on which we can depend.” In the historical sense, however, Megill explains that the dominant metaphor is the ‘break,’ which is closely linked to the notion of progress, seen as time’s gradual movement from what has been to an eventual state of betterment in the future. Crisis is then understood as the halt or deterring of this progression, or the threat that progress will be supplanted by regress. But since postmodernity has also incubated a fervent disavowal of the enlightenment ideal of progress as force of legitimation, crisis experienced as a ‘break’ becomes, in a certain sense, almost inseparable from the more abyssal, spiritual experience of crisis that involves the demise of unifying legitimating narratives. The postmodern context and its confused ethical reality is, I hope to show, constituted by these experiences of pervasive crisis and society’s varied, often contradictory, responses to them.

The presupposition that crisis is a fixture in postmodern thought and experience is supported by descriptions such as Frederic Jameson’s, when he explains “postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural

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33 Megill, Prophets, xiii.
34 Ibid.
36 Ibid., xiii.
37 This has been most aptly demonstrated by the recent economic ‘crisis’ in the United States where their erstwhile slogan of expansionism (seen as ‘progress’) ‘Bigger and Better’ and its centrality in the attainment of the ‘American Dream’ has been directly implicated in the causation of worldwide recession.
novelties and innovations are measured.”38 Ideally, the onset of a crisis would urge one to examine previously valorized maxims and assess the extent of their accountability in the materialization of the crisis. As I will show in the following chapter, this kind of critical reflection often effects an irreparable destabilization of the pivotal values around which society is structured, giving rise to a remarkable opportunity in which new values may be created. However this opportunity is not often relished on a large scale, as it would seem that those fearful of damaging the truisms that organize society are of the opinion that radical questioning may lead to the breakdown of all social bonds. As a result, I argue that crisis may be seen to simultaneously provoke both a potentially radical questioning of existing beliefs or structures, and a potentially fanatical defense of their validity. This is precisely what Nietzsche outlines in his theorization of the creative potentialities of nihilism.39

Arguably the vanguard of the notion of crisis in modern thought, Nietzsche not only shrewdly and unapologetically problematized the established values of his time, but swiftly diagnosed the definitive crisis that was to befall organized society. The death of God, hailed by Zarathustra, plausibly defines “the paradigm of crisis”40 in that it signifies a radical dissolution of the axis around which human society had been ordered since the beginning of recorded history. Although the term ‘God is dead’ had appeared in literature before, Robert Wicks points out that Nietzsche’s usage designated a world in which the notion of authorship was totally excluded; where “the loss of faith in God [was] understood in a general and philosophical sense, namely, as the loss of acknowledgment of stable, universal realities.”41 To understand the dire implications of what Nietzsche posited, Wicks proposes contemplating the death of a loved one, and the emotions that would attend the loss, such as pain, emptiness and disorientation. He then suggests prefacing each of these emotions with the word ‘absolute’, with the result that “rather than experiencing a severe loss of personal meaning – one that is devastating enough literally to kill some people – one would experience an absolute loss of personal meaning and consequently suffer from feelings of utter emptiness.” In the same way, disorientation becomes absolute disorientation, complete groundlessness or abysmal absurdity; fear, becomes absolute terror; and

40 Megill, Prophets, 33.
41 Wicks, Nietzsche, 50.
loneliness is supplanted by a feeling of absolute abandonment. The devastating loss of divine stewardship and the radical lack of a celestially-guided purpose exposed the human position on earth as unsanctioned, random and rootless. It is this traumatic experience of metaphysical upheaval that led to what Nietzsche diagnosed as nihilism. Due to the fact that the God figure was considered to be the absolute foundation of all truth and knowledge, individuals beset by Nietzsche’s ‘psychological state of nihilism’ are pushed to evaluate all the certainties, givens and norms that previously organized their daily existence, only to discover their constructedness and immateriality. To answer the question “What does nihilism mean?” Nietzsche answers succinctly; “The highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.” As Wicks explains, the nihilistic consciousness is fuelled by the “sense of loss, emptiness, solitude and despair” that comes after “the ground of one’s spiritual substance is removed, and one falls into the belief that there is nothing of permanent meaning for which to live.”

To explain in greater detail, Nietzsche proposes that nihilism can either be passive and incomplete, or active and complete. In the case of the former, the individual first becomes pessimistic when experiencing “disappointment regarding an alleged aim of becoming,” brought about by the realization that one has “sought a meaning” in all things that is actually not present. Also, the individual who has acknowledged a totalizing, systematic organization that defines and orders everyday events and serves as some “sort of unity, some sort of ‘monism’ [which…] suffices to give man a deep feeling of standing in the context of, and being dependent on, some whole that is infinitely superior to him,” discovers that such a unity does not exist. As the individual’s faith in the universal is diminished, so too is her faith in her own value. Following the revelation of these two ‘insights,’ Nietzsche posits the third and most radical phase of passive nihilism, in which present world value systems are rejected by the subject as entirely deceptive, and she consequently endeavours to “invent a world beyond it, a true world.” However, in time the individual will come to realize that this world is also a mere construct that

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42 Ibid., 51,52.
44 Wicks, *Nietzsche*, 50.
46 Ibid.
has been built out of her own psychological need and that, as such, she “has absolutely no right to it.”

Thus, the final form of nihilism emerges, causing the individual to relinquish any belief in a “metaphysical world and [forbid] itself any belief in a true world.” At this point, Nietzsche proclaims, “one grants the reality of becoming as the only reality, [and] forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities.”

Reflecting on the progression of nihilism from pessimism to skepticism, and finally to the ultimate rejection of all existing values and truisms, one may conclude that Nietzsche has painted a very bleak picture of the ephemeral reality of humankind. In one of his most striking aphorisms, he emphasizes the apparent inconsequentiality of all human existence in relation to the vast expanse of the cosmos, writing:

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of ‘world history’ – yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star grew cold, and the clever beasts had to die.

But, in spite of this apparent bleakness, it is imperative to remember that whilst being undeniably sobering, Nietzsche’s message is also immensely liberating and life-affirming. The nullity that undermines all human endeavors is also the mark of our freedom from the constraining responsibilities imposed in a universe that has supposedly been created for us. This is why he calls for a re-valuation of values rather than an outright and final destruction of all values.

With the position of active nihilism, Nietzsche’s writing becomes more uplifting, as he points out that nihilism is inherently ambiguous. Due to the complex nature of the world and human society, nihilism is not merely “decline and recession of the power of the spirit,” but can also be a “sign of the increased power of the spirit.” Importantly, this is the reaction favoured by Nietzsche – the one in which, upon discovering the abyss, the opportunity yielded by the crisis is relished and rather than shying away from the void, we are encouraged to “dance upon it” so that instead of “lamenting the absence of a world suited to our being, we invent one.” In doing this, one becomes “the artist of [her] own existence, untrammeled by natural constraints and

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48 Nietzsche, Will To Power, 13.
49 Ibid.
51 Nietzsche, Will to Power, 7.
Here, the destruction of old values becomes a necessary precursor to the creation of new ones; where passive nihilism is merely destructive, active nihilism is both destructive and constructive. As Nietzsche says, “every major growth is accompanied by a tremendous crumbling and passing away: suffering, the symptoms of decline, belong to the times of tremendous advances.”53 This statement presciently anticipates one of the central tenets of complexity, which will find elaboration in the third chapter. For now, what is significant in Nietzsche’s theorization of nihilism is the idea that the abyssal experience of crisis inspires both destructive and constructive reactions.

Following this, perhaps the most famous exponent of postmodern theory, Jean-Francois Lyotard, has famously said, “I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives,”54 or, aptly, a “crisis of narratives,”55 where “narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence, and on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed and can be performed within it.”56 That is, apart from recognizing the steady diminution of reverence for the erstwhile grand narratives of social ordering heralded by Nietzsche, Lyotard draws specific attention to the critical state in which classical science finds itself when the age-old ‘master narratives of legitimation’ that have sustained it are similarly cast into disrepute. A succinct explanation appears in Jameson’s foreword to The Postmodern Condition:

both master-narratives of science have become peculiarly repugnant or embarrassing to First World intellectuals today: the rhetoric of liberation has for example been denounced with passionate ambivalence by Michel Foucault in the first volume of his History of Sexuality; while the rhetoric of totality and totalization that derived from what is called the Germanic or Hegelian tradition is the object of a kind of instructive or automatic denunciation by just about everybody.57

As a result, postmodernity is understood to have “altered the game rules”58 for contemporary knowledge and research in such a radical way, that the introduction of new paradigms for negotiating it are inevitable; and some are bound to be less beneficial than others. For instance,

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52 Megill, Prophets, 34.
53 Nietzsche, Will To Power, 112.
54 Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, xxiv.
55 Ibid., xxiii (italics mine).
56 Ibid., 49.
57 Ibid., xix.
58 Ibid., xxiii.
when he was writing, twenty-five years ago, Lyotard predicted a near future in which the sole motivation for research would be based upon its use-value. In his words, “[t]he question, (overt or implied) now asked by the professionalist student, the state or the institutions is no longer ‘Is it true?’ but ‘What use is it?’” He elaborates in a strikingly Foucauldian manner that, 

The state and/or company must [now] abandon the idealist humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today’s financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.

Postmodernity is thus characterized as an era in which knowledge is no longer honourably pursued as an end in itself, but rather as a deceptive means to power consolidation and manipulation.

Furthermore, now that legitimation in terms of any overarching, objectively founded narrative of truth is no longer a viable course of action, the question that becomes evident to Lyotard is: “Who has the right to decide for society? Who is the subject whose prescriptions are norms for those they obligate?” If one was to consider the preeminence of democracy as postmodernity’s preferred system of governance, as well as the accompanying notions of liberty and the essential human right to choice, one might answer the question above by saying ‘we do,’ inasmuch as “the sign of legitimacy is the people’s consensus.” But pride in the democratic process and the individual’s right to choice has resulted in exactly what Mary Midgley labels “contemporary autonomy-worship.” According to her, modern autonomism leaves nothing but the will, “a pure, unbiased power of choice, detached equally from the choosing subject’s present characteristics and from all the objects it must choose between.” This is precisely the illusion that Borradori was speaking against. The idea of an ‘unbiased power of choice’ is virtually impossible in the postmodern context, thanks not in small part to its overwhelming complexity.

Rather than being merely two in the multitude of crises that have befallen postmodern society, these crises, outlined by Lyotard and Nietzsche, are in fact, constituting crises in that they produce the circumstances according to which we have come to define the postmodern

59 Ibid., 51.
60 Ibid., 46.
61 Ibid., 30.
62 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
context. The death of God and the crisis of knowledge and legitimation have arguably ‘given birth’ to the patchwork that now makes up the postmodern context of contemporary ethical reality. What remains to be discussed is how the manifestations of these two crises in contemporary reality affect ethical practice.

1.3 The Repercussions for Ethics

Bauman has pithily identified postmodernity as “modernity without illusions.” But, with the pervasive atmosphere of crisis in mind, one might just as easily suggest that, for those who fail to recognize the creative opportunity occasioned by crisis, the postmodern context could be one of severe disillusionment. Whether expressly credited or not, the implications of Nietzsche’s and Lyotard’s work are gradually seeping into common understanding. This has manifested itself in a general attenuation of the role of religious ideology in public discourse (in relation to the theocentricity of earlier eras) as well as a growing skepticism toward ultimate truth claims, pretensions to pure objectivity, and utopian political movements. As a direct result of the aforementioned crises of postmodernity, the ethical actor is left with very little in the way of substantiation for his/her chosen paths of action, and this can be a rather traumatic position to find oneself in. John Caputo echoes Nietzsche when he declares that the experience of acknowledging crisis, or even becoming vaguely aware that something is amiss, may be likened to “confessing that the ground on which I stand tends to shift, that something that hitherto seemed to me firm and fixed is given to drift.” The experience could be likened to that of a man, “who discovers that the ground he took to be terra firma is in fact an island adrift in a vast sea, so that even if he stands absolutely firm he is in fact constantly in motion.”

1.3.1 Modernist Nostalgia and the Promise of Certainty

As I discussed in the previous section, people all react differently to this experience. The reaction that Nietzsche would call ‘passive nihilism’ involves what Bauman identifies as the fearful reaction to abyssal experiences, namely, proteophobia; the “dislike of situations in which one feels lost, confused or disempowered.” From here, Bauman asserts that all modernist ethical

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65 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 32.
67 Ibid.
68 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 164.
endeavours are firmly entrenched in the manipulation of this proteophobia. That is, the project of constructing and enforcing an objectively founded, universal ethics that apparently seeks to eliminate the threat of proteophobia for the individual. But this can only be achieved by simultaneously exploiting the anxiety caused by the possibility of distress, in the first place. As Bauman explains, Modern ethical practice and thought was heartened by a belief in the possibility of a non-ambivalent code of ethics; it was about “conflict-resolution, and about admitting of no contradiction except conflicts amenable to, and awaiting resolution.” But as we now know, despite the promise of a place of safety, familiarity and predictability for people who like the illusion of having their feet planted safely on unmovable ground, the totalizing concerns of the Modern mindset have shown themselves to be mostly self-defeating and impossible to realize.

Harvey points out that by 1972, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were arguing that the erstwhile modernist values had turned against themselves and “transform[ed] the quest for human emancipation into a system of universal oppression in the name of human liberation.” Add to this the impracticality of Modern ethical systems, as well as the earth-shattering historical events that occurred on modernity’s watch, and it is easy to understand why postmodernity is understood to have set itself the task of radically undermining such beliefs by revealing these modernist pursuits as misguided. It is believed that there will come a time when the proponents of modernist systems, themselves, will prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, its impossibility, “the vanity of its hopes and the wastefulness of its works,” and finally admit that,

having singed our fingers once too often, […] a non-aporetic, non-ambivalent morality, an ethics that is universal and ‘objectively founded’, is a practical impossibility; perhaps also an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms."

Be that as it may, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche admits that “God is dead: but considering the state the species Man is in, there will perhaps be caves, for ages yet, in which his shadow will be shown.” In other words, whilst the postmodernists might be convinced that the modernist systems will self-destruct, they have erroneously underestimated the allure of the certainty and stability that purportedly “timeless, unchanging and thoroughly reliable structures

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69 Ibid., 8.
70 Harvey, *Condition*, 13.
of what is,” provide via their “being supposedly invariant and unshakable.” As it happens, postmodernity is no stranger to the resurgence of universal modernist concerns; it stands to reason that people who feel threatened and scared by the experience of the postmodern abyss would retreat (as Nietzsche portentously explained) into the safety of some or other modernist ethical stronghold. As Midgley has commented, “given the torments of moral uncertainty, guarantees of righteousness are temptations difficult to resist.” Jameson makes a similar observation in his foreword for *The Postmodern Condition*, as he notes that Lyotard may have overestimated the reach of the so-called total renunciation of metanarratives and that the oversight may be remedied by positing “not the disappearance of the great master narratives, but their passage underground as it were, their continuing but now unconscious effectivity as a way of ‘thinking about’ and acting in our current situation.”

Thus, flying in the face of postmodernity’s vehement incredulity, one now witnesses the emergence of a number of sectarian fundamentalist groupings. These groups are often convinced that all the ills and uncertainty experienced in modern times occur as a direct result of secularization and other forms of complexification, and can therefore only be remedied via the resuscitation of religious creed, or an idea which, though [sometimes] secular, would successfully claim comprehensiveness similar to that of the great religions which enjoyed a nearly total domination before being assaulted and eroded by modern skepticism.

It is easy enough to understand why these religious and ethical ideologies are so vigorously (and sometimes violently) defended or even enforced. Amartya Sen has addressed this radical commitment in his recent book, *Identity and Violence*, explaining that when a group of people identify so strongly with one particular narrative (at the expense of a number of other possible constituting identifications), to the point that it singularly defines their life’s purpose, or constitutes their sole recourse to order and stability, a threat to that discourse can be interpreted as tantamount to a threat against life as that person knows it, and is defended against accordingly. In relation to this, Wicks has also warned that the ‘death of God’ has the potential to be an “extremely dangerous idea which has the power to dynamite one’s sense of integrated personal

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73 Wicks, *Nietzsche*, 65.
74 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 56.
75 Jameson in Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*. xii.
meaning."  Here it is important to remember that ‘God’ stands for any external figure of authority, and thus represents the legitimating force behind all dogmatic ethical allegiances, whether they are religious or secular in nature. As such, for some people, the ongoing belief in some or other metanarrative becomes “a matter of survival.”

What makes this will to ‘God’s’ revival more problematic, however, is the unprecedented coexistence of so many so-called ‘neo-tribes’ in increasing proximity to one another in the postmodern context. One might claim that transport and communications advances are the pharmakons of our time, as they make it increasingly easy for different cultural, social and religious groupings to come into contact with one another – sometimes in a salutary fashion, but often not. In fact, because of the radical and seemingly intractable differences between these multiple cultural discourses and ethical frameworks, contemporary society is faced with immense difficulties when agreements need to be made that would be acceptable to all involved.

1.3.2 The Differend

In his seminal text, The Differend, Lyotard puts the problem down to the lack of a suitable idiom that would allow one to resolve conflict situations without causing violence to anybody, as “a universal rule of judgment between heterogeneous genres is lacking in general.” Kwame Anthony Appiah makes a similar observation in his book Cosmopolitanism, saying that the “temptation is to look for a rule book that could tell you how to arbitrate conflicts like that – but then you’d have to agree on the rule book. And even if you did […] there’s no reason to think you’d be able to agree on its application.” Thus we are faced with the kind of conflict that Lyotard identifies as a ‘differend,’ which can be recognized as a moment of conflict, between two or more factions, that cannot be “equitably resolved for lack of a rule or judgment applicable to

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78 Wicks, Nietzsche, 52.
79 Ibid.
80 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 141.
81 Something that operates as both a poison and a remedy. See Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy.” Dissemination. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.)
82 A recent example in the South African setting is the charge of cruelty brought against the members of the Zulu culture by animal rights activists who were outraged by a certain coming-of-age ritual involving the drawn-out sacrificing of a young bull by strangulation. See “Animal Rights Africa Goes to High Court Over Ukweshama Ritual.” December 2009. <http://www.africanconservation.org/forum/animal-welfare/12043-animal-rights-africa-goes-to-high-court-over-ukweshama-ritual.html>.
both arguments.” Furthermore, the legitimacy of one argument in no way compromises the legitimacy of other. If one were to apply “a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation” one could not avoid doing wrong to at least one party, if not both. Here, Lyotard explains:

Damages result from an injury which is inflicted upon the rules of a genre of discourse but which is reparable according to those rules. A wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre and genres of discourse.

But to avoid doing the kind of harm defined as a wrong, one would then have to create a third term, a new phraseology, a new discourse in which the interests of both (or all) parties are equally represented and our old discourse – including both practical action and a manner of ‘using’ language – is laid to rest. It is only through the realization that what remains to be said exceeds what can currently be phrased, and that there must therefore be an institution of new idioms which are not yet existent, that the differend might be successfully negotiated. However, the prospect of such a taxing, not to mention traumatic, procedure is unfortunately enough to put many people off the decision-making process altogether. Midgley laments that “[m]any more people are now willing to abandon moral judgment in a quite open and simple way – to drop all attempt at concern for what is happening in the world, and treat all human action as inevitable.”

1.3.3 Relativism and the Banality of Evil

Indeed, the relativism I have already discussed is one way of avoiding or ignoring the discomfort imposed by the differend, but it is definitely not a constructive solution to the problem of discursive conflicts. Relativism does, in certain senses, present itself as a ‘fair’ and ‘sensible’ option in the face of undecidability, but Appiah is quick to highlight relativism’s problematic nature as a product of the positivistic influence that science has had on philosophical thinking. He decries the fact that the positivist’s conception of the world “has now so penetrated the educated common sense of our civilization that it can be hard to persuade people that it is a picture and not just a bunch of self-evident truths.” Appiah states that the influence of positivism, which

85 Lyotard, Differend, xi.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 13.
89 Midgley, Wickedness, 59.
90 Appiah, Cosmopolitanism, 18.
understands people as motivated by either their beliefs (which reflect the world ‘as it is’ and can therefore be deemed true or false) or their desires (which reflect how we’d like the world to be, and can therefore only be satisfied or unsatisfied), has formed a number of familiar ‘truisms’ that are seen to constitute our ‘common sense.’ He explains the scenario concisely:

There are facts and there are values. Check. Unlike values, facts – the things that make beliefs true and false – are the natural inhabitants of the world, the things that scientists can study or that we can explore with our own senses. Check. So, if people in other places have different basic desires from people around here – and so have different values – that’s not something that we can rationally criticize. No appeal to reasons can correct them. Check. And if no appeal to reasons can correct them, then trying to change their minds must involve an appeal to something other than reason: which is to say, to something unreasonable. There seems no alternative to relativism about fundamental values. Checkmate.91

Although the relativist outlook may at first seem to reduce the chance of culturally charged ethical conflict, it becomes immensely harmful when one considers the kind of mass apathy that is generated by the belief that one does not have the right to be critical of another person’s values – and even more so when that person’s values entail the extermination of an entire race, the exploitation and abuse of a specific gender, or a damaging and parasitic existence within a fragile ecosystem.

Naturally, people who opt for the relativistic stance do not see their inaction in such a grave light – they are often cast as ‘liberals’ or ‘postmoderns’ in their shirking of the modernist moralizing project. ‘Live and let live’ is the slogan hailed as the most understanding, the most nurturing and the least violent; allowing for the plurality so widely celebrated by the pundits of postmodernity as a radical, liberating break from the suffocating chains of modernity. Postmodernists are well within their rights, Midgley notes, to “insist that we must abandon the wild ambitions of unbridled system-builders,” but this definitely should not leave us facing the equally harmful problem of the “irreducible plurality of totally disconnected human aims.”92 What relativism perpetuates, far from the dancing of Nietzsche’s active nihilist, and with a tangible air of self-righteousness to-boot, is nothing more than a different manner of shying away from the abyss. The fundamental lack of critical engagement that relativism fosters can never be a foundation for any valid ethical practice as it serves only to endorse the path of least resistance,

91 Ibid., 22.
92 Midgley, Wickedness, 26.
providing a rather thin veil of decency for the ugly face of apathy. People adopt stances of relativism because they are under the impression that it will lead to a higher level tolerance amongst cultures, but this is not the case, for as Appiah argues, “if we cannot learn from one another what it is right to think and feel and do, then conversation between us will be pointless. Relativism of that sort isn’t a way to encourage conversation, it’s just a reason to fall silent.”  
And by falling silent, one achieves nothing but the reinforcement of the status quo, where the claim, “‘Everyone does it’, ‘This is how things are done’ is the preventative, and effective medicine for guilty conscience.”  

Significantly, if one is not immediately convinced of the harm caused by the uncritical foundation of relativism, the figure of Otto Adolf Eichmann, often labeled one of world’s most ‘evil’ men, stands testament to its inherent dangers. Hannah Arendt famously linked similar uncritical tendencies to what she termed ‘the banality of evil’ when she published her report on the Israeli trial of Eichmann, the logistical coordinator for the mass deportation of entire communities of people to the Nazi extermination camps during the Second World War. Arendt’s account of the ‘monster’ in question was surprising, as it did not fit the profile that was expected; he showed no signs of guilt or outright hatred for his victims and he certainly wasn’t a homicidal psychopath. On the contrary, he presented himself as someone who was merely a loyal citizen of the Reich, who followed laws and orders imposed from above. Arendt explains it thus: 

Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing … It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means equal to stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. 

Thus in a most alarming sense, Eichmann’s case shows exactly what is at stake when one merely decides to follow the rules.

1.4 Closing Remarks

To conclude, the experience of crisis in the postmodern context has led to reactionary ethical stances which are often ill-considered. By relinquishing ethical responsibility, whether it be from

93 Appiah, Cosmopolitanism, 31.
94 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 79.
95 Midgley, Wickedness, 65-66.
the apathy of relativism which deems the actions of others beyond the reach of our criticism, or from the allegiance to the parochial ‘system’, its architects, and whatever comforting ideal they represent, one is always, unthinkingly, reinforcing whatever dominant regime is making the rules at the time. Midgley corroborates this view by saying that it “seems clear that a great many of the worst acts actually done in the world are committed … by people who have simply failed to criticize the paths of action lying immediately before them.” 96 In a way, this type of action reduces the human being with its supposedly rational, critical capabilities to the level of a robot; programmable and incapable of questioning the whims of its master. As I will discuss in the following chapters, sometimes ethical action actually entails that which is deemed ‘unethical’ by the normative status quo. But to embark on such ethical action one first needs to engage with the root cause of the crisis-induced anxiety of the postmodern context. It is only by recognizing the part that complexity plays in the generation of such anxiety that one may turn such anxiety into an affirmative moment of creation, thereby answering Nietzsche’s call to dance upon the abyss, and to create new ethical guidelines which are better suited to the increasingly complex era in which one finds oneself. To quote Cilliers, humanity has “to confront this complexity if we are to survive, and perhaps, even prosper.” 97 The next chapter will therefore deal with the fundamental aspects of a paradigm of complexity and show how it is linked to the experience of crisis through the destabilization of the paradigm of simplicity.

96 Ibid., 68.
97 Cilliers, Complexity and Postmodernism, 112.
2. The Paradigm of Complexity

All things depend on one another. All things are both mediated and immediate, as each thing is linked to everything else through a bond that connects even the most distantly separated. In such conditions I consider it as impossible to know the parts without a knowledge of the whole as it is to know the whole without a knowledge of the parts.

– Blaise Pascal

What authority has obscured, ignored, and rejected is coming out of the shadows: the pedestal of knowledge is cracking.

– Edgar Morin

At first glance, this situation could appear very regrettable; but often in the course of the history of science, when new ideas reveal the limits of ideas whose universal value has never been contested, we are rewarded: our vision broadens, and we become able to link phenomena that before could seem contradictory.

– Bohr

‘Complexity’ has its roots in the Latin word *complexus* which means ‘woven together’ and this is precisely how complexity theory would have one understand all phenomena. However when one uses the term ‘complex’ today, it often refers to the inexplicable; those phenomena that cannot be explained by repeated empirical experimentation and are therefore relegated to the realm of philosophical speculation. Evoking the ‘complexity’ of a subject is often tantamount to ‘giving up’ one’s attempt to explain it, and as a result, complexity has arguably come to denote a theoretical ‘dead end’. In this chapter I’d like to extract the concept of complexity from this colloquial intonation and elaborate its significance as a relatively new scientific concept that has immense philosophical, epistemological and ethical implications.

Interestingly, one may note that a number of great thinkers from bygone eras were both scientists and philosophers, even if they didn’t explicitly define themselves as such. But a divide emerged between the two disciplines; they became isolated from one another, and in even more counter-productive instances, posited against one another. This split is something that complexity theory seeks to remedy, as now, more than ever, the abstractions that form the limits of contemporary scientific enquiry reveal the extent to which the so-called ‘hard’ sciences are

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98 Morin, *On Complexity*, 84
99 Ibid., 8.
102 Ibid., 24.
faced with exactly the kinds of philosophical problems they have been seeking to eradicate. The notion that complexity is a purely philosophical problem is becoming increasingly difficult to substantiate, as more research studies reveal the overwhelming complexity of the human lifeworld that the sciences so ardently seek to understand. Complexity thus encourages a coming together of philosophy and science and seeks to implement a more integrative and interdisciplinary style of thinking.

That the epistemological implications of the study of complexity are applicable to a number – if not all – research disciplines, has prompted the heralding of a necessary universal movement of self reflexivity, where all knowledge comprises in itself an “epistemological reflection on its foundations, principles and limits.” This chapter is specifically concerned with how this epistemological reflexivity will affect human knowledge claims and the actions and decisions that are linked to them, with a view to clarifying the argument that complexity theory has very important implications for ethics.

Morin and Cilliers are two seminal complexity thinkers sounding this call to reflexivity and the ensuing discussion of complexity theory will be largely informed by their work. At one point or another, both suggest that human society is either approaching or currently undergoing a significant paradigmatic revolution in its mode of thinking. If one understands that a paradigm acts as “the vault key of an entire system of thought,” and as such, affects “the ontology, the methodology, the epistemology, the logic, and by consequence, the practices, the society, and the politics” underpinned by such thought, it would seem evident that the claim that humanity’s predominant paradigm is shifting would have massive implications for the human condition. Complexity theory is therefore an invaluable Twenty-First Century heuristic for understanding a number of contemporary phenomena.

In order to better understand the demands that such a paradigm shift might make on human society it is important that one understands how radically the new diverges from the old, normative views that have dominated classic scientific research since the time of Galileo. Complexity theory challenges the fundamental principles and central beliefs of classical science, or what Morin calls the ‘paradigm of simplicity,’ and these precepts seem to be losing ground as further studies on complex systems reveal the limits and oversights of the old methodologies.

103 Ibid.
104 Morin, *On Complexity*, 34.
Where before the universe was thought of as rationally fathomable and the mind completely able to understand it, complexity works with the idea that the “universe is unfathomable and mind unfinished.”\textsuperscript{105} To contextualize the emergence of the paradigm of complexity and grasp the challenges it both faces and issues in the postmodern context, it is first of all necessary to understand the paradigm of simplicity as one that has informed society’s understanding of the universe for a number of centuries.

\subsection*{2.1 The Paradigm of Simplicity}

The ‘paradigm of simplicity’ is the term Morin uses to denote the epistemological paradigm that shaped the majority of scientific endeavours until the Twentieth Century. Within this paradigm, classical scientists were able to disregard complexity in favour of mechanistic and deterministic understandings of the universe. The belief was that, at bottom, the universe was a perfectly ordered system, running according to some divine clockwork, where the phenomena that occurred could not only be understood, but predicted, given the right conceptual tools. The prevailing assumption that “astute theorizing [could] produce exact knowledge by reducing human and social phenomena to objectively explainable and readily measurable acts with predictable consequences”\textsuperscript{106} saw the reification of science as the driver of human progress and the guarantor of future stability. It was hallowed as the all-important key that would eventually be able to unlock all the puzzles of life and the universe. The massive achievements of iconic thinkers such as Galileo, Newton and Laplace did much to endorse this view. When difficulties, contradictions, paradoxes and disorder did appear, they were dismissed as either “superficial or illusory,” since “behind appearances, there [was always] the impeccable and implacable order of nature.”\textsuperscript{107}

As the basis for classical science’s rejection of complexity, Morin explains that the paradigm of simplicity encompassed three main principles. First, the principle of universal determinism, in which the universe was understood as nothing more than a knowable, ordered machine; second, the principle of reduction, which saw complex wholes being broken up into smaller, more manageable and isolatable parts; and third, the principle of disjunction, which resulted in the strict separation of the disciplines and their assumption of a remarkably hermetic

\textsuperscript{105} Myron Kofman, \textit{Edgar Morin: From Big Brother to Fraternity}. (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1996), 84.
\textsuperscript{106} Andrea Hurst, \textit{Complexity and Human Development}, 2.
\textsuperscript{107} Morin. “Restricted, General,” 6.
character in relation to one another. Operating in line with these principles, researchers and thinkers sought to “separate composite concepts into basic elements, establish orders of priority, and isolate issues, thereby constructing problems … that [were] reducible to coherent theoretical frameworks and measures.”

It is important to note that neither Morin nor Cilliers deny the enormous fruitfulness of the paradigm of simplicity. A number of essential scientific discoveries – such as Newton’s gravity and Faraday’s electromagnetism – were made possible because of these principles. For Cilliers, the problem lies rather with the fact that the success of such analytical methods “has created the illusion that all phenomena are governed by a set of laws or rules that could be made explicit.” Related to this is the idea that humans can, with recourse to such sets of laws, predict and control the fluctuations of the natural world they inhabit. Complexity thinking resists this claim and Morin labels the pursuit to establish such a system of laws within complexity theory ‘restricted’ complexity, for obvious reasons. Any attempt to reduce or de-complexify a system by studying its basic elements negates the wealth of relational information that is integral to the functioning of the system as a whole. Consequently, the knowledge one derives from studying complex systems in this manner will always be limited and therefore the idea of developing a totalizing system of complex laws becomes an unavoidable contradiction. Like Cilliers, Morin strongly affirms an ‘anti-reductionist’ stance, arguing that any method that seeks to “cut up” complex systems, inevitably “destroys what it seeks to understand.”

Myron Kofman’s assertion that the ‘grown-up’ “solution to the invasion of disorders was simultaneously to ignore and control them” adequately summarizes Western society’s responses to the increasingly amplified presence of complexity since the first breaks with the paradigm of simplicity were made back in the 1800’s. Cilliers similarly argues that the “traditional way of confronting complexity was to find a secure point of reference that could serve as a foundation, a passe-partout, a master key from which everything else could be derived.” Whether this takes the form of “a transcendental world of perfect ideas, the radically sceptic mind, [or] the phenomenological subject” is inconsequential, as the point remains that by using such methods one does not confront or solve complex problems. On the contrary, one

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110 Ibid., 2.
avoids them.\textsuperscript{112} Therefore, Cilliers’ readers are solemnly warned against the “the trap of trying to find master keys.”\textsuperscript{113} But despite such warnings, Western thinking has clearly remained romanced by the idea. In relation to this, Morin has identified what he pithily calls the “ostrich solution”\textsuperscript{114} to instances of complexity, where the attempt to ignore these ostensibly threatening realities leads to a flat-out denial of their existence, as if by pretending not to see the problem one may will it out of existence, much like an ostrich that hides its head in the sand. Hence, as more and more instances of disorder, chaos, instability and unpredictability manifested, the reactions became increasingly dismissive and in hindsight, one could even say, naïve. It has only been since the latter part of the Twentieth Century that a new form of complexity thinking that accepts and relishes the fact that it “must face messes, interconnectedness among phenomena, fogginess, uncertainty, contradiction” has emerged.\textsuperscript{115} The challenge humanity now faces is being able to generate knowledge, meaning and responsible ethical strategies despite these hurdles.

One of the first major challenges to the precepts of classical science came with the formulation of the second law of thermodynamics and its establishment of disorder as a prevalent and undeniable natural force. The second law, which states that, over time, in a closed system, energy will degrade in caloric form, was reformulated as the law of entropy by Rudolf Clausius in the middle of the Nineteenth Century.\textsuperscript{116} What this means is that all activity and work performed by a system tends to use energy which is lost from the system in the form of heat (thermodynamics is formally recognized as the science of energy transfer between bodies/systems). Then, in 1877, entropy came to designate disorder, when Ludwig Boltzmann linked the notion to the “increasingly random behaviour of molecules,” and thus the “degradation of energy was revealed as the degradation of order.”\textsuperscript{117} Hence, if the universe was conceived as a closed system, the second law of thermodynamics implied that it, too, must tend toward entropy or disorder. After centuries of exile, disorder had asserted itself as the state toward which the universe was tending, but it would take some time for this notion to be formally accepted.

Scientists at the turn of the Twentieth Century were thus faced with an unprecedented and mystifying paradox; how was it that certain systems in the universe were able to organize

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{114} Morin, \textit{On Complexity}, 25.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{117} Kofman, \textit{Edgar Morin}, 65.
themselves and develop in highly efficient ways, despite the tendency toward general entropy? As Kofman elucidates, the questions of “why there was order rather than complete disorder” and how, if the universe could “legitimately be treated as a closed system, it had not fallen into complete entropy” were the puzzles that would define development of complexity theory in the Twentieth Century.\footnote{Ibid., 65.}

2.2 Emerging Complexity

Complexity is, true to its Latin root, a concept that ‘weaves together’ a variety of different elements. It would be impossible to speak in terms of complexity now, were it not for the revolutionizing work accomplished by a number of different researchers in a number of disciplines throughout the Twentieth Century. After the breakthroughs of thermodynamics in the Nineteenth Century, the importance of chance and the crucial role of disorder in the organization of the universe became increasingly harder to ignore. According to Morin, this was only the first “breach in the epistemological framework of classical science.”\footnote{Ibid., 9.} The Twentieth Century would see a number of others enter the picture. As I will show, Complexity theory emerged as a product of these breaches. But to start with, more pointed definition of the concept ‘complexity’ can be found in Morin’s explanation that it is a

quantitative phenomenon, the extreme quality of interactions and of interference between a very large number of units… It is also made up of uncertainty, indetermination and random phenomena. Complexity is, in a sense, always about chance.\footnote{Ibid., 20.}

Twentieth Century French mathematician, Henri Poincare, set the tone for the century to come when, towards the end of the nineteen-hundreds, he successfully proved that, although Newton had shown how to predict the orbital movements of two bodies in relation to one another, introducing a third body to the system made such prediction impossible. The so-called ‘three body problem’ was one that Newton had also encountered, but he had thought it would be solved in the future when there were more advanced resources and tools to draw upon. Instead, more advanced tools had allowed Poincare to prove this impossibility, and it struck a forceful
blow to the foundations of the Newtonian science that governed the laws of motion on earth.\textsuperscript{121} His discovery destabilized a view of the world that ironically neither he nor his contemporaries were willing to give up. The thought that such unpredictable behaviour may be present in all nature was so incredibly disturbing that Poincare took his work no further and the momentum of Newton and Laplace’s determinism continued into the Twentieth Century relatively unchecked.\textsuperscript{122}

Even more so, in the Twentieth Century, the ‘advanced tools’ that Newton had hoped would secure the future stability of his deterministic theories would in fact destabilize them and eventually create the conditions for an unprecedented recognition of the insecurity and instability that is unavoidable in the universe.

2.2.1 Important Developments

The hugely influential discoveries in the physical sciences were mostly significant events for the emergence of complexity theory, not least among them, Einstein’s theory of general relativity, which “complexified the relations between time and space, until then considered transcendent and independent essences.”\textsuperscript{123} Then quantum physics uncovered an entirely new level of indeterminacy when it was discovered that the most elementary and indivisible elements that constituted all the world, namely atoms, were actually themselves complex systems made up of even more complex entities that were, “on the border between the material and the non-material.”\textsuperscript{124} It was shown that one could not determine with certainty both the position and the movement of a particle, and that it was paradoxically plausible to suggest that a particle could “be both a wave and a corpuscular body.”\textsuperscript{125} This was massively upsetting as the micro-physical world regained the mystery, uncertainty and contradiction that classical science was supposed to eliminate. As such this discovery undermined not only the idea of an absolute point of origin, but also the “coherence of order.”

According to Morin, the idea of a mechanical and eternal world finally ‘collapsed’ thirty years ago when the “discovery of the cosmic background radiation at 3 degrees Kelvin,” made

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{121} David Malone and Mark Tanner. \textit{High Anxieties: The Mathematics of Chaos}. (UK:BBC Four), release date, 14 October 2008. DVD Recording.
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Morin, \textit{On Complexity}, 19.
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 87.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Kofman, \textit{Edgar Morin}, 65.
\end{itemize}
possible the “hypothesis that this world was born in a primal fire, or from a small initial fluctuation in the Void,” resulting from a “mixture of order and disorder.” This lent credibility to Hubble’s ‘Big Bang’ theory of an expanding universe that was by no means constant, stable and unchanging. Furthermore, the nineteen-sixties witnessed the emergence of a number of earth sciences that were dedicated to studying the earth as ‘a complex physical system.’ Eventually the earth disciplines merged with some of the biological disciplines to form ‘ecology’, and in the seventies, the social sciences added their data and information, restoring the “common fabric” between humanity, its lifeworld, and the greater universe. The resultant research was what Morin terms ‘trans-poly-disciplinary’ as it incorporated the entire biosphere. Each of these developments dealt a fatal blow to the paradigm of simplicity, but there was one specific theory that emerged and turned all remaining deterministic conceptions on their heads, namely, Chaos.

2.2.2 Chaos
Like complexity, Chaos theory took its cues from a number of other discoveries, such as Mandelbrot’s fractalism, Poincare’s analysis of the three body problem, and Lyapunov’s investigations into the shift from stability to turbulence in fluids and gasses. A new vocabulary emerged that embodied the radical nature of the young discipline. There was talk of bifurcations, or tipping points, which referred to phenomena in which systems were observed to shift in a sudden and random manner from stability to instability. Not only were these drastic changes seen to occur as the result of infinitesimal perturbances, but the change that would occur was unpredictable – sometimes resulting in disorder, other times leading to more adapted states of order.

Without expressly aiming to, Edgar Lorenz produced concrete and mechanistically calculated proof of this phenomenon. In a study regarding weather patterns Lorenz used a simple desk computer to run a large series of calculations. When he decided to run a certain set of results once more, he re-entered what he thought were the same input values, when in fact, the numbers had been rounded off to the one-thousandth. According to the common knowledge of

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126 Morin, On Complexity, 87.
128 Ibid.
129 Malone & Tanner, High Anxieties.
131 Malone & Tanner, High Anxieties.
the time, such a small deviation should not, surely, have made a difference. But the computer produced a set of results that was completely divergent to the set produced in the original experiment. The minute difference of a few ten-thousandths had produced a pattern of results that had veered radically from the original results’ trajectory. What Lorenz managed to posit from this fortuitous discovery was the landmark concept of ‘sensitivity to initial conditions’, more popularly referred to as ‘the butterfly effect.’ According to this principle, even the most minuscule disturbances in a system have the potential to produce massive consequences, a notion that defies a Newtonian conception of cause and effect. The principle of sensitivity to initial conditions became the cornerstone of chaos theory, and from it researchers came to understand that a “chaotic process may be open to deterministic evaluation during its initial states, but this knowledge is never exhaustive.”\footnote{Morin. “Restricted, General,” 8.} Chaos thus took its place with cosmos as a dominant force in a universe that defies prediction and stability, with the potential for simultaneous destruction and construction.

In relation to the discoveries of astro-physics, it became plausible to suggest that the universe had actually been born from chaos, and that chaos remained as the universe’s fundamental substrate and its ultimate destination. As a result, the questions regarding the possibility of order were once again raised, only this time, “the question posed was not merely how could order exist at all but what sort of order was it which could tolerate [such] uncertainty, contradiction and circularity?”\footnote{Kofman, \textit{Edgar Morin}, 65.}

2.2.3 Ilya Prigogine and Self-Organization

The contribution made by Nobel laureate, Ilya Prigogine, in the latter half of the Twentieth Century revolutionized the science of understanding the relationship between order, chaos and organisation.\footnote{Sardar & Abrams, \textit{Chaos}, 69-77.} His research on what he famously labeled ‘dissipative systems’, posited the concept of self-organisation as the fundamental quality allowing open systems to maintain structure and function, and even to adapt according to their surroundings. Prigogine drew important distinctions between a closed system at ‘equilibrium’ in which no energy transfer takes place with its surroundings (such as a rock), and an open system that is ‘far from equilibrium’. He came to the conclusion that it was only in the systems that were far from equilibrium that
conditions are chaotic enough for new levels of order and organisation to emerge. It was shown that if “a critical level of thermodynamic disequilibrium is reached, many amazing and surprising things can happen.”\textsuperscript{135} But in order for these organisations to occur, a large amount of surplus energy is needed by the system – hence Prigogine’s label ‘dissipative’ systems – and this was received from the system’s surroundings. As a result of the complex relationship between the system and its environment, the system is able to sustain its own organisation as long as energy is attainable from a source outside of itself. Open systems can organize themselves and reach new levels of order and stability if there is sufficient disorder to produce the “energetic flux that feeds them, [as] without this flux, there is an organizational deregulation that quickly leads to decline.”\textsuperscript{136} The concept of self-organisation thereby explains how various ordered systems are able to act \emph{autopoetically} by virtue of the disorder in which they emerge, rendering the notion of a creator or transcendent architect quite unnecessary.

Prigogine provided a model that explained the conditions in which an organized system could be seen as “spontaneously emerging from random events and then sustaining and developing its organization”\textsuperscript{137} in ostensibly inhospitably disordered environments. Answering one of the most puzzling and difficult scientific questions asked in the Twentieth Century, the existence of order in the universe was no longer thought of as a mystery, but a relatively fleeting reality, both “temporary and partial in a universe of movement, collision and transformation.”\textsuperscript{138} In thermodynamic terms, the process of self-organisation is acknowledged as negative entropy, or \emph{negentropy}, as it is seen to reverse the process of entropy for a certain time.\textsuperscript{139} But as Kofman elaborates, “this enhancement is paid for by a long-term increase in entropy not only for the system but its environment.”\textsuperscript{140} Inevitably, entropy will prevail, and either the system’s mechanism for converting the energy will cease to operate, or the energy available will become exhausted, resulting in the decline of the system.

\textsuperscript{135} Boulton & Allen, “Complex Face of God,” 266.
\textsuperscript{136} Morin, \textit{On Complexity}, 11.
\textsuperscript{137} Kofman, Edgar Morin, 64.
\textsuperscript{138} Morin. “Restricted, General,” 18.
\textsuperscript{139} Kofman, Edgar Morin, 79.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 80.
2.2.4 Order, Disorder and Organization

Whether one prefers the term ‘negentropy’ or ‘self-organisation’, both show how the notions of order and disorder became inextricably linked with one another during the Twentieth Century. Disorder ceases to be the ever present threat to all order, but reveals itself as a transcendental condition for the emergence of order. In complexity theory, Morin labels this fundamentally important relationship between the antagonistic principles of order and disorder in the universe “the dialogic of order and disorder,” which allows the new principle of organization to emerge.\footnote{Ibid., 64 / Morin, “Restricted, General,” 7.} He pays particular attention to this paradoxical phenomenon and contributes to the development of a number of new concepts to help address it. The revival of the Joycean neologism ‘chaosmos’ is one of the more popular examples; it is a portmanteau combining the words ‘chaos’ and ‘cosmos’ and denotes a return to the ancient Greek interpretation of chaos, which understood it not as total disorder, but disorder pregnant with the possibility of order, and an undeniable creative force in the cosmos. According to Morin, “In the Greek worldview, Chaos is at the origin of Cosmos. Chaos is not pure disorder, it carries within itself the indistinctness between the potentialities of order, of disorder, and of organization from which a Cosmos will be born.”\footnote{Morin. \emph{Restricted, General}, 18.}

Although all of these developments and their implications are central to the theorization of complexity, a formalized research domain called ‘complexity theory’ only established itself toward the end of the Twentieth Century. The fatal blows to the paradigm of simplicity, together with the new studies of chaotic systems and the theorization of organisation opened the door for the notion of complexity to assert itself. The old dogmas of classical science were gradually being abandoned and the complexity of the universe and many systems within it was finally being given the consideration it required. Complexity theory therefore emphasizes “the essential interconnectedness of ‘things’ rather than their separation,” by de-emphasizing the Newtonian legacy of viewing everything as a separate and independent phenomenon.\footnote{Boulton & Allen. “The Complex Face of God,” 263.}

To speak of complex systems is to speak of systems that display a number of essential characteristics. Once these characteristics are made known, the incredible complexity of the human lifeworld becomes that much more apparent. And the implications of this complexity become harder to ignore.
2.3 The Characteristics of a Complex System

At the beginning of *Complexity and Postmodernism*, Cilliers points out that it is often quite tricky to tell the difference between systems that are complex, and those that are merely complicated.\(^\text{144}\) He jokingly refers to a remark made by a French counterpart claiming that a jumbo jet is merely complicated, whilst mayonnaise is complex. Systems that are merely complicated may seem alarmingly complex, whilst those that are truly complex often seem misleadingly simple, or merely complicated.\(^\text{145}\) In order to make the identification of complex systems a little easier, Cilliers usefully elucidates ten characteristics that systems should display if they are to be considered complex. This list of characteristics is immensely helpful as it may be used as a classificatory tool. That is, one may analyze any given system in terms of these characteristics and reach a relatively certain answer as to whether it is complex or not.

Firstly, Cilliers says that a complex system usually comprises “a large number of elements,”\(^\text{146}\) because in simpler systems that consist of fewer elements, the behaviour is often formally describable and predictable. It must however be pointed out that this is not necessarily always the case, as Morin reminds one that sometimes a relatively small group of elements, such as a water molecule, can be complex. But when the elements in a system reach a certain number, understanding the behaviour of the system by conventional or formal means is more likely to become impractical and even impossible, as there are just too many elements to consider at once. So even though complexity can be seen to stem from causal indeterminacy between fewer elements, and there exist systems, such as jumbo jets, that consist of a large number of elements whose functioning is formally describable, the degree of complexity in a system can be said to increase in relation to the number of elements as a result of the sheer magnitude of interactions between them.

Secondly, it is clearly not enough for there merely to be a large number of elements. These elements must be dynamically interactive. Importantly, the interactions that occur between elements need not always be physical – they are often informational or energetic in nature. These relations between the elements constitute one of the most definitive traits of complex systems: they result in the manifestation of emergent properties. These properties are not present in the individual components, but must rather be understood as a product of the intricate relations

\(^\text{144}\) Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, 2-3.
\(^\text{145}\) Ibid., 3
\(^\text{146}\) Ibid.
between the parts in the whole. Thus it is said that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. It is paradoxically the case that the whole can also be less than the sum of its parts. Just as the organisation of the parts in a whole allows certain relational characteristics to emerge, other properties that are present in the individual parts are inhibited as a result of the organisation. Therefore, the whole may be understood as both more and less than the sum of its parts; yet another paradoxical statement courtesy of complexity theory. For instance, one may look at an example such as an individual’s personality as an emergent property. There are many debates surrounding the factors that influence personality, but, to keep it simple, one could say that it results from the relationship between one’s genetic inheritance, one’s upbringing, various life experiences, and the functioning of one’s brain. The phenomenon ‘personality’ does not reside in any one of these elements exclusively; it is only once they come together that ‘personality’ emerges. On the other hand, however, for personality to emerge without resulting in psychosis, various properties are necessarily inhibited. If this were not the case, the result would arguably be schizophrenic inconsistency.

The third characteristic of complex systems follows closely from the dynamic interactivity of elements as it stipulates that the interactions between elements must be rich such that any element in the system may influence, or be influenced by a number of others. This kind of rich interaction is particularly prevalent in the technological age of the ‘global village’ in which each individual has a myriad of ways to get into contact with others, whilst the global media plays an enormous role in the dissemination of highly influential information, imagery and cultural indicators.

Fourth is the point that all the interactions are non-linear. Cilliers explains that even the largest system of linear relations can be reduced into a simpler system. But when the interactions in a large system are non-linear, small causes can produce large effects, and vice versa. This is precisely what Lorenz stumbled across in the experiment that led to his formulation of the ‘butterfly effect’. The non-linearity of a system destabilizes the cause-effect relations in such a way that it becomes impossible to predict with absolute certainty what the eventual effect of even the smallest disturbance may be. One might look at instances such as Rosa Parks’ choice of bus seat, or the assassination of Franz Ferdinand as examples of isolated incidents that had ramifications that were enormously influential. Yet by the same token, some seemingly massive
events that have the potential to spark enormous reactions – such as the assassination of Chris Hani – often illicit relatively subdued responses.

Fifth on Cilliers’ list is the fact that interactions usually occur at short range, implying that information is most often received from an element’s immediate neighbours. However, this in no way precludes the possibility that interactions may have long-ranging influences. A really pertinent example from contemporary culture is the ‘YouTube’ phenomenon, in which a video from anywhere in the world can become an overnight global sensation via the exponential nature of ‘viral’ networking. To demonstrate how this works; somebody (anywhere in the world) posts a clip onto YouTube and is sure to send the link to all his or her friends on Facebook, who, in turn pass it on to all their friends, who watch it and also pass it on. In this way, a video of a Chinese toddler ‘clocking’ (mastering or completing the highest level) the game ‘Dance Dance Revolution’ is viewed by millions of people from every continent. The child’s parents have not sent the clip to that many people, but because of the nature of viral social networking, it has spread from friend-to-friend all the way across the earth.

Sixth, Cilliers notes that the effect of any activity in a complex system can feed back onto itself, either directly, or indirectly. This characteristic is often referred to as ‘recurrence’ or ‘feedback’. Feedback can act positively, in which case it amplifies or reinforces certain interactions and reactions, or negatively, in which case it inhibits and limits certain reactions and interactions. Furthermore, the effects of the system’s presence in its surroundings can produce changes in its ecology. This means that not only does the system organize itself, but it also has a specific effect on the organisation of its ecology. Together with other influences, these effects may eventually become so great that the ecology will change to the point where the system, itself, is required to adapt to new conditions. Morin refers to this phenomenon as self-eco-organization.147 Perhaps one of the most significant instances of such feedback is the case of factory farming, where the constantly increasing demand for cheap meats such as pork and chicken has had a feedback effect on the farming industry that has led to a radical shift away from classical ‘family farming’ styles. As a result, animals are bred in a way that will yield the most quantities of saleable product, despite the fact that this involves diets rich in antibiotics that have been proven to be harmful to the humans who consume the meat. In a second feedback loop, humans are, in turn, becoming more susceptible to the stronger strains of antibiotic-resistant

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147 Kofman, Edgar Morin, 71.
viruses that we contract from these animals, due to the largely unsanitary and inhumane ‘factory’ conditions in which they are grown and slaughtered. The consequence of a developing awareness of this (ecology-changing feedback again) has resulted in the small, but growing interest in ‘organic’ and ethical farming, and the decision of some to become vegan, vegetarian, or to only eat meat that they have consciously chosen for its quality and origins, on specific (limited) occasions.\textsuperscript{148}

Seventh is the complex system’s ability to interact with its environment. Complex systems are therefore recognized as open systems. Cilliers notes that closed systems are usually merely complicated as there is little or no interaction (information/energy transfer) between the system and its environment. With regard to this, Morin evokes yet another paradoxical notion – that of ‘autonomy-dependence’ – in order to articulate the state in which a complex system gains more autonomy as an individual organisation while it simultaneously becomes more dependant upon its environment for energy and information. According to Morin, “all autonomy constitutes itself in and through ecological dependence.”\textsuperscript{149} Thus it becomes increasingly difficult to impose boundaries and borders between the system and its environment because without its ecology, the system would cease to exist. But it is also that case that the system has to close itself off from the outside world to maintain its structures and its internal environment. Neglecting to do this would also result in decline or degradation. The self-eco-organising system must be therefore be thought of as both open and closed to its environment, such that the “closure is allowed by the very fact that the system is open.”\textsuperscript{150} One need only think of the human respiratory system to get a clear idea of this simultaneous opening and closing. In a sense, every time one takes a breath, one incorporates one’s environment (air) into one’s body (the lungs) and if one were to cease this action, one would cease to live. By imposing a boundary around the human body alone, the all-important atmosphere that sustains it would not be part of that system, but one cannot include everything that sustains human life within the boundary that defines ‘humans’. Still, human beings, like other complex organizations, can never be totally isolated as systems independent from the lifeworld that sustains them.

\textsuperscript{149} Morin, \textit{On Complexity}, 113.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 11.
The eighth point is one that has already been discussed above: complex systems “operate under conditions far from equilibrium.” Prigogine’s theorization of ‘dissipative systems’ showed that certain levels of thermodynamic instability (or disorder) provide the perfect conditions for the generation (or creation) of new and dynamic organisations (order). Cilliers says that, for complex systems “equilibrium is another word for death” as the system requires a flux of energy in order to adapt and sustain its organization.

Penultimately, Cilliers highlights the important fact that all complex systems have their own history. He explains that “not only do they evolve through time, but their past is co-responsible for their present behaviour.” In order to adapt and change according to its environment, a complex system needs some way of comparing present conditions to those that it has previously experienced. The past, historical arrangements of the system are not essential, they stand to be revised, or rejected if they are no longer suitable. But not all change has to be incorporated, and sometimes there is even a resistance to change (even if it is good). Memory is therefore a mechanism that allows a system to discern whether a change is warranted. Through its history a complex system learns to either incorporate change or resist it, and Cilliers is adamant that any analysis of a complex system that neglects the aspect of time will be deficient, at most a "synchronic snapshot of a diachronic process.”

The tenth characteristic is that it is impossible for any individual element to be aware of the activity of the system as a whole. Elements respond only to the information that they are presented with locally, for if any element were aware of the behaviour of the system in its entirety, Cilliers explains that all the complexity in the system would then have to be present in that one element. In the case of human society, if one individual had to be aware of the complex interactions of the entire human race at any given time, that person would possess powers of omniscience that are usually attributed to God, which would essentially make her/him in-human. It is impossible for all that information to be present in one single element within a system.

With these ten characteristics it is without doubt easier to identify complex systems. But when it comes to understanding the way in which complexity affects the behaviour of a system, or trying to predict that behaviour in terms of complexity, one encounters a whole new sphere of

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152 Ibid., 3-5.
153 Ibid.
154 Ibid.
difficulty. Perhaps it isn’t enough merely to acknowledge that a system is complex without attempting to understand what that complexity implies. But one must always be careful that the temptation to find a concrete set of demystifying ‘answers’ to the problem of complexity does not become too strong. To ensure that this does not happen, it is imperative to remember the distinction Morin makes between restricted and general complexity.

2.4 Restricted Complexity and General Complexity
Although the notion ‘complexity’ has been an object of study since the latter half of the Twentieth Century, Morin bemoans the fact that the radical epistemological implications of complexity itself have not been taken into consideration by those doing much of the research in this field. Here, he is referring mostly to those working in the fields of cybernetics, general systems theory and information theory as it seems that, although they are committed to understanding the nature of complex behaviours, their desire to formally model a complex system completely indicates an epistemological commitment to the old ideals of the paradigm of simplicity.

When the Santa Fe Institute opened in the 1980’s, complexity was celebrated as the “essential concept needed in the definition of dynamical systems with a very large number of interactions and feedbacks, inside of which processes very difficult to predict and control take place.”\textsuperscript{155} But no matter how difficult these complex processes were thought to be, they were still seen as potentially controllable and predictable. In this domain, the study of complex systems still seeks to uncover “a method that [would] improve our understanding of, and therefore our control over complex systems.”\textsuperscript{156} This notion is what Morin refers to as ‘restricted complexity’ as he claims that it “has not undergone the epistemological and paradigmatic revolution that complexity obliges.”\textsuperscript{157}

This becomes clear in Morin’s analysis of the methodology employed in the fields where complexity is only acknowledged after it has undergone certain processes of decomplexification, in a manner redolent of the reductionist techniques preferred in classical science. In the paper “Restricted Complexity, General Complexity,” he notes that the kind of complexity that is studied in these domains is “restricted to systems which can be considered complex because

\textsuperscript{155} Morin, “Restricted, General,” 9.
\textsuperscript{156} Cilliers. \textit{Complexity and Postmodernism}, 136.
\textsuperscript{157} Morin, “Restricted, General,” 28.
empirically they are presented in a multiplicity of interrelated processes, interdependent and retroactively associated.”¹⁵⁸ He continues by arguing that “complexity is never questioned nor thought epistemologically” in these domains.¹⁵⁹ And although this restricted complexity has allowed for significant advances in the fields of modeling and formalization, he is skeptical of its ultimate epistemological efficacy, due to the fact that it still functions within the epistemological paradigms of classical science.¹⁶⁰ The belief that a universal theory of complexity may finally be developed whose laws will be applicable to all complex systems is anathema to Morin’s idea of the fundamental epistemological demands that emerge as a result of complexity theory. As he states, “[w]hen one searches for the ‘laws of complexity,’ one still attaches complexity as a kind of wagon behind the truth locomotive that … produces laws.”¹⁶¹

Cilliers approaches the subject by asking whether it is at all possible to have a formal “science of complexity?” He decides that it may be possible, but that it would imply a total rethinking of our current notions of what qualifies as science.¹⁶² Morin similarly evokes the concept of a ‘scienza nuova’, a new science that that “does not suppress disciplines but connects them, and consequently makes them fertile, a science which can at the same time distinguish and connect where the transdisciplinarity is inseparable from complexity.”¹⁶³ It is only in this mode that science could support or embody Morin’s paradigm of ‘general complexity.’

Unlike restricted complexity, ‘general complexity’ requires an important “epistemological rethinking,” that would have a significant “bearing on the organization of knowledge itself.”¹⁶⁴ To think in terms of general complexity implies replacing the paradigm of simplicity once and for all with a paradigm of complexity. This involves substituting the principle of reduction for one of conjunction that always seeks to conceive part-whole relations. Next, the principle of disjunction should be discarded in favour of a principle of distinction in which the foremost aim would be to establish relations between various systems and their environments, even while

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.
¹⁵⁹ Ibid.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid.
¹⁶¹ Ibid., 10.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.
maintaining certain necessary distinctions. And lastly, the principle of determinism needs to be replaced by a principle that accounts for the relation between order, disorder and organization.\textsuperscript{165}

This task is much easier said than done, though. As Morin warns that it is incredibly difficult to modify the “foundational concept, the massive and elementary idea that supports the whole of the intellectual edifice.”\textsuperscript{166} Thinking in terms of uncertainty and paradox is not the ‘conventional’ way in which humans have been conditioned to engage with their environment and Morin feels that humanity’s “aptitude for connecting is under-developed” whilst our “aptitude for separating is over-developed.”\textsuperscript{167} Therefore, to help one come to terms with the challenges that a theory of generalized complexity presents, Morin provides three conceptual principles as guidelines for a new way of thinking. They are paradigmatic tools for better understanding.

The first is the principle of \textit{dialogic}, which refers to the paradoxical relationship between ostensibly contradictory concepts. Here the fact that two principles may be juxtaposed never assumes that they are mutually exclusive. Rather, complexity theory allows for a complementary antagonistic relationship to exist between them, where they are necessarily opposed and creatively unified.\textsuperscript{168} This dialogic is precisely what underpins the relationship between order and disorder. Morin draws on an example from Heraclitus to demonstrate what it means for concepts to be complementarily antagonistic. He explains that the Heraclitean phrase “live of death, die of life,” has recently become intelligible as indicative of the human body’s paradoxical dependence on both death processes and life processes in its sustained growth and development over a lifetime. The human body is perpetuated by the death and rejuvenation of its cells, to the point where the “process of almost permanent regeneration […] is the process of life.”\textsuperscript{169} Thus the logical paradox arises that it is the human body’s effective integration of death that protects it against death. This is evident if one thinks that it also happens that cells resist their own deaths, which results in the growth of life-threatening tumors. On the other hand, though, if there is an excess of cellular loss, it can lead to equally dangerous conditions such as Parkinson’s and

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\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{166} Morin. \textit{On Complexity}, 35.
\textsuperscript{167} Morin, “Restricted, General,” 25.
\textsuperscript{168} Morin, \textit{On Complexity}, 49.
\textsuperscript{169} Morin, “Restricted, General,” 16.
\end{flushright}
Alzheimer’s. Thus Morin asserts that “[o]ne lives between two catastrophes, the excess or insufficiency of mortality.”\(^{170}\)

Secondly, Morin refers to the principle of organizational recursion, which is linked closely to the phenomenon of feedback, as it occurs in “a process where the products and the effects are at the same time causes and producers of what produces them.”\(^{171}\) Morin’s example here is that of society and reproduction. Humans are simultaneously products and producers of their own reproductive capacity. Recursivity moves away from linear notions of cause and effect, “product/producer, or structure/superstructure, because everything that is product comes back on what produces it in a cycle that is itself self-constitutive, self-organizing, and self-producing.”\(^{172}\)

Morin’s third principle is that of the holographic metaphor which makes use of the concept of a hologrammatic image which defies both reductionist and holist understandings. He explains that in “a physical hologram, the smallest point of the hologram image contains the quasi-totality of information of the represented object.” So once again we are confronted with the paradoxical notion that “[n]ot only is the part in the whole, but the whole is in the part.”\(^{173}\) If one applies the holographic principle, knowledge of the whole will always be enriched by knowledge of the parts, while knowledge of the parts will be equally enriched by knowledge of the whole. For Morin this implies a position beyond both reductionism and holism as the “compositional rules of the system are not additive but transformative,” and an overly analytic decomposition of the system’s elements would simultaneously destroy the system.\(^{174}\)

Importantly for Morin, all three of these principles are fundamentally linked in such a way that the appreciation of a theory of general complexity would be virtually impossible without recourse to them. He also suggests that one view the system itself as a phantom concept, one that “takes on the form of material beings but like the phantom, it is immaterial.”\(^{175}\) Moreover, being able to identify and discuss complex systems should not give one false impressions of certainty, as Morin warns that “the concept of system is no magic formula or some vehicle that might

\(^{170}\) Ibid., 6.
\(^{172}\) Ibid., 50.
\(^{173}\) Ibid.
\(^{174}\) Ibid., 100.
\(^{175}\) Ibid., 107.
transport us to a state of knowledge. It offers us no security. It must be straddled, corrected, and
guided. It is a pilot-concept, but only on condition that it is piloted.”176

In order to apply the notion of a more generalized complexity, one needs to let the terms
of its existence reshape one’s ways of knowing. That is why it is necessary to become
comfortable with linking concepts that are usually logically incommensurable such as ‘research’
and ‘uncertainty’. Morin concludes that even though restricted complexity often rejects general
complexity as “pure chattering, pure philosophy,”177 it is incorporated into general complexity
nonetheless. Whereas restricted complexity forms its own domain, its own discipline, general
complexity incorporates all fields. Furthermore, Morin specifically stipulates that generalized
complexity “also relates to our knowledge as human beings, individuals, persons, and
citizens.”178 It is precisely in this link between a theory of generalized complexity and human
knowledge that one might begin to elucidate the connection between complexity and its ethical
implications.

2.5 Complexity and Human Knowledge
In its focus on epistemological reformation, the discussion of restricted and general complexity
has already shown that a theory of general complexity has implications for all knowledges, across
all disciplines, in all fields of research. In this section I’d like to focus on this in more detail, with
a view to elaborating how complexity thinking can be better incorporated into contemporary
knowledge without regressing into a state of relativism or meaningless freeplay. The definition of
a complex system as “one in which there are more possibilities than can be actualized”179 is
particularly pertinent to a discussion of what complexity theory means for human knowledge. If a
complex system is one that embodies an innumerable number of potentialities – more than could
ever be conceived – how could a finite being ever claim to have total knowledge of said system?
A complexity approach to knowledge is therefore one that is simultaneously against arrogance
and relativism.

As a way of beginning this discussion, it is useful to draw upon the distinction Morin
makes between the concepts of rationality and rationalization. According to him, ‘rationalization’

176 Ibid.
177 Morin, “Restricted, General,” 27.
178 Ibid., 25.
179 Cilliers, Complexity and Postmodernism, 2.
seeks to establish a “totalizing, coherent vision of the universe based on restricted ground”\textsuperscript{180} whereas ‘rationality’ involves an “incessant dialogue” whereby we create logical structures, apply them concretely, and modify them in response to feedback from the world.”\textsuperscript{181} Both of these concepts emerge from the root concept of reason, which Morin identifies as the effect of the human will to have a “coherent vision of phenomena, of things, of the universe.”\textsuperscript{182} The difference is that rationality does not have the ambition to reduce all reality to a perfectly logical system, but is rather open to discussion with things that oppose or resist it. Thus, as Morin notes, despite their common origin, their development turns them into adversaries. Because rationalization excludes all realities that contradict its coherent system, Morin insists that “[w]e must incessantly fight against the deification of reason even [though] it is our only trustworthy instrument of knowledge, under the condition of being not only critical but also self-critical.”\textsuperscript{183} Rationalization is labeled ‘the pathology of reason’, and for him, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell when one has crossed over from rationality into rationalization as “there is no border, there is no alarm.”\textsuperscript{184} This is what makes reason itself harmful; it always has the potential to close itself. The deification of reason leads to what Morin calls a ‘blind intelligence’ that progresses along with human knowledge, and stands as one of the most serious threats that humanity now faces. Morin argues that one needs to oppose this ‘closed logic’ with a complex logic that seeks to “dialogue with both the irrational, and the simply a-rational fact of existence.”\textsuperscript{185}

The application of such a ‘complex logic’ takes one back to the notion of a more general view of complexity; one in which the method of enquiry cannot be separated from the nature of one’s subject. In this context, the subject position of the observer in any research situation is one element that has not received sufficient consideration up until now. For a long time, the subject position of the observer was not acknowledged in scientific enquiry. But with the rise of complexity studies it is increasingly evident that the idea of ‘objective knowledge’ is no longer valid, or as Morin says, “the idea of pure objectivity is utopian.”\textsuperscript{186} Cilliers pertinently criticizes the scientific appeal to ‘objectivity’ as a political tool for “establishing a certain mode as a

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{180} Kofman, \textit{Edgar Morin}, 60.
\bibitem{181} Morin, \textit{On Complexity}, 46.
\bibitem{182} Ibid., 47.
\bibitem{183} Ibid.
\bibitem{184} Ibid.
\bibitem{185} Kofman, \textit{Edgar Morin}, 60.
\bibitem{186} Morin, “Restricted, General,” 21.
\end{thebibliography}
privileged one.”¹⁸⁷ This is possible because the appeal to ‘objectivity’ seems to preclude the inevitable reality of human fallibility. A general complexity approach to human knowledge therefore urges one to grant Bishop Berkeley’s dictum that there “are no un-thought bodies”¹⁸⁸ and accept that knowledge is always ‘interpreted’, “a cerebral translation starting from data of the external world and a mental reconstruction, starting from certain organizing potentialities of the spirit.”¹⁸⁹ In other words, although knowledge can never be generated outside of human perceptual faculties, one cannot deny the existence of certain empirically tested, universally shareable facts. So whilst various subjective opinions, beliefs and experiences that are specific to the individual can be disregarded as bases for ‘knowledge’ on the grounds of their unrepeatability, the ‘human perspective’ that co-constitutes phenomenal reality cannot ever be eradicated from knowledge claims.

As finite beings trying to make sense of a possibly infinite universe, one is obliged to break knowledge up, to partition it, but this must not happen at the expense of a healthy sense of contextualization. One’s ‘interpretive frame’ is subjective insofar as it is idiosyncratic, and objective insofar as it can be shared as a model or a theory. Very careful thought needs to prefigure the imposition of the necessary boundaries that make a system (somewhat) intelligible. Cilliers is adamant that one should therefore think of the boundary as something that constitutes the system, rather than that imaginary line that always confines it. As constituting elements, the boundaries one chooses to impose upon a system will then radically determine the outcomes of one’s research, and one must therefore remain mindful of this imposition.

A perfect model of a complex system would have to repeat the system exactly and this is neither practical nor possible. Therefore, Cilliers reminds us that, in order to foster any understanding, one has no choice but to develop limited models even though there will inevitably be something that is lost in this process.¹⁹⁰ On the one hand, by concentrating on the larger scale interactions of the system, much of the more detailed information is left unaccounted for, and on the other, a focus on micro-relations cannot account for the overall relations at a macro level. Furthermore, Cilliers makes the additional point that even though one may know that his/her model is flawed, it is often impossible to know how, or to what extent. This “problem is

¹⁸⁷ Cilliers, “Complexity, Deconstruction and Relativism”, in Theory, Culture and Society, 22(55), 256.
¹⁸⁸ Kofman, Edgar Morin, 59.
¹⁹⁰ Cilliers, “Boundaries,” 145.
compounded by the fact that that which is left out, interacts with the rest of the system in a non-linear way and we can therefore not predict what the effects of our reduction of the complexity will be.” Let us not forget that each different interpretive frame will also simplify the system in a different way, generating different ways of knowing it. Hence, Cilliers states that, because the use of such models is inescapable, so too is the responsibility involved in using them. Complexity theory urges that we take this responsibility seriously.

Because general complexity undermines the appeal to ontological unity and focuses on the generation of knowledge according to multiple perspectives based on consciously imposed boundaries, it has become susceptible to the accusation of encouraging relativism. But this is a rather misguided and reactionary understanding of general complexity. The key to appreciating the relationship between complex systems and human knowledge is the understanding that human knowledge of complex systems will always be approximate, but that this does not mean one should give up the attempt to understand them, or adopt an ‘anything goes’ approach. Morin instead suggests that a complex logic should involve a ‘meta-point of view’, that will allow for the critical self-examination of knowledge. This is a view from which our own knowledge can be considered as an object of knowledge and “enrich the reflexivity of the knowing subject.” There will always be cracks in a system, moments of undecidability, but for Morin, the important thing to do is resist the urge to “to stop the ultimate crack with an ideological band-aid.” Danger comes when an individual or a community (religious, social or political) is romanced by one specific explanation and claims “a privileged position for it” as this masks the intrinsic limitations of all models, and prevents further enquiry in doing so. To avoid such a simplifying and potentially harmful practice, Cilliers argues that “this spell must be broken” by a constant revelation of the paradoxes and contradictions that manifest when a boundary is fixed from only one perspective. The ‘meta-point of view’ should seek to gain as many perspectives as possible, and acknowledge the cracks in systems when they appear, allowing them to function as they should: as incitements to dialogue. Knowing therefore becomes a process of simultaneous

191 Cilliers, “Complexity, Deconstruction, Relativism,” 258.
193 Morin, On Complexity, 27.
194 Ibid., 28.
195 Cilliers. Complexity and Postmodernism, 81
196 Ibid.
“analysis and synthesis.” In other words, an intrinsic aspect of knowing is knowing how to step back from knowledge claims and examine them in full awareness that knowledge is always generated from a particular perspective/angle in a specific context, and that the extent of its pertinence and generalisability must be considered, as well as its position vis-à-vis competing perspectives.

As a corollary, knowledge claims based on research informed by a general theory of complexity need to be humble and open to revision. The fact that one cannot have complete knowledge of a complex system does not mean that it is impossible to have any knowledge of complex systems, “or that the knowledge claims we make about them have to be vague, insipid or weak.” On the contrary, Cilliers insists that one is free to make strong claims, but with the proviso that one realizes that they are always limited and that we therefore “have to be modest about them.” By constantly revising the frameworks which one applies, while acknowledging the provisional nature of whatever knowledge emerges, one can maintain a modest position that is constantly engaged with in the kind of “epistemological reflection” that complexity theory calls for. Cilliers reiterates that, rather than being a disastrous realization, the fact that our knowledge is limited is, in fact, a “condition for knowledge.” In this sense our limits will “enable our knowledge” as without “limits we would have to incorporate life, the universe and everything into every knowledge claim we make and that is not possible.”

Consequently, if knowledge (and this term is used quite loosely here) can be recognized as the base from which most decisions are made, the ways in which we approach and understand knowledge, its generation, and its validity, become immensely influential factors in the decision-making process. Since it has become clear that there is no human way of understanding the system and its relation to the environment in all its complexity, one is left to come to terms with a reality that can never be fully known, and to find a way of dealing with this fundamental human ignorance. The problem that arises concerns how one would legitimate any action at all, when all knowledge claims can be said to be only partially accurate. Morin’s answer to this impasse has a slightly ironic veil of simplicity: something must change – either the human mind,

198 Cilliers, “Complexity, Deconstruction, Relativism,” 263.
199 Ibid.
202 Ibid., 264.
or knowledge.\textsuperscript{203} Of course, in terms of being able to conceive the entire complex organization of the human lifeworld, the former is not realistically an option just yet, so attention turns to the reformulation of what constitutes ‘knowledge’. The contemporary subject is consequently urged to work with the uncertainty and disorder of the complex systems that define the contemporary lifeworld “by means of a more dynamic and complex form of thinking,”\textsuperscript{204} that will fundamentally change her apprehension of the human lifeworld. The task, then, is to embark on this journey and resist becoming overwhelmed or beset by disillusionment.

The following chapter will deal with this question in more detail, but there is one important starting point that Morin discusses in \textit{On Complexity}, namely, the adoption of strategies of action, rather than programs. He describes programs as inflexible and designed to perform a series of actions “which are decided a priori and which must begin to function one after the other without variation.”\textsuperscript{205} Any deviation from the very specific conditions in which programs are geared to function will result in program failure or malfunction. They are non-adaptive systems and therefore have no capacity for innovation. Strategies, on the other hand, are adaptive, flexible and open to chance. In fact, they can be seen to use chance, taking advantage of it as an opportunity for change. A strategy is “an action scenario which can be modified in the light of new information or chance events as they arise.”\textsuperscript{206} What Morin argues is that, as complex, adaptive, non-trivial machines, humans need to work with strategies rather than programs. A rigid programmatic plan of action is invariably going to be one that fails to understand and account for the implications of the complex lifeworld.

\textbf{2.7 Complexity in the Postmodern Context.}

In the first chapter I discussed the postmodern context as one that is permeated with the atmosphere of crisis. Now, in light of the preceding elaboration of complexity theory, it is plausible to suggest that there is an important link between the complexity of the human lifeworld and the anxieties that underpin the postmodern context. This is not to say that complexity is to blame for the postmodern atmosphere of crisis, but rather that since the paradigm that has dominated Western society’s understanding of the universe is one in which complexity has not been accounted for, the unfolding of many complex happenings in the last

\textsuperscript{203} Morin, \textit{On Complexity}, 32.
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 96
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid.
century has been met with an almost hysterical inability to comprehend their reality, let alone their implications for society at large (especially in the realm of ethics).

In a deterministic system nothing happens without a cause, there is nothing that cannot be explained, and yet the Twentieth Century witnessed a number of alarmingly inexplicable events that seemed to occur quite suddenly, with little or no forewarning. The devastating natural, social and economic disasters that have punctuated the past one hundred years consistently undermined the human idea of a deterministic world. In fact, it is precisely because of humanity’s inability to know enough to predict, to control, and to stabilize their lifeworld that these events occurred as ‘disasters’. But despite the glaring evidence to the contrary, the ideal of a deterministic world persisted. Humanity has not “wanted to hear that the promises of prediction and control might be bankrupt – not even wanting to admit the evidence of our own eyes.”\(^\text{207}\) It is as if, from the moment of Poincare’s inaugural unsettling of the Newtonian paradigm, instances of complexity have been met with Morin’s ‘ostrich’ solution. This is, however, not really surprising. When one considers that it “is the whole of an enormous superstructure of ideas that is collapsing,” the trauma that results is to be expected.\(^\text{208}\) Progressive economist, Dr. Paul Ormerod attributes this in part to a simple “human need to have a forecast about the future” which translates into a reluctance to accept the fundamental unpredictability of a complex world.\(^\text{209}\) Pair this with Linda Gask’s definition of the psychological experience of anxiety as “a fear that something awful is going to happen; a kind of dread and uncertainty,”\(^\text{210}\) and it becomes clear that the inability to come to terms with complexity is an important driving force behind the contemporary experience of crisis. As climatologist, Peter Cox suggests, humanity has moved from a state in which we “thought we could control everything and now we feel like we can control nothing.”\(^\text{211}\) This realization is immensely daunting, perhaps too daunting to deal with, as it hints at the very precarious position humanity now occupies. In an explanation that echoes Caputo, Morin asserts that humanity has been reluctant to admit that

the moorings of our conception of the world had been broken apart at both ends, that we were in our ‘middle band,’ not so much on the firm ground of an island

\(^{207}\) Malone & Tanner, *High Anxieties.*
\(^{208}\) Morin, *On Complexity,* 35.
\(^{209}\) Malone & Tanner, *High Anxieties.*
\(^{210}\) Ibid.
\(^{211}\) Ibid.
surrounded by an ocean, but rather on a flying carpet. There is no more firm ground, no terra firma. 212

Although there may now be, as esteemed physicist David Ruelle insists, a growing awareness of the chaotic nature of the world, this does not necessarily involve an acknowledgment of complexity. If it did, it would not have caused such disillusionment, fear, and anxiety, as a view from complexity would appreciate that this “incoherent universe is nevertheless the only one where we can conceive of becoming and innovation,” as transformation and change could not occur in a deterministic universe and organization would be impossible in a totally random universe.213 The complexity view would look at the crumbling of one paradigm as an opportunity to create new meaning, rather than a threat. Once one understands the way in which systems that are far from equilibrium can undergo rapid and unexpected changes of order, it becomes clear that “there is more than one possible future and thus at these [bifurcation] points, the future is unknowable.”214 Uncertainty is therefore not only inescapable, it holds promise.

The discernable similarities between the view from complexity and Nietzsche’s active nihilism are striking. Similarly, the resonances between the reactionary responses to complexity and Nietzsche’s passive and radical nihilism are equally telling. The human desire for certainty in the face of a complexity that denies it has arguably resulted in a number of desperate attempts to grab hold of older symbols of stability, which are sometimes incredibly harmful in the false certainty they provide. Morin alludes to this with regard to the postmodern context, saying

We know that rationality does not grow as a matter of course. It can regress, take on insane forms of rationalization, which is to say the form of a closed logical system, incapable of seeing reality. It is question here of the great crisis and the loss of the future. Why do we see religious fundamentalisms mixed up with awakening nationalisms? Because when one has lost the future, one latches onto the past.215

The experience of crisis in the postmodern context is almost undeniably tied to a paradigm shift, one that has been in process for over a century. Unwittingly or otherwise, society has been experiencing the rupture of its dominant paradigm for approximately one hundred years, and it will continue. The fact that complexity is now accepted as a credible scientific concept is perhaps

212 Morin, On Complexity, 9.
213 Ibid., 112.
215 Morin, On Complexity, 95.
one of the biggest steps human society has made toward understanding the challenges that it now
faces. But the notion of generalized complexity has definitely not yet found a general audience.
That is why texts such as *Watchmen* are so important – they communicate the concepts of
complexity to a readership that may not have had recourse to them before.

However, complexity does not provide one with all the answers, and perhaps Kofman’s
suggestion that complexity thinking should be recognized as “a method which is not
methodology, but a traveler’s guide”\(^{216}\) is a constructive way of moving forward. Complexity
wills one to recognize that history “has not reached a stagnant end, nor is it marching
triumphantly towards a radiant future. It is being catapulted into an unknown adventure.”\(^{217}\) With
recourse to the a more generalized theory of complexity, one might find that prospect less
daunting and the uncertainty that is acknowledged as the central characteristic in complexity
theory need not be a cause for disillusionment. If one can come to accept that complexity
thinking “won’t be thinking capable of opening all doors (like those keys that open safes and
cars)” and that it will, “on the contrary, be a thinking wherein difficulty is forever present,\(^{218}\)
these uncertainties, difficulties and paradoxes may be used constructively and ethically in the
future.

My central claim throughout this dissertation is that the acknowledgment of complexity is
a matter of ethics, and Cilliers is particularly vocal on this point. For him, the fact that we have to
make choices regarding our dealings with and representations of this complex world means that
we cannot “escape the normative or ethical domain.”\(^{219}\) By failing to acknowledge the
complexity of the human lifeworld or come to terms with its implications, one simply continues
to perpetuate a paradigm that is not only harmful, but potentially life-threatening for all
humanity. In other words, to quote Cilliers once more, “the failure to acknowledge the
complexity of a certain situation is not merely a *technical* error, it is also an *ethical* one. A
modest position should not be a weak position, but a responsible one.”\(^{220}\) With this as my
theoretical point of departure, I will now focus on the problem of the possibility of ethics in the
complex lifeworld of the postmodern context.

\(^{216}\) Ibid., 59.
\(^{218}\) Morin, *On Complexity*, 84.
\(^{219}\) Cilliers. “Complexity, Deconstruction, Relativism,” 259.
\(^{220}\) Ibid., 256.
3. Ethics for a Complex Lifeworld

We only have limited access to a complex world and when we are dealing with the limits of our understanding, we are dealing with ethics.

– Cilliers

Contrary to one of the most uncritically accepted philosophical axioms, there is no contradiction between the rejection of (or skepticism towards) the ethics of socially conventionalized and rationally ‘founded’ norms, and the insistence that it does matter, and matter morally, what we do and from what we desist. Far from excluding each other, the two can be accepted or rejected only together.

– Bauman

In a complex view, when one arrives via empirical and rational means at contradictions, this points not to an error but rather to the fact that we have reached a deep layer of reality that. Precisely because of its depth, cannot be translated into our logic.

– Morin

In the previous chapter, I sought to show that the atmosphere of crisis that seems to characterize contemporary human experience in the postmodern context is, in large part, the result of the destabilization of deterministic paradigms. Because much of Western civilization has been dependent upon these deterministic paradigms for so long in order to make predictions and forecasts about the future, the gradual realization that no prediction can be made with certainty has been immensely traumatic for a civilization which, up until this point, has prided itself on the ‘progress’ of its ability to predict and control its environment. Coming to grips with this uncertainty is not made any easier in light of the recent technological developments that have made instantaneous access to vast information resources a universal phenomenon. There is the “illusion that we get the complete picture,” but as was previously elaborated, a view from complexity is firmly entrenched in the conviction that complex systems are not perfectly knowable. The fact that one can no longer have one hundred percent certainty does not, as some might argue, result in relativistic anarchism, for as Cilliers insists: “‘Limited’ knowledge is not equivalent to ‘any’ knowledge.” It simply means that we “cannot ‘calculate’ the performance of, for example, complex social systems in their complexity, we have to reduce that complexity;

221 Paul Cilliers, “Complexity, Deconstruction, Relativism,” 261.
222 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 250.
223 Edgar Morin, On Complexity, 45.
224 Ibid., 122.
we have to make choices.” Acknowledging the complexity of our lifeworld does not signify the end of ethics but the beginning, and this is what I hope to demonstrate in this chapter.

I am wholly in agreement with Cilliers when he argues that the acknowledgement of complexity in the contemporary lifeworld is now a matter of ethical concern. One’s activities can no longer be called ‘ethical’ when they are premised on a belief in the infallibility of forecasting methods, and the certainty of predictions that can only ever be speculative, at best. If it is ethically imperative for complexity be acknowledged, understood and incorporated into contemporary life, the task becomes one of unpacking what this means for ethical practice in more concrete terms. Complexity theory itself does not elaborate an ethical theory that can be adopted in the complex lifeworld. To borrow Deborah P. Bloch and Terrence Nordstrom’s articulation of the dilemma “complexity science is descriptive, ethics is prescriptive” and this gap needs bridging. It is in the attempt to address this need that I will turn to the poststructuralist thinking of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, as their work best exemplifies the extent to which the poststructuralist style of thinking is applicable to the complexity with which this study is concerned. For Cilliers, it is the ‘playful’ element of the poststructuralist approach that makes it so valuable in its application in the understanding of complex systems. In his words: “When dealing with complex phenomena, no single method will yield the whole truth. Approaching a complex system playfully allows for different avenues of advance, different viewpoints, and, perhaps, a better understanding of its characteristics.”

In applying the work of these two very different, but closely linked thinkers to my exploration of the possibility of ethics in the complex lifeworld, the argument to follow will be developed along the line of a two-pronged strategy (not a program). Firstly, I will focus on how the experience of crisis in the postmodern context provides the contemporary individual with a rare and valuable opportunity for the creation of new meaning. That is, following on from the first chapter, where I focused on Nietzsche’s exposition of the different kinds of nihilism that emerge as a result of the problematization of old values, and the second, in which the paradigmatic shift from a simple to a complex worldview was discussed, it is plausible to suggest that much of the crisis-induced anxiety experienced by individuals in the postmodern context is a direct result of the crumbling of the paradigm of simplicity. Importantly, though, whereas these

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226 Ibid., 264.
228 Cilliers, Complexity and Postmodernism, 23.
anxious responses arguably fall in line with a more passive nihilistic reaction to the experience of complexity, Lacan, like Nietzsche, posits a theory in which the experience of crisis or trauma presents an opportunity for the affirmation of new meaning and a revaluation of values. I will therefore begin with an elaboration of Lacan’s account of human subjectivity, with special focus on his registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, and continue with particular emphasis on how the experience of the Real can act as an incitement to ethical action.

Following this, I will address the question of what a complexity ethics might entail. In a deterministic paradigm it might seem realistic and therefore acceptable to insist that a truly ethical decision can only be made if one is certain one knows all the facts, and has taken all the possible consequences into account. However, within the paradigm of complexity, this kind of ethical accounting is not only unrealistic; it is completely delusional. As I discussed in the previous chapter, one’s knowledge of a certain situation can never really be complete, and one’s ability to predict the outcomes of various activities is even less reliable. From a deterministic standpoint (or for those who are still entrenched in a paradigm of simplicity) it might seem that the application of complexity to the ethical domain forces ethical thinking into an impasse. Crucially, the second prong of this chapter’s strategy will not attempt to overcome the dilemma created by the necessity and impossibility of complete knowledge for ethical-decision making, but instead undertake an exploration of it in order to show that incomplete knowledge is not a barrier to ethical action, but rather the condition of the possibility of ethical action. I hope to accomplish this by elaborating on Derrida’s practice of “deconstruction,” and the concept of the “plural logic of the aporia” – which incorporates the ethical dilemmas of “suspension,” “undecidability,” and “urgency” – thereby showing that Derrida, apart from being a complexity thinker himself, has provided us (inhabitants of the complex lifeworld) with useful tools for understanding what it means to make ethical decisions in the postmodern context.

3.1 Lacan and the Paranoiac Structure of Human Knowledge.

French psychoanalytical thinker, Jacques Lacan, alludes to the impossibility of totalizing knowledge by labeling the tendency of humans to create the illusion of complete knowledge for ourselves, ‘paranoiac’.

By this he means that, despite the dynamism of the human sphere of knowledge, the tendency to create the illusion of complete knowledge for ourselves is itself a form of ‘paranoiac’ thinking. Lacan’s theory of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real provides a framework for understanding how this tendency manifests itself in human subjectivity. In the Imaginary, the subject is represented by a mirror image, which Lacan interprets as the idealized representation of the ‘I’. However, this representation is never perfect, and the subject is always aware of the gap between the ideal and the real. In the Symbolic, the subject is represented by language, which Lacan interprets as a system of representations that is never complete, and is always in the process of being constructed and deconstructed. In the Real, the subject is represented by the world of things, which Lacan interprets as the realm of contingency and indeterminacy.

In conclusion, Lacan’s theory of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real provides a framework for understanding how the tendency to create the illusion of complete knowledge for ourselves is a form of ‘paranoiac’ thinking. By this he means that, despite the dynamism of the human sphere of knowledge, the tendency to create the illusion of complete knowledge for ourselves is always in the process of being constructed and deconstructed. As such, the tendency to create the illusion of complete knowledge for ourselves is a form of ‘paranoiac’ thinking that is always in the process of being constructed and deconstructed.
existence, we have developed the propensity to construct spheres of phenomenal reality, mediated, among other things, via language, in which every element is exhaustively explicable. Of course, this is not entirely possible, as the ‘knowable’ edifice within which humanity contextualizes itself is only knowable up to a point; the reality we know is only the reality we can talk about. However, paranoia involves a covert switch whereby we tend to convince ourselves that the reality we can talk about is the only reality there is, and this known reality is then defended at all costs.

Acknowledging the fact that our ability to comprehend and interpret the complex events and reality of our lifeworld is limited therefore presents a problem for the Lacanian subject, as it runs counter to one of our most primordial predispositions; namely, the desire, or quest to regain a lost (and always unattainable) state of plenum, or jouissance. Hence any intrusions upon the illusory ‘wholeness’ of the established, normative lifeworld bring about the troubling realization that one does not have the means to comprehend everything, thereby destabilizing the foundation upon which the subject has built his or her precarious fortress of security. Such moments are traumatic experiences in the life of the Lacanian subject that he classifies as the imposition of the inassimilable Real.

It is a ‘will to knowledge’ that underpins the habit of ‘constructing’ acceptable phenomenal realities for ourselves over and against the Real. In other words, the inclination to build an illusory edifice of totalizable knowledge is precisely a response to the traumatic uncertainty caused when the unknowable Real imposes itself on human consciousness; it is an attempt to defend oneself against such impositions. The Real, for Lacan, is that excess in being which we cannot come to terms with, that which cannot be incorporated into the everyday iconic and linguistic structuring of human experience. In short, Lacan argues that the human subject creates an acceptable, ‘speakable’ reality to mask the uncanny experience of the Real. This masking of the Real behind the cloak of effable knowledge and memory is what allows the subject to continue normal functioning. But this does not mean that the Real will disappear; on the contrary, it will always be an ‘unknowable’ excess that haunts the subject’s normative reality. The links between trauma (or what I’ve diagnosed as the anxiety linked to the experience of crisis) and the Real are apparent throughout Lacan’s development of the concept, and I would

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like to pay more attention to the ethical implications of this relationship now. But before I elaborate further, a brief introduction to the three registers that constitute Lacanian subjectivity is necessary as a contextual anchoring for what follows.

3.2 Lacan’s subject: The Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real

Lacan’s development of Freudian psychoanalytic theory into a model that represented not only the workings of the human psyche, but the origination of the human as subject was nothing less than revolutionary. Taking the various schools of ‘Freudian’ psychology to task for their apparent ‘misinterpretation’ of Freud, he openly denounced the trends that had emerged and which he charged for putting psychoanalysis in danger “of becoming a ‘right thinking movement whose crowning expression was the sociological poem of the autonomous ego.’”

Hence, Lacan’s radical re-reading of Freud saw an emphatic shift away from the predominance of the conscious ego in analysis and towards a concentrated investigation of the worth and structure of the unconscious, which, he argued is not the seat of dark, irrational forces, but a mental state characterized by its own particular grammar and logic.

As the seat of the subject’s “traumatic truth,” the unconscious remains largely inaccessible and/or indecipherable to the conscious subject who is often unaware of her ‘true’ desires or unlikely to approve of them. It is the unpredictable part of the mind that continually threatens to undermine and destabilize one’s rational intentions at the most unexpected moments. As a result, Lacan’s subject is what he calls a ‘split subject,’ the nature of which he expresses as follows: (S) Subject = ego (self) / (over) unconscious.

This ‘split’ subjectivity is constituted by three registers – each acting as a harbinger of new constituting faculties on the part of the developing or maturing subject – namely, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. For Lacan, the registers are central to analysis because without them, he says, “one can only make progress in the analytic experience by using expressions bordering on the mystical.” They interlink with one another to form a ‘Borromean

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234 Ibid.
The knotted nature of all three registers is “ever-present and underscore[s] all aspects of human existence,” and is therefore pivotal in the healthy functioning of the subject’s relationship with him/herself and the surrounding world. The impairment of the function or influence of any one register would have the effect of drastically changing the disposition of the subject, such that he or she may likely display varied signs of psychoses. The progression and context in which each stage or ‘register’ unfolds is therefore of fundamental importance to the development of the Lacanian subject.

The Imaginary typically occurs in the subject between the ages of six and eighteen months, whilst the infant is still pre-linguistic, completely dependent on the mother and experiences itself as a physically fragmented being. The seminal moment of this phase is known as the *mirror stage*, and transpires when the child is able to recognize him/herself in a reflective surface so that the specular image of his/her body performs a function that Lacan calls “orthopedic.” That is, the mirror image appears to the child as a unitary whole that he or she is able to identify as his/her own body, hence it anticipates a level of motor control that is yet unattained by the subject. Whilst enthralled by the illusory prospect of this cohesion of self, the infant is simultaneously alienated, as it recognizes this ideal in a place that is outside of itself. As a consequence of this moment being the first of self-recognition, it is at this point that “the human infant comes to consolidate a rudimentary sense of an ‘I’,” but Lacan insists that this is a mis-recognition and therefore, that the ego in the subject is constituted in an alienated body – it is another. Hence Malcolm Bowie’s claim that, “the mirror image is a minimal paraphrase of the nascent ego.” As a result of the ego’s alienated gestalt, it will always be the location of the alienated self and its misrecognised desires and that is why Lacan is insistence that “the ego is an imaginary function,” and that “it is not to be confused with the subject” Hence his disdain for

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240 Hook, “Lacan, the meaning of the phallus,” 62
popular psychology’s practice of trying to strengthen the ego. Furthermore, as a result of this process, the idea of totality starts as, and remains, a dream generated by the “imaginary moi.”

The second register, the Symbolic, is the phase in which the unconscious is constituted via the subject’s repression of his primordial desire and his subsequent initiation into language. Far from merely representing language itself, the Symbolic incorporates Lacan’s revisions of Saussure’s structural linguistics and Levi-Strauss’s structuralist anthropology in a manner that denotes the flexible structure of meaning in language as well as “the pre-existing domain of language and law, the social and cultural structure into which the child is born.” For the child to progress from the Imaginary and enter the Symbolic it is necessary to sever the intensely dyadic relationship it experiences with the mother and in which the mother constitutes the sum-total of the infant’s desire. This necessarily intrusive third party takes the form of the father figure, whose usurpation of the mother’s attention alerts the infant to its own position of lack in that it realizes it does not constitute the sum total of the mother’s desire in the same manner in which she does his. However, as Hook asserts,

What is more important here is what the father signifies, the first imposition of the law, the law, in short against incest, the prohibition that the mother is off bounds to the child as an object of desire …The child, in other words, is being pushed out of the realm of the Imaginary into that of the Symbolic, into a system of social structures and meanings, of laws, language and regulations. The father is the first representative of the world. It is this world of the Symbolic more than the figure of the father himself that ensures the breaking of the imaginary bond between mother and child.

Thus it is this primordial repression on account of the infant’s forced acknowledgement of its own lack that catapults it into language and the wider realm of the symbolic which, Lacan believes “from the first takes on its universal character. It isn’t constituted bit by bit. As soon as the symbol arrives, there is a universe of symbols.” This is a rather violent induction, as Lacan points out that the “letter kills” – it kills precisely all that came before it, and thus the infant will no longer have any recourse to its pre-linguistic state of being. The function of the Symbolic as the register in which normative social law operates is immensely significant to the present

244 Ibid., 63.
discussion, as it is the register according to which the subject conducts him or herself as a law-abiding member of a specific society, family and culture, or as Jonathan Scott Lee articulates, “…it is the notion of the Thing as fundamentally lost that, as forbidden by the primordial threat of castration that provides the very foundation of the moral law in modern ethical theory.”\(^\text{247}\)

It is what falls outside of these two registers, what remains inassimilable to the symbolic, and the imaginary – that which is always irreducibly unsymbolizable that constitutes the Real. Whereas repressed desires are heralded by the wavering and flailing of language in its attempts to comprehend the contents of the unconscious, the Real, which is often associated with a “[p]sychic trauma [that] arises from the confrontation between an external stimulus and the subject’s inability to understand and master these excitations,”\(^\text{248}\) renders language null and void, so to speak. As Bruce Fink explains, the real “is perhaps best understood as that which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization; and it may perfectly well exist ‘alongside’ and in spite of a speaker’s considerable linguistic capabilities.”\(^\text{249}\)

It may be said that language simply does not accommodate the experience of the Real, for it is a completely inadequate means of expression for events of such strangeness, inadmissibility or magnitude. As a result of this position beyond the limits of both the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the Real, the event as such, cannot be represented and therefore cannot be repressed in the symbolic unconscious. Nevertheless, as mentioned, the Real represents the “traumatic truth” (of uncertainty and complexity) behind the subject’s coherent, Imaginary façade. Whilst it is possible that memories of details surrounding an encounter with the traumatic truth represented by the Real may be repressed (such as smells, tastes or sounds), only to return and repeat themselves in line with what Freud labeled the death drive, the event itself, according to Lacan, is always a ‘missed’ encounter that inculcates itself as an anxious ‘knot’ at the very core of the subject’s psyche, but can never be encountered face-to-face. Hence, Lacan asserts that “what we have in the discovery of psycho-analysis is an encounter, an essential encounter – an appointment to which we are always called with a real that always eludes us.”\(^\text{250}\)

\(^{247}\) Lee, Jacques Lacan, 165.  
\(^{250}\) Lee, Jacques Lacan, 137.
3.3 The Experience of the Real as an Incitement to Ethical Action

The subject’s experience of the traumatic real is therefore a nodal point around which the process of analysis unfolds. It is toward this missed encounter with her ‘truth’ (her true uncertainty) that the analyst directs the analysand’s discourse, no matter how incoherent a discourse it is. In fact, incoherent speech is the only, albeit inadequate, tool at the subject’s disposal for approaching the Real. As Joan Copjec explains:

It is this undislodgeable negation, this rigid kernel in the heart of the symbolic, that forces the signifier to split off from and turn around on itself. For in the absence of any metalanguage, the signifier can only signify by referring to another signifier… Far from positing the existence of an elsewhere, the real as internal limit of the symbolic – that is, the very impotence of the signifier – is the obstacle that scotches the possibility of rising out of or above the symbolic.251

Lacan marks two levels at which the Real operates in the subject’s development. The first is a pre-linguistic phase in which all of the subject’s needs are met by its primary caregiver, and where desires (the excess that results from the subtraction of need from want or demand) are similarly accounted for. Lacan identifies this state as a period in which the subject lives ‘within the real.’ But with the acquisition of language and the subject’s initiation into the Symbolic there occurs a rupture that destroys, or cancels this world of ‘wholeness,’ trampling it out of existence, out of conscious memory and repressing it into the foundations of the unconscious, only to make itself heard in the form of an incessant yearning for a similar but unattainable wholeness. The real is therefore always a startling reminder of the primordial lack that drives the subject’s desire for the Thing, represented by what Lacan calls the objet petit a.

The second instance of the Real comes in the form of the traumatic experiences discussed above, where the subject is faced with an incomprehensible, ineffable event that strikes a blow to whatever stability, certainty, and symbolically comprehensible ‘reality’ he or she has come to feel secure in. The trauma of the ineffable Real need not always be a negative trauma, there are a number of significantly life-affirming experiences that can cause a similarly foundation-shaking experience. The important point is that the foundations are shaken, and when I say ‘foundation’, I mean the Imaginary and Symbolic foundation of all that is acceptable, knowable, and normative in the subject’s iconically, linguistically and culturally mediated lifeworld. For as Bert Olivier

points out in his article, “Lacan and the Question of the Psychotherapist’s Ethical Orientation,” being a subject always implies being “subject to’ all the relations of authority and value embodied in language in this wide sense.”

As the domain of culture and law, as well as linguistic signification, the Symbolic is the natural register in which to look for classic ‘moral’ imperatives, or ‘objectively founded,’ and carefully structured ‘programs’ for ethical action. It is vital to remember that the Symbolic traditionally operates in the service of a ‘master signifier’, or a point de capiton; that signifier against which all others are transcendently indexed, and from which all possible meaning emanates. One is led to believe that without the master signifier, one would be lost in an anarchical state of meaningless freplay. Consequently, the morality, or ethical persuasion of the symbolic register will always cow-tow to the status quo that is determined by the master signifier. Hence it becomes clear that the ethics of the Symbolic is not an ethics of change.

But, what happens when the subject is confronted by the experience of the Real, is that she is directly exposed to the internal limit of the Symbolic – that point at which it fails her, and cannot account for a reality that ‘ex-sists’ beyond its legitimating reach. The Real thus issues a challenge to the normative Symbolic reality. As soon as the subject becomes aware the limits of the symbolic, she is arguably privy to some privileged information; the fact that the current Symbolic that organizes her reality is not the only possible one. It is at this moment that the subject is faced with a dilemma, as the attempt to incorporate the experience of the real would amount to a recognition of the shortfall of the present symbolic, and call for some sort of revision of ‘reality’. However, the subject is also able to remain steadfast in his or her current ‘reality’ and choose not to embark on any transformative action with regards to her or his symbolic, in which case, the experience of the real will remain a ghostly excess, a haunting reminder of something amiss, neglected, refused, and a stumbling block in the symbolic unconscious.

What becomes clear in light of this discussion is the potential that exists for change to occur after the experience of the traumatic Real. For Lacan, moral and ethical action in the form of a revaluation of entrenched values is “in effect, grafted onto the real.” As I discussed in the first chapter, Nietzsche recognized this a century before Lacan, and essentially, Lacan’s subject is faced with a similar decision between active and passive responses to the experience as the crises

252 Olivier, “Psychotherapist’s Ethical Orientation” 657-683.
of the postmodern context provide one with a number of incitements to engage critically with the current master signifiers of the Symbolic order.

There is however one main difference, succinctly articulated by Olivier, that is particularly pertinent to the present discussion of ethics. In this case, he refers extensively to the work of Joan Copej and Slavoj Žižek in order to support the argument that not only does the experience of the Real have significant ethical implications, but that these implications are intrinsically tied to the subject’s desire. One of Lacan’s central claims is that the conscious desires of the subject are merely the misdirected yearning of the fallacious ego or the moi, whilst the real desires of the subject are the unconscious desires that have been repressed due to their incompatibility with the moral imperatives and structures of the normalizing Symbolic. As a result, Olivier argues that once the subject is successfully led to recognition of these desires via the process of (responsible) analysis, he or she is inevitably faced with a choice: to assume that desire, thereby acting in a way that openly challenges and perhaps destabilizes the status quo, or, upon realizing that the act of assuming one’s desire would be irreparably harmful to the status quo and those within it, give up one’s desire. Both of these choices can be seen as ethical and unethical. In his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan asserts that the only unethical act one could be accused of committing is ‘giving up on, or failing to assume one’s desire’, because, only “by following the path of one’s (usually hidden or repressed) desire is it possible to confront, in the form of an ethical act, the effects of the (impossible) real in human reality – effects which are likely to reconfigure one’s world in surprising or decisive ways.”

However, Olivier, following Žižek and Copej, chooses to interpret this as implying that if the master signifier of the given symbolic order is benign, and the assumption of one’s desire would serve to unsettle it and cause harm to countless people who have no control over the situation (Olivier uses the example of Timothy McVeigh), then assuming one’s desire would be seen as unethical, whilst acknowledging, but giving up on one’s desire would classify as the ethical option. But, if the master signifier of the symbolic status quo has become perverted, as in the case of apartheid South Africa or Nazi Germany, then the decision to assume one’s desire following the encounter with the real would be an ultimately ethical act. Olivier explains it thus:

An ethical act could therefore manifest itself in the guise of someone transgressing the symbolically mediated moral code of her society by choosing

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254 Olivier, “Psychotherapist’s Ethical Orientation,” 657-683.
255 Ibid.
to do something that conflicts with this code, and hence renders her ‘guilty’ or ‘criminal’ in relation to the extant law, but simultaneously indict this law as incapable of accommodating the desire of the individual, and hence as being in need of ‘re-invention’ for the sake of ‘singular justice’ as Derrida might put it.\textsuperscript{256}

In summary, Olivier refers to Žižek’s comments on the trauma of the Second World War, in which he asserts that it is such encounters with the real that force one to ‘think’ and therefore, act ethically. As Žižek asserts, what “provokes us to think is always a traumatic encounter with some external Real which brutally imposes itself on us, shattering our established ways of thinking. As such, true thought is always decentred: one does not think spontaneously, one is \textit{forced} to think.”\textsuperscript{257} Following this, it is cogent to suggest that the conclusion I came to at the end of Chapter 3 may now be confirmed in terms of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, only with added emphasis on the ethical implications of the anxiety-ridden situation that humanity faces in the postmodern context. At the risk of repeating myself I will reiterate that the experience of crisis and the anxiety linked to it in the postmodern context can plausibly be attributed to the constant imposition of an ineffable Real that serves to destabilize an already shaky Symbolic master signifier, namely, the paradigm of simplicity. The ecological crisis, the world economic recession, and what seems to be an ever increasing occurrence of catastrophic natural disasters are all perfect examples of the complex Real that is making itself known to a world that is yet caught up in the paranoiac illusion of totalizing knowledge, stability, prediction, forecasting and control. Complexity is, in this light, the ghostly excess that seeks incorporation at the cost of a clearly non-essential symbolic master signifier. Moreover, complexity acts as the paradigm of simplicity’s internal limit, that which haunts it from within. Cilliers’ claim that the recognition and acknowledgment of complexity is an ethical concern is therefore undeniably affirmed by Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Ethical action is consequently unavoidably embroiled in the choice elucidated by Olivier, where subjects in the throes of anxiety caused by the irreducible Real must choose whether or not to assume their desire and act accordingly, or do nothing and uphold ‘the way things are’. Most often, though, such decisions are incredibly difficult to make, and further guidance is needed to chart such dilemmas ethically.

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid.
3.4 What Would an Ethics Suitable to a Complex Lifeworld Entail?

The question I seek to answer in this section is therefore ‘how would one go about articulating and implementing an ethics in the complex lifeworld?’ When, post the acknowledgment of complexity, the idea of an ethical choice based on ‘exhaustive’ knowledge and a careful consideration of all possible outcomes ceases to be realistic. As a way of answering this question I will insist again on the complexity approach of establishing ‘strategies’, rather than ‘programs’ for action. In order to show what form such an ethical strategy might take I will turn to the quasi-transcendental thinking of Derrida.

Even though he has never worked under the banner of ‘complexity’ per se, Derrida can easily be identified as a complexity thinker. Throughout his prolific career, he was concerned with the workings of paradoxical notions such as aporias and undecidability, not to mention the exemplary complexity of the practice of deconstruction. In a nice moment that typifies this commitment to paradox, during a roundtable discussion held at Villanova University in 1994, Walter Brogan identifies a tension between “disruption and attentiveness” that runs throughout Derrida’s work and asks him whether he would identify it as a ‘characteristic’ of his style, to which Derrida replies quite speedily, “this tension is characteristic of everything I try to do.”

That is why the second part of this argument will be charted ‘according to Derrida’; his work can be directly and fruitfully applied to the current dilemma of merging complexity and ethics. In the same breath, however, one cannot proclaim ‘Derrida is the answer!’ and rest at ease. Derrida’s work provides helpful tools, or heuristics, for the continued exploration of the dilemmas of the complex lifeworld, but much the same as any complex position, it is humble and open to revision.

Specifically, I shall turn to his paper “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority” as a point of reference for this argument. During this address, Derrida outlines three different aporias that are all part of what he identifies as the overarching aporia of justice; namely ‘the epokhe of the rule,’ ‘the ghost of undecidability,’ and ‘the urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge.’ In what follows, the sections ‘suspension,’ ‘undecidability,’ and ‘urgency’ will refer to each of these respectively and elaborate specifically what it is about each of these that

makes them central to an understanding of what an ethics for the complex lifeworld will entail. But first, I would like to discuss how, as a complexity thinker, Derrida has posed a great challenge to the philosophical establishment, which has resulted in his ‘infamy’ as a merchant of relativistic freeplay, when in fact, his theories offer precisely the opposite; a suitably complex alternative to the mutually self-defeating extremes of relativism and dogmatism.

3.5 Derrida as a Complexity Thinker

The work of Derrida has been the center of numerous intellectual controversies since the middle of the Twentieth Century. This is not in small part due to the encyclopedic nature of his texts and his flair for linguistic playfulness; both characteristics that are self-reflexively part and parcel of what he endeavours to communicate. The aim of his most contentious practice, deconstruction, is to destabilize the inherent meaning of certain words, concepts and texts, thereby clearing the path for more creative interpretations, meanings and readings to emerge. The whole point of this practice is meant to show how

> things, texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need – do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, they are always more than any mission would impose, they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy.\(^{260}\)

In a sense, this is precisely what I am attempting to do with the concept of ethics – to show that it is much more than a dichotomous dead-end choice between the self-defeating paths of a stiff, moralizing modernist approach, and the free-for-all apathy of postmodern relativism. Ethics is in need of a fresh articulation that is suitable for application in the postmodern context. In short, deconstruction affirms; it is always ‘for’ new meaning, but the one thing Derrida’s critics all fail to recognize is the affirmative tone that runs through his work, as they mistakenly confuse his playfully wordy style for willful obscurantism and irresponsible intellectual frivolity. As John Caputo has suggested, one could “think of deconstruction as a practice of its own special version of Socratic irony,” but the result is that this has earned “it about as many friends as Socrates earned in his lifetime.\(^{261}\)

Deconstruction’s detractors are plenteous and incredibly vocal – so vocal that they almost succeeded in barring Derrida from receiving an honorary degree from Cambridge. The most

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\(^{260}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^{261}\) Ibid., 132.
common claim they make is that deconstruction entails some kind of random intellectual violence, which leads to the corruption of meaning and the celebration of relativistic freeplay. But as Caputo notes with not a little tongue-in-cheek:

It is not uncommon to portray Derrida as the devil himself, a street-corner anarchist, a relativist, a subjectivist, or nihilist, out to destroy our traditions and institutions, our beliefs and values, to mock philosophy and truth itself, to undo everything the Enlightenment has done – and to replace all this with wild nonsense and irresponsible play.»262

It seems fairly obvious that the kind of activities attributed to deconstruction by such critics would be better signified by the term ‘destruction’ (of old values, of the foundations of meaning, and so on). Importantly, though, Derrida – a man famous for the care with which he chooses his words – did not select ‘destruction’ as a suitable term for his practice, and this is more telling than many would grant. The word deconstruction is almost precisely indicative of the practice it signifies, which is not an act of ‘destruction’ at all, but an endeavour that seeks “to loosen up, to open something up so that it is flexible, internally amendable, and revisable.”263 If deconstruction breaks anything down, it is so that something may be rebuilt in its place, in its foundations; much the same way one would convert an old, cold and dreary farmyard barn into a warm, welcoming country home – the old structure remains, but an entirely new potential is realized.264 It is here that the links with Nietzsche’s equally affirmative active nihilism are clearly discernable.

All the same, certain reactions to deconstruction have been immensely volatile and are still passionately defended well into the Twentieth Century. It is this type of indignant response to not just the concept of deconstruction, but the figure of Derrida himself (the mere mention of his name elicits all types of responses, depending on what company one is in) that should give one the first hint that this particular thinker is engaged in the development of concepts that in one way or another unsettle the paranoidic edifice of ‘totalizing’ knowledge which some depend on for stability and validation. As Caputo astutely notes, his “critics seem immediately to shift into high dudgeon, cloaking themselves in a self-righteous ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ mantle – where ethics has the look of a self-approving good conscience – appointing themselves Defenders of the Good

262 Ibid., 36.
263 Ibid., 130.
264 For Derrida, the ability to find new meaning in established knowledge is a result of its intrinsic iterability, or our ability to repeat differently.
and the True.” What else besides the destabilizing of a dominant paradigm, or the unsettling of a particular point of master signification would earn Derrida and deconstruction the ‘threatening’ status that they are accorded by so many in the philosophical establishment? Surely this kind of knee-jerk, “allergic reaction” is indicative that the position he occupies on the ‘fringe’ of the ‘acceptable,’ has scandalously asserted itself and started causing ‘trouble’ or ‘anxiety’ within the calm, normative structured ‘state’ of established knowledge. It is therefore only fitting that I turn to Derrida for a means of exploring the dilemma one faces when trying to bridge the gaps between complexity and ethics; he is arguably, after all, himself a figure of the ghostly Real, an event, that demarcates the internal limit of the established knowledge claims.

3.6 Deconstructing the Law
As an opening address at the conference ‘Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice’, Derrida begins ‘Force of Law’ by jocularly taking issue with the title of the conference which seems to imply that deconstruction is in some way a hindrance to the process of justice. This implication ironically falls in line with the charge leveled by his critics that deconstruction “purportedly undermines the social consolidation that must take place if we are even to be able to speak to one another about standards of justice” as it “undermines public reason, rejects communitarian standards of morality and denies even the possibility of shared reality given to us in language.”

Derrida’s response to this is characteristically bold, as he claims (to the inevitable chagrin of his critics) that deconstruction is justice, and that positing them against one another as mutually exclusive is damagingly ill-informed.

To understand how Derrida comes to this assertion, it is important to be aware of the distinction he makes between law (justice as right, or droit) and justice. He identifies the former as the “positive structures that make up legal systems, by virtue of which actions are said to be legal, legitimate and authorized.” The law is therefore something calculable, concrete and constructed, and for this reason, it is deconstructible. Justice is, on the other hand, a more abstract concept. It is incalculable and uncertain, and consequently undeconstructible. As for the relationship that exists between them, Derrida clarifies from the beginning, saying:

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265 Ibid., 38.
266 Ibid., 40.
I want to insist right away on reserving the possibility of justice, indeed of law that not only exceeds or contradicts ‘law’, but also, perhaps has no relation to law, or maintains such a strange relation to it that it may just as well command the ‘droit’ that excludes it.\(^{269}\)

For Derrida, these two concepts are simultaneously undeniably divergent, but inextricably linked in their relation to deconstruction.

In his musings regarding the ‘justice’ of his obligation to address his audience in English, he draws attention to the English phrase ‘to enforce the law’ which has no French equivalent. The most similar phrase Derrida can come up with in French translates as ‘to apply the law’ and this does not communicate the necessary force or violence that he sees as intrinsic to, or coming from within the concept of law. The notion of the ‘enforceability of law’ therefore becomes central to the first part of Derrida’s address as he stipulates that the “word ‘enforceability reminds us that there is no such thing as law (droit) that doesn’t imply in itself, a priori, in the analytic structure of its concept, the possibility of being ‘enforced,’ applied by force.”\(^{270}\) As such, there is no law without some kind of violence, a ‘just’ force that is valid in its application. This, however raises some problems, as it would involve being able to prove that a particular force is just, and explain what differentiates a just force from an unjust violence. In addition, Derrida points out that ‘justice’ could only emerge from an act that withholds force, or violence, whilst law is dependent on a legitimate force. Some reconciliation is therefore needed.

As a way of exploring these questions, Derrida cites Blaise Pascal and Michel de Montaigne, from whom he borrows the phrase that forms the paper’s title, “The Mystical Foundation of Authority.” Pascal does not differentiate between justice and law (droit), but he does pay particular attention to the function of force that is central to law as he claims that “[f]orce without justice [droit] is tyrannical. Justice without force is contradictory … and so it is necessary to put justice and force together; and, for this, to make sure that what is just be strong, or what is strong be just.”\(^{271}\) Here Pascal introduces more clearly the implications of force for law, as he makes it clear that due to the law’s dependence on force, either those that uphold the law must be forceful, otherwise, those who are forceful must be made to uphold the law.

From Montaigne, Derrida obtains the notion that laws are not just in themselves but just merely because they are laws. Unlike Pascal, Montaigne makes a clear distinction between laws

\(^{269}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{270}\) Ibid., 6.
\(^{271}\) Ibid., 11.
and justice and explains that the authority upon which laws are dependent for their validity is mystical in its origin. Montaigne claimed that there is no material link between any specific law and ‘justice,’ arguing that it is only because there is social consensus affirming a law that its enforcement is perceived as just. He labels these customs “legitimate fictions which found the truth of justice.” Following Montaigne’s assertion, Pascal later invokes the notion in one of his Pensees saying, “nothing is just in itself; everything crumbles with time. Custom is the sole basis for equity, for the simple reason that it is received; it is the mystical foundation of its authority. Whoever traces it to its source annihilates it.” And following both Montaigne and Pascal, Derrida delves into the genesis of law, revealing the performative force that marks its institution. He explains how the inaugural moment of law is dependent on a violence that can be said to be neither just nor unjust, as there is no pre-established law according to which it can be legitimized. Derrida proposes that it is therefore the silence that “is walled up in the violent structure of the founding act” that forms the ‘the mystical’ foundation of all laws. The fact that the law cannot rest on, or refer to anything but itself for legitimation, means that all laws are, at some point, “a violence without ground.” Therefore, in its founding moment the law escapes the opposition between legality and illegality. It is for this reason that law [droit] is something that is essentially deconstructible; because it is either “founded, constructed on interpretable and transformable textual strata, […] or because its ultimate foundation is by definition unfounded.”

Derrida suggests that the news that the law is deconstructible should not be taken badly as it is this deconstructibility that prevents the legal system from being what Caputo calls a “blind and inflexible tyrant.” He continues to argue that the deconstructibility of the law is the condition of the possibility of legal progress. But Derrida also submits the reciprocal fact that it is the deconstructible nature of the law that insures the possibility of deconstruction. Deconstruction and law are mutual enablers; they support one another, each rendering the other possible.

Of equal importance is the undeconstructibility of justice. As an abstract concept, justice is not a present entity or order, not an existing reality or regime. Caputo defines justice as “what

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272 Ibid., 12.
273 Ibid., 14.
274 Ibid.
275 Caputo, Deconstruction in a Nutshell, 130.
the deconstruction of the law aims to bring about. To elaborate the implications, Derrida breaks it down into three points:

1. The deconstructibility of law (droit), of legality, legitimacy, makes deconstruction possible.
2. The undeconstructibility of justice also makes deconstruction possible and is inseparable from it.
3. Result: deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of droit.

Of course, it would be much easier if the strict opposition of justice and law were a true and verifiable opposition. But it is precisely the conflation of these two terms in contemporary society that points to their irreducible dependence on one another at a constitutive level. As Derrida remarks, it is not uncommon to see justice establishing itself in terms of droit, whilst droit passes itself off as justice.

### 3.7 Just Ethics; Aporetic Complexity

The relationship between law, justice and deconstruction is what makes up the first section of Derrida’s “Force of Law”. In the next section, he elaborates the aforementioned three aporias that form part of the overarching aporia of justice. Drawing upon the definition of ‘aporia’ that marks it as an impossible experience, or an impassable path, he explains that where ‘experience’ usually occurs as a movement over time toward a destination, the aporia halts or hinders this passage, by not allowing for traversal, and therefore, the full experience of an aporia is itself impossible. But, for Derrida there can be no justice without the experience of the impossible aporia, and justice therefore also becomes an impossible experience.

It should be emphasized that these aporias are the condition of both the possibility and the impossibility of justice. And I would like to supplement this claim by saying that they bear the same relationship to ethics in the complex world. In fact, I’ll go as far as to argue that as far as ethical ‘strategies’ for the complex lifeworld go, one cannot (at the moment) do better than Derrida’s account of the three-fold aporetic nature of justice, as it outlines precisely the dilemmas that the contemporary ethical agent faces. In other words, Derrida’s three aporias, namely, ‘the epoke of the rule,’ ‘the ghost of undecidability,’ and the ‘urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge,’ can be seen to account for what Lacan saw as the ethical need to suspend, or revise

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276 Ibid., 131.
the symbolic order, the dialogical co-implication of opposite terms, and the ‘incompleteness’ of knowledge, respectively. It is only by engaging in a deconstruction of the law or the established rule that such aporias might be justly negotiated, for as Derrida says, it is “between law and justice, [that] deconstruction finds its privileged site – or rather, its privileged instability.”  

In the following sections I will address these resonances under the headings ‘Suspension,’ ‘Undecidability,’ and ‘Urgency,’ showing how the mutually informative relationship between the implications of complexity and the ‘impossibility’ of Derrida’s ‘justice,’ create a space in which the possibility of a responsible strategy for ethics in a complex lifeworld might find articulation. According to Caputo, the fact the law can and must be deconstructed is the “condition of […] revolution, morals, ethics, and progress.” As such, justice (in Derrida’s sense) is precisely what the ethical act in complex lifeworld should hope to achieve, the impossibility of ever being able to call oneself ‘just’ notwithstanding. To strive toward an ideal, undeconstructible ‘justice,’ however impossible, via the active negotiation of the following aporias, involves an appreciation of the complexity of the human lifeworld, for as Lacan has shown us, it is only by deconstructing, by revealing the internal limit of the normative ‘law’ of the symbolic status quo that ethical action becomes possible.

3.8 Suspension

Derrida’s first aporia is called the ‘epokhe of the rule’, and can be loosely translated as the ‘suspension’ of the rule. Quite simply, this aporia emerges from the axiom that one needs a certain degree of freedom and the capacity to feel responsibility for one’s behaviour in order to exercise either justice or injustice. However, this freedom is always organized by various rules, laws and prescriptions, which one is obligated to honour when making decision. In this sense, one is free to follow laws, but if an act merely consists in applying a law, one’s calculation may be said to be legal, but one’s decision cannot be considered just. For a decision to be thought of as just, Derrida instructs that it must not merely follow a rule, but it must also “assume it, approve it, confirm its value, by a reinstituting act of interpretation… as if the judge himself invented the law in every case.”

279 Caputo, Deconstruction in a Nutshell, 16.
The distinction is much like the one Kant makes between acting from duty and acting in conformity with duty. If one merely applies a rule, one’s actions will correspond to a law, and therefore be legitimated in terms of it. But just as Kant says that action must be performed from duty rather than merely correspond to duty in order to be ethical, so too is Derrida’s subject protected by his application of the law, but in no way can this mere conformity with what is expected be classified as just. Derrida clarifies this saying, “law is not justice. Law is the element of calculation and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable.”281 For Derrida then, the challenge is trying to find a way to reconcile justice, which is always something that concerns individuals, unique situations and singularity, with the normative laws and established values which usually adopt a general form.282

He thus claims that the exercise of a law can only count as just if there is a ‘fresh judgment’, which both conforms to existing law and re-invents it. A just decision simultaneously conserves and destroys the existing law as each separate case requires a distinct interpretation. If the decision is guaranteed by any pre-existing law or rule then a judge cannot be said to be just, but this is also the case if the judge makes no reference to any pre-existing law, relying purely on a personal interpretation. According to Derrida, laws and legality “defer the problem of justice.”283 In other words, every time one applies a rule in a specific case and the outcomes are favourable, the law has been upheld, but not necessarily justice. Upholding the law is not the condition for justice. It is only in the experience of the aporia – when the decision between just and unjust is not guaranteed by a rule – that there is an experience of justice.

Earlier in this chapter I put forward the argument that, in line with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the experience of crisis or trauma is potentially constructive in that it problematizes the status quo of the symbolic register so that reformative, ethical action may take place. In Derrida’s sense similarly, one can apply such logic to the making of everyday decisions. Lacan shows how the Symbolic is structured according to a master signifier, or a point de capiton, according to which all meaning and standards are generated. The symbolic, therefore stands as the everyday ‘law’ that we are obliged to uphold. But as I have articulated throughout this argument, the mere upholding of the status quo or the almost somnambulistic conformity to ‘the way things are’ does not count as ethical action, even it is in conformity with the ‘ethical’. It

281 Ibid., 16.
282 Ibid., 17.
283 Ibid., 23.
is only once one has realized that whatever normative state prevails is, like the law, rather arbitrarily dependent on a ‘mystical foundation’ that one can partake in an ethical act that willfully suspends or reforms it, if that is what the occasion calls for. On an everyday scale, the aporia, as an experience of a double bind or a crippling impasse – in itself a form crisis – can potentially bring this about.

What is this ‘suspension’, ‘revision’ or ‘reformation’, other than the practice of deconstruction? Caputo explains that “the paralysis and impossibility of an aporia is what impels deconstruction, what rouses it out of bed in the morning, what drives it on and calls it into action.”284 For example, if one takes the case of Rosa Parks, her act of sitting in the ‘white’ part of the bus was in contravention the normative symbolic law of a time in which a “it was legal, legitimate, and authorized to force African-Americans to the back of the bus.”285 But the undeconstructibility of justice prevailed, and it was not Rosa Parks who was cast into disrepute, but the symbolic law, itself. Importantly, such acts of constructive rebellion are not merely acts of destruction. Rosa Parks did not destroy the law that day in Alabama, she initiated its reinvention. Fittingly, Geoffrey Bennington sees the inventive spirit as central to a responsible ethic, asserting that being

*inventive means not being merely dutiful.* Simply following one’s duty, looking up the appropriate action in a book of laws or rules, as it were, is anything but ethical – at best it is an administration of rights and duties, a bureaucracy of ethics. In this sense an ethical act worthy of its name is always inventive.286

Just as invention, or the creative spirit, is central to the Nietzsche’s active nihilism, so too is it central to Derrida’s deconstruction. Lacan is also adamant that one cannot merely destroy, or eradicate the Symbolic, as this would result in a psychotic subject. The ethical act of suspension of the law is always therefore an act of simultaneous demolition and invention. This rather apt dialogical co-implication of opposites that is common to both Lacan and Derrida can plausibly be seen to reflect and respect the essential marriage of chaos and order that underpins the existence of the human lifeworld.

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284 Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 32.
285 Ibid., 130.
3.9 Undecidability

Derrida labels the second aporia the ‘ghost of the undecidable’. For him, the undecidable does not merely denote an oscillation between two seemingly contradictory rules or two decisions, but is rather an experience of the heterogeneous; that which is incalculable and foreign to the order of the rule, but to which one is yet obliged. It is, in basic terms, a matter of freedom, as a decision that has not passed through an experience of the undecidable is merely a programmable application. As long as one is trapped in the moment of suspense that precedes decision, justice is in the balance – only the decision is just. However, according to Derrida, there is also no moment in which the decision can be said to be ‘presently’ and ‘fully’ just. He qualifies this by saying that the “undecidable remains caught as an essential ghost in every event of decision. Its ghostliness deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criteriology that would assure us of the justice of a decision.”\(^{287}\) This second aporia is therefore responsible for demonstrating the extent to which a deconstruction of contemporary justice is based on the idea of a more ‘infinite’ and ‘irreducible’ justice, “which isn’t law,” but is “the very movement of deconstruction at work in law and the history of law.”\(^{288}\)

Most notably, undecidability emerges as a result of what Derrida calls the ‘quasi-transcendental’ constitution of concepts in which one term is always simultaneously the condition of the possibility, and the impossibility of the other, and vice-versa. The concept ‘justice,’ for example, is constituted by both its lawful side (justice as \textit{droit}) and the ideal, infinite justice mentioned above. In Derrida’s terms, the part of ‘justice’ that designates law or \textit{droit} may be defined as its ‘economic’ moment, which gives preference to matters of sameness, immanence and totality. The part that designates the irreducible, ideal notion of justice, on the other hand, is identified as the ‘aneconomic’ moment, and it prefers difference, transcendence, and singularity. Hurst links these moments to Derrida’s account of the “relation between structure and play,” where the economic moment would claim that structure comes before to regulate, condition, or “limit the relational play of elements in a system,” whilst the aneconomic moment would claim that play comes first and conditions structure.\(^{289}\)

\(^{288}\) Ibid.
Derrida says that choosing either of these moments of ‘justice’ over the other would result in aporetic dead end. The closed or strictly regulated system that is typical of economic constitution always attempts to secure the situation by “by rationalizing away discrepancies and oddities,”290 and suppressing all hints of the ‘aneconomic,’ or that which “in relation to a system remains errant, dis-ordered, resistant, aleatory, unexpected, or nonsensical.”291 But this type of rationalizing action is self-defeating because it stems from “an inaccurate picture of phenomenal reality,” which renders the situation insecure from the start, no matter how ardent the attempts to secure it are.292 The aneconomic aporia by contrast, stems from the lack of limits and the inability to erect borders. An aneconomic take on a situation would then bring about the opposite aporia: “an anarchistic free-play where nothing can happen, for it misses the legitimate regularities, patterns, and trends that enable us to make the reasonably general theoretical propositions essential for deciding what to do.”293 Even though they are radically opposed, the economic and the aneconomic are always in constant tension with one another, such that trying to choose one without it being tempered by the other will always result in violence, or more dilemmas.

One of Derrida’s most fundamental assertions is that making clear cut ‘either/or’ distinctions between apparently opposing terms such as ‘law’ and ‘justice’, or ‘dogmatism’ and ‘relativism’ is impossible, as this would always result in the self-defeating aporia that each choice amounts to. Thus if one had to favour Law, and pay no heed to justice, the result would be tyranny. But if one were to choose Justice at the expense of law, the result would be an equally self-defeating state of anarchical relativism. In Hurst’s words,

because all phenomena are constituted by this double economic/aneconomic exigency, they remain unresolved: one can never bind all the possible threads into an absolutely systematic network … but we are not for that reason left in a fray of loose ends.294

That is why Derrida emphasizes the impossibility of making such a choice, saying: “We will not choose between the opening and the totality. Therefore we will be incoherent, but without systematically resigning ourselves to incoherence.”295 So for Derrida, the idea that forcing such an either/or choice will result in guaranteed, ethical non-violence is fallacious. He suggests that

291 Ibid.
292 Hurst, “Complexity and Human Development,” 12
293 Ibid., 12
295 Derrida, cited in Ibid., 84.
the best one can do is choose the path of least violence, which is to resist making the choice between totality (or the economic moment) and infinity (the aneconomic moment), and rather negotiate a path between the two. Derrida is trying to show that one needs to start thinking beyond the either/or choice (arguably made normative in the paradigm of simplicity) and look towards a mindset of both/and. Importantly for Derrida, it is therefore never a matter of attempting to overcome or ‘solve’ such incoherence, but rather a matter of accepting its inevitability. 296

It nearly goes without saying that undecidability has a central role to play in the contemporary ethical ‘crisis’. In fact, one could articulate the argument outlined in the first chapter along these very terms. The modernist kind of pre-occupation with order, totality and structure is easily identifiable as the economic moment in contemporary ethics, whilst a singularly constituted, relativistic freplay definitely coheres to the aneconomic mode of postmodern ethics. But as I showed in the first chapter, neither choice, in isolation, is viable as they both produce ethically impotent subjects. The neo-modernist yearns for the ‘law’ side of justice, and in merely adhering to predetermined prescriptives, cannot be said to be ethical. Whereas the relativist’s obsession with the singularity of every event (or Derrida’s ‘ideal’ justice) amounts to an inaction that merely reinforces the status quo and bolsters the reigning symbolic master signifier, and is therefore also not ethical, according to the parameters outlined in this argument.

To refer back to complexity theory, I would argue that the belief in the nonviolence of a strict either/or choice is the product of the paradigm of simplicity, and its disjunctive practices. Consequently, those who are still operating within this paradigm will likely be those who choose one side of the equation and defend it vehemently. And this could, ironically, take the form of either fundamentalism or vehement relativism, for as Cilliers points out, a “true relativist, i.e. somebody that argues that there are no grounds for any form of knowledge is, in a way, nothing but a disappointed foundationalist.” 297 Essentially the complexity view, with its focus on conjunction, is, according to Morin, also “attempting to go beyond the either/or alternative.” 298 It is therefore cogent to argue that if the complexity of the human lifeworld were to be acknowledged, the tendency to treat such co-implicated terms as ‘justice’ and ‘law’ as mutually

296 Derrida, cited in Ibid., 106.
298 Morin, On Complexity, 8.
exclusive oppositions might give way to a more inclusive ‘both/and’ stance; one that is cognizant of the fact that we are “not dealing here with straight contradictions” and that economic and aneconomic “are bound together in a knot such that loosening the one side tightens the other, in a movement Derrida calls, ‘striction.’”

Undecidability is therefore, arguably, the condition of the possibility of ethics in the complex lifeworld, for without it, Hurst says,

there would only be the economic delusion of perfect rational calculability where the law is merely applied under the illusion that we know enough to do this, or the abdication of responsibility on the basis of the aneconomic illusion that we cannot know anything.

Undecidability, like uncertainty, is unavoidable in the complex lifeworld, and the value of Derrida’s work is that he acknowledges and addresses this constructively, instead of attempting to reduce it out of the picture as so many of his critics would ostensibly have had him do.

3.10 Urgency

The third aporia is termed ‘the urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge’, where the word ‘horizon’ denotes “both the opening and the limit that defines an infinite progress or a period of waiting.” But justice is something that cannot and must not wait, and the just decision must always be made immediately. As Derrida says: “It cannot furnish itself with infinite information and unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it.”

Even if it could do this, the moment in which the decision is made will always be a “finite moment of urgency and precipitation” which interrupts the deliberation that hopefully precedes it. Since justice as droit always results in a decision that is divisive, or cutting, Derrida argues that it ought to begin, “in principle, with the initiative of learning, reading, understanding, interpretation, even calculation,” but this cannot go on indefinitely.

The fact that justice requires us to calculate with the incalculable should not serve as an excuse for shying away from the making of just decisions. Justice exceeds law and calculation, and as a result it has the capacity to reform legal and calculative processes, but to do this, a decision must always be made in spite of undecidability. If no decision is made, one is, by

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300 Ibid., 88.
302 Ibid., 26.
303 Ibid., 24.
default, favouring the aneconomic, or relativist side of the aporia. That is why Derrida is adamant that one should take the economic imperative seriously and avoid abdicating the responsibility “for economizing, taking decisions, drawing boundaries, and actively inventing economic or relational systems, in the name of aneconomic freeplay, since this, in any event, remains impossible.”304 By making a decision, one imposes a measure of order and sameness, that, as Hurst asserts, can only ever be a “temporary suspension” of the aneconomic “play of differences” which will inevitably assert itself once more.305 Hence the decision must be made, but following Cilliers, it must be made ‘modestly.’

Given that the moment of just decision is an instant in which the complex reality of never being able to attain a totalizing knowledge presents itself most keenly, Derrida cites Kierkegaard’s sentiment that the “moment of decision is a madness.” He explains in more detail, saying that, “even if time and prudence, the patience of knowledge and the mastery of conditions were hypothetically unlimited, the decision would be structurally finite” and thus a moment of madness; “a decision of urgency and precipitation, acting in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule.”306 Morin makes a similar point when he says that action is a ‘wager’ that gives the impression of simplifying the complex reality because, “with a choice, we decide, we close the matter.”307 But if there’s one assertion upon which every thinker I have drawn from in this argument agrees, it is that the ‘matter,’ whatever it may be, is never ‘closed.’ Morin says that action is a ‘wager’ because, in the complex lifeworld, every time one acts, every time one decides, and every time one judges, there has to be an awareness of the uncertainty, and risk that such economizing action involves. That is why he is adamant that strict, economic ‘programs’ that act as if the matter is closed, as if the final word has been said, cannot be imposed upon complex systems. It is only a modest, adaptable strategy, able to incorporate new information and adapt accordingly, that is fitting for our complex lifeworld.

3.11 Some Closing Remarks

To conclude, I hope the argument in this chapter has shown clearly that the experience of crisis, trauma, and anxiety, that are a result of the destabilization of the paradigm of simplicity in the

305 Ibid.
307 Morin, On Complexity, 54.
postmodern context, are not at all reason for inaction, or ethical paralysis. On the contrary, if one follows Lacan and Nietzsche, these experiences provide a valuable opportunity for ethical action to take place. It is, however, understandable that the complex reality of the human lifeworld makes ethical action that much more treacherous, uncertain and tentative, or as Morin asserts, complexity makes one more “prudent and attentive… It shows us that we should not believe that what is going on now will continue indefinitely.”308

Consequently, one cannot apply some predetermined metaphysical ethical ‘program’ to the complex lifeworld. By recognizing complexity, one is therefore obliged to devise an ethical strategy that accounts for the uncertainty and unpredictability that complexity makes inevitable. For Cilliers the only kind of ethical strategy that is practical in such a case is a modest one which is indefinitely open to new information and revision. Modesty is in no way a synonym for weakness, though, as one can hold a strong ethical stance, as long as this does not involve the attempt to reduce new, conflicting information out of the picture.

To detail what such a modest position would entail I have followed Cilliers and Hurst in showing the exemplary nature of the poststructuralist logic of Lacan and Derrida in relation to complexity theory.309 Derrida’s elaboration of the necessary negotiation of aporias that prefigures just decision-making is useful heuristic for understanding the double-binds that similarly face the ethical actor in the wake of an acknowledgment of complexity. In particular, Derrida’s elaboration of the ‘plural logic of the aporia’ serves to show that “there is ethics precisely where I am in performative powerlessness,”310 and that without this moment of dilemma, there can be no real ethical decision. Derrida therefore gives contemporary ethical agents a ‘“logic’ to work with, which offers a suitably complex and sophisticated way of ‘making sense’ of the incorrigible persistence of interpretative differences across the spectrum of human practices.”311 It is with this as a base that the subject in the complex lifeworld can embark on ethical action with no need for the illusions that mask the “aporetic predicament” of the human condition.312 I will now engage in a hermeneutical analysis of Watchmen to show how these concepts find representation in popular culture.

308 Morin, On Complexity, 56.
309 Hurst, Complexity and Human Development, 9.
310 Cilliers, “Complexity, Deconstruction, Relativism,” 262.
311 Hurst, Derrida vis-à-vis Lacan, 110.
312 Hurst, Derrida vis-à-vis Lacan, 93.
4. The Ethical Challenge Presented in Watchmen

The world at the moment seems to be a bit of a runaway train. It’s getting faster and faster and faster and nobody’s got the faintest idea what the hell’s going on. But one thing that is certain is that it is all changing and it is changing really really rapidly [...] What I think is that people these days get their information from all of the much despised sort of vulgar media that people have been trying so hard to ban for the past forty years. Movies, television, comic books, rock ‘n roll records. That is the main way that kids soak up this sort of information. So if in these basically silly sort of funny books and things I can actually get over some information, if I can help the education process in a bright, full colour, comic book way that kids [and adults] actually want to read. Then I’d say that’s enough of a contribution. If I thought I’d done that, I think I’d be happy.

– Moore

Although it was released in 1985, Alan Moore’s and Dave Gibbons’ landmark graphic novel, Watchmen, is remarkable in its agelessness, and its insights into the complexity of the human lifeworld are arguably more relevant today than ever. With its self-reflexive narrative and the crisis-ridden plot, Watchmen – undeniably a product of the postmodern context – offers great insight into contemporary society’s most pressing ethical aporias. A close analysis of Watchmen may therefore be used as a hermeneutic tool, allowing for better elucidation and critique of some of the predominant ethical stances common to the postmodern context. Despite its pop-culture status, the Watchmen characters all grapple with a number of pressing ethical concerns in a way that demands a certain level of critical engagement from its readers. So by discussing this graphic novel, its context, and its characters in detail, I hope to show that it successfully challenges its readers to acknowledge the complexity that underpins all human interactions, and to contemplate the ethical implications that arise as a result. My focus will be centralized on how the graphic novel problematizes the various ethical convictions of four of the central characters – namely, The Comedian, Rorschach, Dr Manhattan and Ozymandias – in light of this complexity.

4.1 Introducing the Parallel Reality of Watchmen

The world presented by Watchmen is not radically different from contemporary Western urban reality, in fact, there are significant parallels. Set in New York in 1985, the citizens of the Watchmen world are faced with familiar social ills such as murder, rape, organized crime and mob violence. Apart from the impending threat of nuclear disaster and various historical discrepancies (Nixon is still president thanks to a tweak of legislature, America has won the Vietnam War and the Cold War is reaching a fever pitch), the most evident difference is that, for

313 Alan Moore, “Monsters, Maniacs and Moore.” (UK: Britain, their Britain, 1987.)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ucba9NtF3cE&feature=&p=637AED6ADDFB5682&index=O&playnext=1>
a time in the *Watchmen* world, a group of surprisingly ordinary citizens were allowed to don absurd costumes and take up fantasy personas in an attempt to ensure society’s safety from ‘evil-doers.’

Significantly, with one notable exception, there is nothing ‘super’ about most of the would-be-heroes who are the central characters in *Watchmen*. They are, for the most part, regular people with a particularly strong desire to fight for justice – showing just how subjective the notion of ‘justice’ can be in process. Author, Alan Moore, explains that rather than representing various super-beings, he was more interested in exploiting super-hero stereotypes and challenging the assumptions of the super-hero genre in order to comment on the dispositions of every-day people, while tackling the age-old question, ‘who has the right to decide?’

Therefore, rather than being “stereotypical fantasy images of good people who act outside an incompetent criminal justice system, [the] characters are realistic portraits that challenge the way we look at masked crusaders.” Moreover, the graphic novel also motivates a more critical view of the ethical ‘code’ that each masked crusader is associated with. As the reader becomes more familiar with the characters and their ethical persuasions, it becomes clear that all seem to hold the idea that what they are doing is best for society, and yet their methods and the outcomes of their actions are totally diverse, if not contradictory.

Given that each of these characters is a supposed ‘hero’ within the narrative, the reasonable assumption may be that their actions stand as paradigms of moral goodness within their society. However, by evaluating the nature of their conduct throughout the narrative progression, I aim to show that, in some way, each character fails to be one whose actions could be plausibly emulated in the postmodern context mirrored by the *Watchmen* world. In relation to this, Tony Spanakos has observed that “the characters of *Watchmen* appear old, battle-scarred, emotionally stunted and morally questionable,” which leads the reader to ask, “Why them? Who gave them their tights and said, ‘Go forth and bring bedlam to nought’?” It is precisely the ambiguous status of the central ‘hero’ figures that sets *Watchmen* apart as a text which inspires critical engagement on the part of its readers. And there is arguably no character more ambiguous than Ozymandias, as I will show in the ensuing evaluation. Ozymandias is potentially the only

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKeBcCtCBCA>


316 Ibid., 34.
character that ‘does’ something constructive in order to save the world, but the plan he hatches is so devastating that it is almost impossible to tell whether he is the hero or the villain in the story. I will therefore be paying him more attention as it is particularly with reference to his actions that the aporetic nature of ethics in the complex lifeworld finds the best representation. But, before I continue with this evaluation, a succinct plot synopsis will be necessary to contextualize each character’s role within the overall narrative.

4.2 Plot Synopsis

*Watchmen* begins with the violent death of one Edward Blake, supposedly a ‘foreign diplomat’. However, the reader soon learns that the eponymous Blake was, in fact, The Comedian, a former ‘masked adventurer’ and member of the elite crime-fighting unit, the Minutemen. But since the Keene Act, which banned all ‘masked adventurers/costumed vigilantes,’ when it was passed in 1977, he had been working as a government operative with a particular penchant for politically and socially hostile foreign environments. As the storyline progresses, Blake’s more than a little shady past becomes clearer as we see him represented in the memories of the other ‘adventurers’ with whom he was associated.

Upon investigating the inside of Blake’s apartment as a routine ‘check-up’ after the police have gone, it is Rorschach – the only ‘masked vigilante’ who has refused to cooperate with the passing of the Keene Act – who discovers Blake’s parallel identity. This leads him to formulate the hypothesis that somebody may be hunting former ‘adventurers’ or ‘masks’ as he refers to them. As a result, he sets off to warn all the other potential victims, namely; Dan Dreiberg, formerly active as the second Nite Owl, who chose to retire anonymously after the passing of the Keene Act; Adrian Veidt, who is publicly recognized as the former Ozymandias (and who has made a fortune marketing this super-hero persona); and Laurie Juspeczyk, formerly the second Silk Spectre, also anonymously retired and living with her boyfriend, Dr. Manhattan.

In a terrible accident at Gila Flats Research Base in 1959, the young nuclear physicist Dr. Jon Osterman is accidentally locked into the vault of an intrinsic field separation experiment and is disintegrated. Some months later, however, a residue of consciousness is able to reconstruct itself – merely a matter of reassembling the components in the correct sequence, he later explains – and a version of Osterman returns to life; only this time, bright blue, experiencing time simultaneously and able to manipulate atomic structures on a whim. Dr. Manhattan, as he comes
to be known, is a key presence in the *Watchmen* world as he is the super-being that ensures the USA’s position as the dominant world power (also the reason they have won the Vietnam War), and acts as a walking nuclear deterrent as it is said that he could destroy ninety percent of the USSR’s nuclear stockpile, should they decide to attack. Throughout the novel, the *Watchmen* world’s proximity to total nuclear destruction is analogously represented by the minute hand of the ‘doomsday’ clock, upon which the hour twelve signifies Mutually Assured Destruction (the acronym for which is, aptly, MAD).

At first, Rorschach’s ex-colleagues are dismissive of his hypothesis, thanks in large part to his tendencies toward paranoia and his infamously sociopathic behaviour – Rorschach is wanted by the police on two counts of murder and numerous assault charges. But soon the convergence of three significant events piques their interest. First, there is a media frenzy surrounding the claim, made in a televised interview, that close contact with Dr. Manhattan has given at least three people terminal cancer; then Rorschach is framed and arrested; and thirdly, there is the attempted assassination of Adrian Veidt. The cancer scandal, augmented by the fact that Laurie ends their relationship shortly before the aforementioned television interview, causes Dr. Manhattan to leave Earth and exile himself on Mars. Almost immediately after Dr. Manhattan leaves, the USSR invades Afghanistan and a nuclear holocaust seems immanent, as the scientists adjust the doomsday clock to one minute to midnight. All these ‘coincidences’ begin to seem a little too orchestrated for Dan, as he squeezes himself back into his Nite Owl costume, and together with Laurie as the rejuvenated Silk Spectre (who has moved in with him since her split from Dr. Manhattan), breaks Rorschach out of prison so that they can investigate the situation further. With the information that Rorschach has gathered so far, they go in search of the person who ordered the hit on Ozymandias, but not before Dr. Manhattan teleports Laurie to Mars, where she is supposed to convince him to return to earth to save humankind from nuclear destruction.

After some typically violent coercive force, Rorschach learns that the freight coordinator at a company called Pyramid Deliveries, run by the Veidt Corporation, had organized the attempted assassination of Ozymandias. Thus, Adrian Veidt is implicated as the mastermind behind his own hit, and perhaps the whole master plan, although neither the reader nor the

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317 In response to the passing of the Keene Act, the reader learns that he dumped the dead body of a suspected multiple rapist outside of the police headquarters, with a sign reading ‘NEVER’ attached to the corpse.
characters are certain what the plan is, exactly. Nite Owl and Rorschach then seek Ozymandias out at his Antarctic retreat, Karnak. Upon their arrival, Veidt first feigns ignorance, but realizing just how inconsequential it would be to reveal his plan to them, he acquiesces. Veidt then explains, in painstaking detail, how this plan had been in motion for almost twenty years, since The Comedian had undermined an older adventurer named Captain Metropolis’s attempt to reorganize a crime-fighting group of adventurers called the ‘Crimebusters,’ in the wake of the dissolution of the original ‘Minutemen.’ The Comedian had interrupted Captain Metropolis’s introductory speech by burping loudly and highlighted the futility of a project like the ‘Crimebusters,’ when he sardonically commented that: “Inside thirty years the nukes are gonna be flying like maybugs… and then Ozzy here is going to be the smartest man on the cinder.”

Ozymandias explains that it was in response to this remark by The Comedian that he had taken it upon himself to ‘save the world from itself’ (for want of a better phrase). He tells Rorschach and Nite Owl that “brutally, I’d been brought nose to nose with mankind’s mortality; the dreadful, irrefutable fact of it. For the first time I genuinely understood that Earth might die. I recognized the fragility of our world in increasingly hazardous times.” He then admits to murdering The Comedian whom, in his travels as a government agent, had come across the island upon which the lynchpin of Veidt’s plan was being engineered. He also takes responsibility for orchestrating the cancer scandal as a way of manipulating Dr. Manhattan’s strained connections with human society, and for framing Rorschach, in order to get them both out of the way.

In his ardent effort to eliminate the threat of nuclear destruction from its root cause, Ozymandias continues to explain how he realized that he could not effect the same kind of unifying action that his personal role-model and namesake, Alexander, did by conquering the known world and unifying it by force, creating a vast empire. Instead his plan was to “trick it; frighten it towards salvation with history’s greatest practical joke,” which takes the form of constructing a massively grotesque alien-looking being and then teleporting it to New York City, knowing full well that the impact of the teleportation would kill it. The attendant trauma inflicted on the creature’s telepathic brain would consequently send a shock-wave through the entire city killing at least half of New York’s population. In short, Ozymandias planned to simulate an alien attack on earth in order to unite its warring factions against the threat of a common (but

318 Moore & Gibbons, Watchmen, Ch 2, p11.
319 Ibid., Ch 11, p21.
320 Ibid., Ch 11, p24.
completely fallacious) enemy, thereby ushering in an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence and a unified world identity, eradicating the threat of nuclear warfare. When Nite Owl responds incredulously that he can’t believe that Veidt had planned such a ‘mad-scientist’ scheme, and that he is glad they got to him before he attempted such a hopeless ‘black fantasy,’ Veidt responds (somewhat ironically), “Dan, I’m not a Republic serial villain. Do you seriously think I’d explain my master stroke if there remained the slightest chance of you affecting its outcome? I did it thirty-five minutes ago.”

Nite Owl and Rorschach can only look on in horror as Veidt shows them the latest reports coming from a devastated New York City. Laurie, back from Mars with Dr. Manhattan rages at Veidt, telling him he’ll never get away with what he’s done, but he is confident that she (and the rest of them) will have to swallow any self-righteous plans to expose him, as he points out that “all countries are unified and pacified. Can’t get away with it? Will you expose me, undoing the peace millions died for? Kill me, risking subsequent investigation? Morally, you’re in checkmate … let’s compromise.” Dr. Manhattan then corroborates Veidt’s point by explaining that any attempt to unveil the plot would doom the world to worse destruction, and that therefore, if the others want to preserve life on earth, they’d have no choice but to ‘remain silent.’ Defeated, Laurie and Dan agree to keep Ozymandias’ secret. Only Rorschach refuses, leaving the building and wandering into the ice and snow. Dr. Manhattan follows him, saying: “You know I can’t let you do that.” Finally, the reader sees that Rorschach comes to understand the impossibility of his situation, and unable to accept what is expected of him, he commands Dr. Manhattan to kill him. Dr. Manhattan obeys. After one last talk with Ozymandias, Dr. Manhattan then leaves Earth indefinitely, for a galaxy “less complicated.”

In the last panel, we see Seymour, a rookie at the New Frontiersman, a right-wing political paper, reaching for Rorschach’s Journal (that he posted to them just before he left for Antarctica to seek out Veidt), which the reader knows contains all the details of his investigation, including the last entry which reads, “whatever the precise nature of this conspiracy, Adrian Veidt responsible.” It is this last denouement that is the most shocking, as the reader realizes that the sacrificing of millions of people may, in fact, have been for nothing, because the

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321 Ibid., Ch 11, p27.
322 Ibid., Ch 12, p20.
323 Ibid., Ch 12, p23.
324 Ibid., Ch 12, p27.
325 Ibid., Ch 10, p22.
revelation of Veidt’s role as mastermind could potentially undermine the event entirely. Considering Rorschach’s decision to be disintegrated by Dr. Manhattan rather than fulfill his desire to reveal the truth, one wonders whether he would have sent the journal in the first place, had he known what the context of its discovery would be. But as I will continue to elaborate, this is merely indicative of the irreducible effects of the complexity at play every time an ethical decision (no matter how big or small) is made; in Watchmen world and the real world alike. In fact, one of the most intriguing sub-plots in the Watchmen narrative deals exclusively with the complexity of the human lifeworld.

4.3 Complexity at Play in Watchmen

As one of the only notable feminine elements in otherwise male-dominated narrative, Laurie Juspeczyk, or Silk Spectre II is a disappointingly reluctant ‘hero’, who seems to hanker after a conventional life of secure normalcy – which is exactly what she gets when she enters into a relationship with Dan Dreiber. In the novel’s opening chapter she speaks scathingly of the career her mother had groomed her for, mocking her ‘skimpy’ costume and wondering aloud to Dan about what had motivated their ‘adventuring.’ She eventually concludes that the “Keene Act was the best thing that ever happened” to them.326 As a result, Laurie is an ethically vague character, and there are very few moments in the narrative in which her ethical stance is clearly voiced. This definitely does not mean she is unimportant, though. On the contrary, Laurie is perhaps one of the most significant characters in Watchmen as she is, in fact, an embodiment of complexity, or a “thermodynamic miracle” as Dr. Manhattan finally realizes. I would argue that her central function in the narrative is to allow the complexity of the parallel reality of the Watchmen lifeworld to reveal itself. This sub-plot addresses complexity in such a direct fashion that one is left to wonder whether Moore did not do some contract work for the Santa Fe Institute between graphic novels.

Laurie’s mother, Sally ‘Jupiter’ (a name she chose over ‘Juspeczyk’ in order to conceal her Polish origins) had been the first Silk Spectre, one of only two female adventurers in the original Minutemen crime-fighting group. But she was also a sex symbol, a model, and an aspiring actress, who eventually married the manager she had hired to promote the ‘Sally Jupiter’ persona. After Hollis Mason (the original Nite Owl) publishes a tell-all memoir, Under the Hood,

326 Ibid., Ch 1, p25.
about his time as a ‘Minuteman,’ it becomes public knowledge that Sally had been the victim of a brutal attack by The Comedian, during which he had tried to rape her. The scene is played out in detail during one of Sally’s flashbacks and the reader learns that he would have succeeded had it not been for Hooded Justice, another member of the Minutemen, who interrupted the attack and neutralized Blake. But in interviews and in private conversation, Sally appears ambivalent about her feelings toward The Comedian, never condemning him or his brutality outright. Laurie, on the other hand, is unforgiving, and seems relieved to hear of The Comedian’s death, calling him “a bastard” and a “monster.”

Hence, when Dr. Manhattan inadvertently leads Laurie to the discovery that Blake is her biological father (whilst she is on Mars, trying to convince him to save earth), the realization is unspeakably traumatic for her. She flies into a rage, destroying the roaming Martian palace that Dr. Manhattan had created. When Dr. Manhattan asks if she is alright, Laurie responds: “[o]f course not! Blake, that bastard and my m- mother, they pulled a gag on me is what they did. My whole life’s a joke. One big stupid meaningless … Aw shit.” But Dr. Manhattan’s response is quite the opposite – he is awestruck by the revelation, and it becomes the one factor that changes his opinions on the value of human life. He says as much to Laurie, explaining articulately that her life is the prime example of a thermodynamic miracle, an event “with odds against so astronomical they’re effectively impossible, like oxygen spontaneously becoming gold.” He tells her how he had longed to observe such a thing, and yet he had overlooked the fact that, “in each human coupling, a thousand sperm vie for a single egg.” He continues to impress upon her the amazing unlikeliness of her existence, saying,

Multiply those odds by countless generations, against the odds of your ancestors being alive, meeting; siring this precise son; that precise daughter… until your mother loves a man she has every reason to hate, and of that union, of the thousand million children competing for fertilization, it was you, only you, that emerged. To distill so perfect a form from that chaos of improbability, like turning air into gold… that is the crowning unlikelihood. The thermodynamic miracle.

The reader is never given any details regarding the context of Laurie’s conception, except that it was a once off event. Sally shows remorse for not telling Laurie, but it is evident that her

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327 Ibid., Ch 1, p21.
328 Ibid., Ch 9, p26.
329 Ibid.
330 Ibid., Ch 9, p26-27.
own ideas of what happened and how it occurred are still ambiguous and confused. It remains an inexplicable occurrence in the plot, and some would say that this is the point. Two such commentators are Sarah Donovan and Nick Richardson, who write:

The whole point of that storyline is that it resists interpretation according to any theory – it is utterly too messy and too complex. The attempted rape, the subsequent consensual relationship, and Laurie as the end product of it are meant to sit side by side in the graphic novel in an unresolved fashion.

The fact that Dr. Manhattan explicitly labels it as a ‘thermodynamic miracle’ has huge implications for reading complexity into the plot. As I have already mentioned, the second law of thermodynamics states that all systems tend towards entropy, or heat death, including our solar system, galaxy and universe. But yet, an entire planet of life-forms has managed to organize and perpetuate itself in an almost direct contradiction of the all important law of entropy. This is why phenomena such as life (and complex systems in general) are referred to as negentropic – they defy the overwhelming odds against their existence – they are, in Dr. Manhattan’s sense, thermodynamic miracles.

Laurie eventually realizes the amazing implications of Dr. Manhattan’s realization as she remarks, “if me, my birth, if that’s a thermodynamic miracle… I mean, you could say that about anybody in the world!” Dr. Manhattan affirms this and concludes their Mars sojourn with a remark that has great significance for complexity theory, replying:

Yes, anybody in the world. But the world is so full of people, so crowded by these miracles that they become commonplace and we forget… I forget. We gaze continually at the world and it grows dull in our perceptions. Yet seen from another’s vantage point, as if new, it may still take the breath away.331

It is as if Dr. Manhattan is alluding to the dangers of a reductionist view of the world here. Whether in the context of the sciences, or in the guise of an overly insular personal worldview, Dr. Manhattan’s statement arguably heralds the benefits of inter-disciplinary and horizon-expanding pursuits in which the givens of one’s own limited perceptions may be challenged, reviewed and informed by those of other, more complex, and therefore modest, positions.

331 Ibid.
4.4 The Comedian

The first character one comes into contact with in the novel is The Comedian, or Eddie Blake. Although the opening panels of the novel depict his violent demise, his character continues to play a vital role throughout the plot. Eddie Blake is hardly what one would expect of a character with the pseudonym “The Comedian”. It soon becomes clear that, while he is grouped among the supposed ‘heroes’ of the narrative due to his alliance with crime-fighting groups like the Minutemen, The Comedian was anything but comical. He is characterized as a brutal, immoral ruffian with no regard for the social conventions of his time, a derisive view of human nature, and a penchant for violence, terror, war and abuse; while his political license as a government agent (under Nixon’s Republican Regime) ensures his position above the law. According to Taneli Kukkonen, the fact that Blake “comes to be at ease in the corridors of power” despite being a “murderer, a rapist, and a thug” points to his being a rather “skilled ironist” when, “essential to the ironist’s stance is the notion that life is a game and that only mugs and losers take it too seriously.”

Blake, himself, is well aware of the irony of his existence as The Comedian when, in Vietnam, he says to Dr Manhattan, “once you find out what a joke everything is, being The Comedian’s the only thing that makes sense.” When Dr. Manhattan inquires whether the atrocities they have both experienced in Vietnam were counted as a part of this ‘joke’ Blake replies by saying: “Hey, I never said it was a good joke! I’m just playing along with the gag.”

This is probably the most succinct and valid summary of The Comedian’s role in the novel; as the ironist, “he can only ever ‘play along,’ and he never creates anything of independent value.” Kukkonen sees this as the “ironist’s trap,” because “irony by definition is a parasitic entity, feeding off other, more serious, opinions and activities.” Therefore Blake is similarly cast as a parasitic entity, sapping the energy from all he encounters and – as in the case of the Vietnamese woman whom he shoots while she is carrying his child – leaving them worse off for the experience.

However, it is not evident that The Comedian was born with this nature; much like Rorschach and Ozymandias, he is portrayed as a man under the duress of ‘lunatic times,’ who has had to formulate his own assimilation of a seemingly constant contact with the abyssal,

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334 Kukkonen, “What’s so Goddamned Funny?” 201.
335 Ibid., 205.
traumatic, experiences that war provides. As Rorschach puts it in the second chapter, “[h]e saw the true face of the Twentieth Century and chose to become a reflection, a parody of it.”

Blake’s exposure to the horrors of what humankind is capable of doing to one another has undermined any hope he may once have held for humanity. This radical pessimism, teamed with his almost violent skepticism, plausibly places him squarely in the most radical realm of Nietzsche’s passive, or incomplete, nihilism. Nietzsche explains the state of radical nihilism as “the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes; plus the realization that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be ‘divine’ or morally incarnate.” Thus, the possibility for creation is thwarted. As the reader observes, Blake does not attempt to create a new system of values to replace the ones that are irrevocably destroyed by his numerous encounters with the dark void that haunts society. On the contrary, he ostensibly makes it his life’s mission to ridicule those bastions of social value around which ‘acceptable’ human society is organized. As a consequence, the kind of laughter Blake inspires as The Comedian is “the mocking sort, which denigrates, rather than celebrates, its subject matter.”

Importantly, Nietzsche’s request that we ‘be honest with ourselves,’ implies “admitting squarely that ‘life is something immoral.’ Or, as Wicks clarifies, “insofar as we are alive and breathing, what we self-righteously call ‘immorality’ is an unavoidable part of our own living fabric.” However, he did not advocate a culture of cruelty, destruction and violence, the likes of which we observe explicitly on the part of The Comedian. The imperative part of the transition from incomplete nihilism to complete nihilism is the ability to recreate values, with the knowledge that they are transient and fluid. The Comedian does not seem to have developed this skill, and “unable to create, he instead takes pleasure in destruction, and being a [government sanctioned] superhero gives him the license to do so.” As a result, a number of his insightful observations concerning human society go unheeded and he is largely rejected by his former ‘adventurer’ counterparts. Ozymandias is open in his contempt as he describes Blake as, “an amoral mercenary allying himself to whichever political faction seems likely to grant him the

336 Moore & Gibbons, Watchmen, Ch 2, p27.
337 Nietzsche, Will to Power, 9.
339 Wicks, Nietzsche, 70.
greatest license.”\textsuperscript{341} And in the end, it is only Moloch, an old arch-nemesis whom he had locked up, who brings flowers to his grave. It is unsurprising that Blake was not popular, but the depiction of him as sad, aging, and utterly alone before his death – to the point where Moloch was the only person he could confide in, and only while drunk – obliterates any romanticized notions of Blake as a debonair rogue that may have existed in the minds of the readers. The Comedian is an inherently sad character, and the joke that Rorschach tells at the end of Chapter Three stands as an effective analogy representing this. Rorschach recites,

\begin{quote}
Man goes to doctor. Says he’s depressed. Says life seems harsh and cruel. Says he feels alone in a threatening world where what lies ahead is vague and uncertain. Doctor says “treatment is simple. Great clown Pagliacci is in town tonight. Go and see him. That should pick you up.” Man bursts into tears. Says “but, Doctor… I am Pagliacci.” Good Joke. Everybody laugh. Roll on Snare Drum. Curtains.\textsuperscript{342}
\end{quote}

Thus, his superhero status notwithstanding, The Comedian becomes a wholly unworthy character for ethical emulation because his captivity within the grips of the destructive mode of passive nihilism has precluded him from deriving any value out of life.

4.5 Rorschach

Arguably on par with The Comedian as far as a disturbing modus operandi goes, is Rorschach. He is the figure the reader follows most consistently throughout \textit{Watchmen}; his journal entries stand as a running commentary of the events, as well as an invaluable insight into his own motivations, opinions, and ethical orientation. The first entry appears in the opening pages of the novel and it is immediately clear that Rorschach, the ‘masked avenger,’ is not pursuing this line of action as a result of any humanitarian inclinations. It reads:

\begin{quote}
Rorschach’s journal. October 12\textsuperscript{th}, 1985.
Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me, I have seen its true face. 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 up and shout “save us!” … and I’ll look down and whisper “no.”\textsuperscript{343}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{341} Moore & Gibbons, \textit{Watchmen}, Ch. XI, end insert (Nova Express, July 12\textsuperscript{th} 1975, p10).
\textsuperscript{342} Ibid., Ch 2, p27-28.
\textsuperscript{343} Ibid., Ch 6, p15.
From the outset, Rorschach’s disdain for the grotesque heaving mass that he thinks humanity has become is evident. It is arguably his desire to punish and deliver retribution to all those who are deserving of it that makes him one of the most terrifying characters in comic book history, despite his ‘hero’ status in the novel. Moore comments on the conception of Rorschach, which resulted from the question of what a kind of “Batman-type, vengeance-fuelled vigilante would be like in the real world?” And the ‘short answer’ he gives is, “a nutcase.” One instance which may confirm this occurs in Chapter Five, when, going out for the night, he encounters what he understands to be “an attempted rape/mugging/both,” and intervenes gratefully, exclaiming, “sometimes the night is generous to me.” From this, one may suggest that Rorschach is a crime fighter who seems to be sustained by the very scourge he seeks to eradicate – it is precisely those aspects of society that sicken him the most that simultaneously provide him the only source of relief from the pain of existing in a world he despises. He derives no discernable pleasure from his actions, they merely make an otherwise unbearable life only somewhat bearable. After he is framed and captured, he alludes to this duty-driven desire to see ‘justice’ served while being interviewed by Dr. Malcolm Long, the police psychiatrist, saying,

[o]nce a man has seen, he can never turn his back on it. Never pretend it doesn’t exist. No matter who orders him to look the other way. We do not do this thing because it is permitted. We do it because we have to. We do it because we are compelled.

In this sense, Rorschach seems to assume a somewhat deontological stance. He deals out his particular brand of justice with such an air of grim necessity that it becomes evident that he is motivated by a sense of duty that far outstrips all other motivations. But Rorschach violates one of the central tenets of Kant’s deontology; he uses other people as means alone, often using violent measures to extract information from apparently innocent people. One pertinent example is when he breaks the fingers (and almost the arm) of the ailing and aged Edgar Jacobi, formerly known as ‘Moloch the Mystic,’ an erstwhile super-villain who has served his prison sentence and been released, but is now battling with terminal cancer. Acts like these make it easy for the reader to deduce that Rorschach is, similarly to The Comedian, by no means a hero. J. Robert Loftis considers Rorschach’s personal ethics to be “a shadow of deontology that is used to rationalize fascist thuggery.” But he realizes that it may take more than this to convince everybody that

344 Moore, “Alan Moore Talks.”
346 Ibid., Ch 6, p15.
Rorschach is psychotic killer because “in comics, as in Hollywood, crazy vigilantes have a certain cachet.”

In relation to this, there is something very particular about Rorschach’s brand of crazed vigilantism that sets him apart as one of the more alluring ‘anti-heroes’ in the novel. His claim that he has ‘seen the true face’ of society, is clearly linked to an abyssal encounter with what he understands to be the fundamentally perverted reality of human nature. He recounts his transition from Walter Kovacs into Rorschach to Dr. Long, explaining how he made his first mask (white with morphing blank ink-blots, hence the name ‘Rorschach’) after an incident in which a young woman, Kitty Genovese (coincidentally a client at the garment factory where he was employed), was raped, tortured and murdered right outside of her apartment block, in full view of a number of the residents, who did nothing to help her. In disgust he adds,

Some of them even watched. I knew what people were, then, behind all the evasions, all the self-deception. Ashamed for humanity, I went home. I took the remains of her unwanted dress, and made a face that I could bear to look at in the mirror.

Following this, he explains that although he was operating as the masked avenger, Rorschach, he was still Walter Kovacs underneath the mask. He is critical of his early vigilante activities, saying that he was too soft on his victims as he let them live. But that changes when he tracks down the man suspected of kidnapping a six-year old girl named Blaire Roche, and finds that he has killed her, cut her up and fed her to his two German Shepherds. In his fury he kills the dogs, hacking their heads open with the same cleaver it appears was used on the girl. He tells Dr. Long that, at this moment, “It was Kovacs who closed his eyes. It was Rorschach who opened them again.” This shift from one identity to another is apparent in the text as earlier depictions of Rorschach show him speaking readily and in full sentences, a style he definitely does not employ throughout the ‘current’ pages of the novel. In terms of Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, this is a very significant point as it fits with the argument that a traumatic encounter with The Real can have effects in the Symbolic which is the seat of language and cultural identity. In Rorschach’s case, the genesis of his reticence seems to coincide with these traumatic experiences, as does his shift from a relatively mild-mannered crime fighter into the

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349 Ibid., Ch 6, p21.
uncompromisingly violent vigilante the reader encounters throughout the narrative. This also serves as a confirmation of Lacan’s assertion that the experience of the Real often precipitates a critical reappraisal of the social laws and conventions that are constituted in the symbolic, as they are compromised in the face of the ineffable. We see this shift occur in Rorschach, as once he has killed the dogs, he waits for their owner to return, and then burns him alive in the house where the little girl was murdered. After this, Rorschach recalls his dark epiphany, saying,

Stood in firelight, sweltering. Bloodstain on chest like map of violent new continent. Felt cleansed. Felt dark planet turn under my feet and knew what cats know that makes them scream like babies in the night. Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold suffocating dark goes on forever and we are alone. Live our lives lacking anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion, bear children hellbound as ourselves, go into oblivion. There is nothing else … This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate who butchers them, or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It’s us. Only us.350

If anything, the quote above is indicative of a person who has had a truly paralyzing abyssal experience. However, Rorschach, like The Comedian, has not been able to shift gears from passive to active nihilism. It is as if his experience of the abyss has pushed him into a radicalized re-assumption of ostensibly conservative right-wing values, demonstrated most notably in the first chapter, when he speaks scathingly of ‘liberals’ and explicitly states that The Silhouette – a member of the original Minutemen who was expelled from the group for being a lesbian, only to be brutally murdered shortly afterwards – was a victim of her own immoral lifestyle. This is precisely the kind of passive nihilism Nietzsche warned against when he spoke of God’s shadows being shown yet, as the attempt to “escape nihilism without revaluating our values so far” tends to produce the opposite result, making the “problem more acute.”351 Rorschach has arguably done exactly that as the experience of the abyss has exacerbated his reliance on these radical values for stability, making him unyielding in his belief in their legitimacy; as a result, he allows for no movement, no revision, and certainly, no compromise. In fact, Rorschach’s ‘mantra’ if one could define such a thing, seems to be “never compromise,” as he repeats the phrase in various guises throughout the narrative, not least significantly at the end of the first chapter, when he is considering the overall irrelevance of The Comedian’s murder

350 Ibid., Ch 6, p26
351 Nietzsche, Will to Power, 19.
against the threat of imminent nuclear destruction, saying, “Why does one death matter against so
many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of
Armageddon I shall not compromise in this.”352 This ostensibly paranoiac dependence on a
binary system of values leads him to believe that ‘nothing is insoluble’ and marks him as the
masked ‘modernist’ as it were. It is this predilection for retributive and violent justice, together
with his inability to see outside of a Manichean dichotomy of pure good and pure evil that brings
about his demise towards the end of the novel.

According to Moore, he and Gibbons realized by the middle of the novel that Rorschach
would not survive, and it can be read as a comment on the kind of personal ethics he lives by that
the complexity of the world becomes too much for him to live with in the end. The reader is
arguably always aware that Rorschach wishes to die, wishes to take leave of his pained existence,
but suicide is never an option for him, it would not fit in with his ‘code.’ Rorschach is a character
who needs to die with honour (whatever his twisted understanding of honour may be) and so he
is constantly putting himself in situations where this may occur. Perhaps it is this ever-present
death wish that adds to both his pathological indifference to life-threatening situations, and his
unreserved manner, demonstrated so artfully in an instance where Rorschach is in prison,
surrounded by vengeful criminals who are all dying to kill him in the most torturous way
possible. He defends himself from an attack in the canteen by drenching his assailant in boiling
frying oil and proceeds to shout at the rest of the inmates, “none of you understand. I’m not
locked up in here with you. You’re locked up in here with me!”353

With this in mind, one can understand his decision to be disintegrated by Dr. Manhattan
in a clearer light. His black and white ethics is unbearably compromised in the wake of
Ozymandias’ devastating scheme. Rorschach, like the others, is confronted with a paradigm
example of the aporia, which Nite Owl articulates nicely, saying “How can humans make
decisions like this. We’re damned if we stay quiet, Earth’s damned if we don’t.”354 Rorschach
can either attempt to reveal Ozymandias’ actions and appease his own ethical sensibilities only to
inflict even more harm as a result. Or he could condone Ozymandias’ plan in silence and hope,
with the rest, that it was not in vain. Both options would be a compromise for Rorschach, the
very thing he has avoided and despised throughout the narrative. In the end, it is his own binary

353 Ibid., Ch 11, p13.
354 Ibid., Ch.11, p20.
that is his undoing. He cannot negotiate the aporia that confronts him and therefore gives Dr. Manhattan little choice. When Dr. Manhattan tries to stop him from revealing Ozymandias as the villain, Rorschach responds, “Of course, must protect Veidt’s new Utopia. One more body amongst the foundations makes little difference. Well? What are you waiting for? Do it!” By becoming part of the means to the end of peace, Rorschach is dying for the cause, with his values intact. What it signifies however, is the untenable place that any binary understanding of the human ethical condition occupies in a complex society. Rorschach’s passive nihilism has barred him from acknowledging the innately complex structure of all human society, and his consequent death plausibly convinces the reader that he is also not a ‘hero’ worth emulating at all.

4.6 Dr Manhattan
As I have noted, Dr. Manhattan is the only actual ‘super’-hero type character in the novel. Hence the question of what an analysis of his character could possibly add to the discussion of human ethics is relevant. But it is more his God-like role in the text that I’d like to examine, especially with regard to the apathy he shows as a result of his immense powers. Moreover, I suggest that the text warns against putting one’s faith in any ‘God’-type figure, as the all-powerful being may, against the prevailing opinion, not really care about humanity at all.

With his inconceivable authority over all forms of matter (including the ability to teleport unsuspecting humans), his simultaneous experience of time, and his understanding of most things at the sub-molecular level, Dr. Manhattan is rendered a God amongst men. The problem arises then, that he shows no personal inclination to use his powers to help the human race. He is merely coerced into a role that is dictated by the American government and strangely, he accepts it rather unquestioningly. One may make the point that his “origins do not lie in a choice but in an accident,” but this is true of many superheroes. It is apparent that the oft quoted Spiderman aphorism, “[w]ith great power, comes great responsibility” seems not to have reached Dr. Manhattan’s ears. He even admits the ultimate indifference he feels towards his activities as a ‘hero’ and an agent of the American government, saying “the newspapers called me a crime-fighter, so the pentagon says I must fight crime… the morality of my activities escapes me.”

355 Ibid., Ch 12, p24.
357 Moore & Gibbons, Watchmen, Ch 3, p14.
government – they even house him in highly protected premises at the heart of a military base. He is therefore largely alienated from the outside world, only interacting with Laurie, who lives with him, and Adrian Veidt, with whom he conducts research. Throughout the novel, Dr. Manhattan demonstrates precisely how detached he is from the so-called ‘intrigues’ of human existence, at one point prompting his then-partner, Janey Slater, to remark scathingly, “You know how everything in this world fits together except people.”³⁵⁸ It is clear that, as a result of his incredible insights into the functions of the universe, humanity and its fluctuations of fortune seem utterly banal and inconsequential in his grand understanding of things.

Nowhere is this God-like apathy more evident than when he teleports Laurie to Mars, where she attempts to convince him to return to earth and save the world from its immanent nuclear destruction. She tries a number of futile arguments which all illicit a similarly disinterested response. For example, Laurie says, “Humanity is about to become extinct. Doesn’t that bother you?” To which Dr. Manhattan replies, “[a]ll that pain and conflict done with? All that needless suffering done with at last. No… no that doesn’t bother me. All those generations of struggle, what purpose did they achieve? All that effort and what did it ever lead to?” To which Laurie retorts, “just the existence of life, isn’t that significant?” and he answers: “In my opinion, it’s a highly overrated phenomenon.” Finally, exasperated, Laurie exclaims, “you’ve got to prevent it! Everyone will die!” To which Dr. Manhattan responds, in a devastatingly matter-of-fact way: “And the universe will not even notice.”³⁵⁹

Considering Dr. Manhattan’s role as the only possible guarantor of humanity’s survival, his indifference is most alarming. Laurie does eventually succeed in convincing him to come back to earth, though not by virtue of any enlightened new argument on her part. It is only once Dr. Manhattan comes to understand the process of human coupling, conception, and the birth of a new human life as a result, as a ‘thermo-dynamic miracle’ – Laurie being the epitome of such an unlikely beginning – that he decides humanity is worth saving. As the reader finds out, though, they are too late, as Dr. Manhattan teleports them back to New York only to witness the aftermath of Ozymandias’ orchestrated attack, which was blocked from Dr. Manhattan’s simultaneous vision of past, present, and future, by the massive tachyon disturbance that Ozymandias had generated to confuse him.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., Ch 3, p16.
³⁵⁹ Ibid., Ch 9, p10-18.
On the other hand, however, perhaps the apathy Dr. Manhattan shows concerning humanity’s demise is, in fact, somewhat ethical. Perhaps, in his indifference, Dr. Manhattan is showing humanity just how vain it has been, assuming that he will always exist to suture its self-inflicted wounds. The idea that an all-powerful being would willingly remain subject to a finite phenomenon such as humanity is absurd from the start. Interestingly, one may draw parallels between the position of Dr. Manhattan and the one which is so articulately expressed in Swamp Thing, another series that came under the authorship of Moore. At the point where the series’ namesake realizes his power and, rather than begrudging his ailment, comes to relish his commune with the environment, he considers the notion that he may have to take responsibility for the human race, by virtue of his powers. In a resonating passage, he declares,

Is this then what it is to be a God? To know and never to do. To watch the world wind by, and in its windings find content. If I should feed the world, heal the wounds man’s smoldering industries have made. What would he do? Would he renounce the wealth his sawmills bring, would he step gently on the flowers instead, and pluck each apple with respect for this abundant world and all its provenance? No, he would put more poisons, build more mines, safe in the knowledge that I stood on hand to mend the biosphere, endlessly covering the scars he could now endlessly inflict.  

Essentially, Dr. Manhattan is not merely a guarantor of peace on earth, he is also the figure that guarantees the perpetuation of trends that are both unsustainable and destructive. Nietzsche berated Christianity for the effects it had on its followers' perceptions of this life as a means to a greater afterlife. Similarly, Dr. Manhattan may also be chastised, as his presence seems to have instilled within the human race the idea that they may pursue harmful activities to the point of absurdity, as he is there to ensure that they never destroy themselves completely. The character of Dr. Manhattan therefore opens the door for a scathing denunciation of all belief-systems that urge one to ‘hand’ one's troubles over to some or other ‘God,’ as this arguably results in a transfer of responsibility from the person who is directly involved, to some abstract entity, whom in its omnipotence, is understood to care for the human race.

Dr. Manhattan does eventually shatter any delusions the people of the Watchmen world may have had concerning his love for the human race. Just before he leaves for Mars, he reveals: “I am tired of this world, these people. I am tired of being caught in the tangle of their lives,” and

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360 Alan Moore, Monsters, Maniacs, and Moore. (UK: Britain, their Britain,1987.) Television Broadcast.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ucba9NtF3cE&feature=&p=637AED6ADDFB5682&index=O&playnext=1>
after his final words with Ozymandias, he takes leave of the earth for good, hinting that he may create life forms of his own in another galaxy. Thus, if one understands the character of Dr. Manhattan as, first and foremost, an allegory of the ostensible ‘disinterestedness’ of the doctrinal Gods that dictate the ethical structures of a large portion of the world’s society, the novel is issuing an enormous challenge to its readers. Namely, to not rely on these inconceivably ‘super’ beings. Much like world’s dependence on the presence of Dr. Manhattan to prevent a nuclear disaster, the idea that humans can put their ethical dilemmas ‘in the hands of the Lord’ so that he might ‘have his will be done on earth as it is in heaven,’ appears ridiculously presumptuous. What *Watchmen* demands of its readers is rather a hands-on approach, in which ethical dilemmas become a responsibility to be dealt with by the people involved.

### 4.7 Ozymandias

As I have already suggested, Ozymandias is perhaps the closest one comes to a ‘hero’ in *Watchmen*, but this is not immediately evident. In his article, “Means, Ends, and the Critique of Pure Superheroes,” J. Robert Loftis claims that, “according to the standard comic book formula, Rorschach is the hero of the story and Ozymandias is the villain.” 361 This may make sense if one considers that it is Rorschach with whom the reader becomes most familiar, via his journal entries and central involvement in the investigation that leads to the uncovering of Veidt’s plot. Also important in terms of comic book rivalries is that “Rorschach is a foil for Veidt in every respect: the unkempt, taciturn, right-wing outsider against the slick, eloquent, left-wing celebrity.” 362 But, as is hopefully obvious by now, *Watchmen* is not a ‘standard’ comic book and Rorschach is by no means the clear cut ‘hero,’ just as Ozymandias is by no means the clear cut villain. There are no ‘clear cut’ characters in the novel and this is most evident when one takes a closer look at the character of Adrian Veidt, or Ozymandias. In my reading of *Watchmen*, he is the character that definitively embodies the hero/villain ambiguity that is plausibly brought about by the complexity of his lifeworld.

362 Ibid., 70.
4.7.1 Ozymandias, the Hero

What makes Ozymandias, in a certain sense, exemplary is his approach to the intractable aporia that threatens to destroy humanity in the *Watchmen* world; namely, ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’ by nuclear war. He seems to be the only character that is able to appreciate the aporetic nature of the threat and comprehend the kind of solution that would be necessary to overcome it. Unlike The Comedian, whom one could imagine straddling the first ‘nuke’ launched by the USA, laughing smugly at the regular ‘dupes’ who didn’t realize that their destruction has been immanent for years; unlike Rorschach who is totally incapable of thinking outside of his strictly constructed notions of good and evil, right and wrong; and, unlike Dr. Manhattan who simply couldn’t be bothered, Ozymandias feels that it is only he who has the potential to dissolve the problem. One could also argue that, as a result of his great wealth and intelligence, Ozymandias was almost obligated to do *something*, and that perhaps he felt it was his *duty*. Either way, his comparison of the situation to the famous instance of Alexander cutting the Gordian knot explicitly reveals the very manner of thinking that sets him apart. By cutting the knot that had been deemed impossible to untie, Alexander changed the paradigm in which the problem of the knot existed, making it irrelevant. By orchestrating the attack on New York City, Ozymandias is arguably attempting to achieve a similar outcome.

When the USSR invades Afghanistan after Dr. Manhattan leaves earth, they are ostensibly seeing how far they can go before the USA makes a decision to use its nuclear force against them. It is a gamble for strategic dominance and as such, the Soviets are painted as the risk-takers in the novel; the side that is crazy enough to risk almost certain nuclear devastation, if only to assess what the USA will let them get away with in the interest of avoiding a nuclear war. The USA are then faced with what one would hope would be an impasse, but it seems Nixon and his team, although regretful, are perfectly ready to make the sacrifice in order to maintain America’s dominance as the world power. Ozymandias sums it up thus, “Here was a knot to try even Alexander’s ingenuity. Both sides realized the suicidal implications of nuclear conflict, yet couldn’t stop racing towards it lest their opponents should overtake them.”

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363 In Zack Snyder’s 2009 film adaptation there is a nice scene depicting Nixon, Kissinger and his advisors discussing the fact that if they could strike first they would stand only to lose the eastern seaboard of the USA, then Mexico would get the brunt of the fallout. This scenario is summed up as “not too bad, relatively speaking.”
Thus, it is he alone who acknowledges that the nuclear arms race presents the *Watchmen* world (and potentially our own) with what Lyotard would identify as a differend. To reiterate, Lyotard describes a differend as a conflict which cannot be “equitably resolved because of a lack of rule or judgment applicable to both parties,” and the only way of positing a solution would be to create a third term, a new phraseology, a new discourse in which the interests of both (or all) parties are equally represented. This move towards a ‘third term’ is precisely what Veidt is intoning when he explains, “an intractable problem can only be solved by stepping beyond conventional solutions. Alexander understood that two thousand years ago in Gordium.” By giving the world the impression that there is another, bigger threat outside of itself, Ozymandias has effectively unified a previously divided world populace under a common identity as ‘earthlings’ who are now enjoined to look after one another. Thus, the threat of self-destruction is neutralized as the USSR withdraws its forces from Afghanistan and the entire world rallies around the USA in its time of trauma.

It is almost certain that nothing less than this kind of devastating ‘event’ would have had the desired effect, and that is why Veidt stands as the only potential ethical hero in the novel; because he had the insight to realize what kind of action the situation demanded, and the resolve to see it through. He arguably negotiates each of the three aporias covered in the previous chapter; he suspends the fundamental social law ‘do not kill’ after he recognizes it is the only way to save humanity; he also has to grapple with the undecidability involved in his decision to take this incredibly difficult action rather than sit back and witness humanity’s self-destruction; and finally, he has not put it off a minute too long as he implements his plan at exactly the right time, despite the uncertainty of its outcome. As Loftis asserts, “He doesn’t deal with a world of black and white… Everything is gray, but some areas are darker than others. To do the ‘right thing Ozymandias simply chooses the lightest shade of gray.” Or, in Derrida’s terms, he attempts to take the path of least violence. But does he really? Morin says that complexity thinking is poised as “a point of departure for a richer, less mutilating action.” But considering the immense mutilation that Ozymandias’ plan involves, can it really be said that he has truly come to terms with the complexity of the situation?

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365 Lyotard, *Differend*, xi.
4.7.2 Veidt the Villain

Despite Ozymandias’ ostensibly altruistic guise, there is still the nagging reality that Adrian Veidt is an evidently power-hungry individual who seems to thrive off of the expansion of his self-built empire and the challenges of navigating corporate success. Thus, one can’t help but think that the hint of a messiah complex that comes through in his expressed intention to “usher in an age of illumination so dazzling that humanity will reject the darkness in its heart,”\(^{369}\) may point to a much darker motivation. There are a number of instances towards the end of novel where the reader gets a clear picture that Veidt’s plan for the humanity’s ‘salvation’ could merely be a front for the age-old villainous plot of attempted world domination. In the most ‘supervillain-esque’ moment in the novel, Veidt sees the reports heralding a new era of peace and launches into a passionate double air punch, shouting “I DID IT!”\(^{370}\) Furthermore, the novel does not make clear whether he has fully come to terms with the reality of his actions, and the burden that such a decision would place on most seems to have evaded him. He claims that he has made himself feel every death, but when he tries to justify himself to Dr. Manhattan, exclaiming that “[s]omeone had to take the weight of that awful, necessary crime,”\(^{371}\) the reader is left with the impression that it is more a statement of perceived martyrdom, than a legitimate show of regret.

It is obvious that Veidt does not see himself as a villain at all, and in a way this is indicative of the less than honourable stance he occupies. It is no secret that Ozymandias is in awe of the ancient world and its empires, and he is especially obsessed with of the figure of Alexander the Great. He surrounds himself with elements of this fixation in all areas of his life and goes as far as retracing the path of Alexander’s conquests on a journey of self-discovery. Add to this the fact that he uses the term ‘salvation,’ whilst citing Hitler in the justification of his actions and the notion that there is perhaps a latent, misrecognised desire for domination driving his actions becomes plausible.

There is no denying that Veidt’s will to unite the human society is honourable, but it is on the topic of his desire that the dubious ethics of his actions comes to the fore. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Lacan states that ethical action consists in ‘assuming one’s desire.’ But Olivier’s assertion is that, having realized one’s desire, one should then weigh up whether

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\(^{370}\) Ibid., Ch 12, p19.

\(^{371}\) Ibid., Ch 12, p27.
pursuing it, or acknowledging, but ultimately denying it, would be the ethical choice. My argument here is that Veidt has assumed his desire, but without realizing what his true desire actually entailed. Looking back to the Lacanian theory of subjective development, I’d like to propose that Adrian Veidt’s altruistic, superhero alter-ego, Ozymandias, functions as an imaginary construction for him, and is therefore the site of his misrecognised desires. What can arguably be called the ‘true’ desires of Adrian Veidt, therefore reveal themselves unconsciously in his day to day life and discourse, pointing to a discernable orientation toward conquering and empire building. Despite his unabashed obsession with relics and anecdotes from the age of Alexander, Veidt has arguably not recognized that this will to rule constitutes his true desire, the desire of his ‘je’ voice that reveals itself unconsciously. It seems fair to suggest that the two driving forces of ‘altruistic heroism’ and ‘tyrannical conquest’ do not fit together easily, but through his superhero persona Veidt has somehow merged the two. It is therefore pertinent to note that he dons his Ozymandias costume while he carries out his plan as it is indicative that the role of ‘altruistic hero’ is the one he wishes to play. And yet, his true desire is the one that is being appeased, as he continuously reveals the extent to which his delusions of grandeur have informed his supposedly ‘heroic’ plan.

Like most villains, it is Veidt’s hubris that leads to his downfall. Despite being dubbed ‘the smartest man on earth,’ it seems that he has crucially overlooked the most obvious constant in his plan; that the human lifeworld is an irreducibly complex system, and the idea that one can manipulate circumstances to the point that specific outcomes would be a certainty is impossible. Veidt has carefully manipulated all the parts of his plan that he could possibly have had power over, which includes murdering the entire boat-load of artists, scientists and engineers who created the massive alien being in a top-secret location. He also successfully removed all perceivable threats, such as The Comedian, Dr. Manhattan, and Rorschach. Yet, he could never have known about Rorschach’s diary, or predicted that he would have mailed it to a very vocal right-wing publication before his fated mission to Karnak. This is Veidt’s ultimate shortfall, for as the reader knows, Rorschach’s journal does outlive its author, and sits waiting to reveal the damning information that may undermine Veidt’s entire plot, thereby making the death of millions both needless and reckless.

Moreover, the startlingly utilitarian nature of his plan in which millions have to die is a massive point of contention. Veidt’s manner of rationalization runs along familiarly
consequentialist lines; he has sacrificed the few, for the maximization of pleasure for the many. But this pleasure is not by any means guaranteed, in the same way that that the expected outcomes in any complex system are not guaranteed. Looking at it in this light, one can perhaps understand the stinging pertinence of Dr. Manhattan’s final words to Ozymandias. In a rare, but telling moment of insecurity, Ozymandias asks Dr. Manhattan, “Jon… before you leave, I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end?” To which Dr. Manhattan responds, “in the end? Nothing ever ends, Adrian, nothing ever ends.” Veidt is left to contemplate these words privately as Dr. Manhattan does not stay long enough to elaborate. The reader is also left to speculate, but, considering Dr. Manhattan’s substantial powers of experiencing all time simultaneously, the prognosis doesn’t sound all that positive. Thus, the misrecognition of his megalomaniacal desire and the concomitant negation of complexity results in his regression into a rather pathetic character at the end of the text, overshadowing his ostensibly valiant initial efforts.

4.7.3 The Verdict

The hero/villain distinction thus opens itself up as a subject for deconstruction as an inclination towards ‘pure’ heroism would arguably disallow any wrongdoing whatsoever. In this instance, the character that exemplifies this stance is best in *Watchmen* is Nite Owl, or Dan Dreiberg. He is principled, virtuous, measured and brave and yet his silent imperative to only do ‘good’ makes a somewhat boring and ineffectual character. Ozymandias condescendingly explains the futility of his outmoded version of heroism to him at Karnak, saying “Oh Daniel, Daniel, Daniel … please… do grow up. My new world demands a less obvious heroism, making your schoolboy heroics redundant. What have they achieved? Failing to prevent earth’s salvation is your only triumph.” And the reader cannot help agreeing with him. Nite Owl’s commitment to ‘upholding the law’ amounts to no great ethical decisions on his part, and as a result his ‘heroism’ is undermined, and even cast as naïve.

Absolute villainy, on the other hand, would involve diabolical evil that doesn’t permit a hint of goodness. But in a complex world the purity of such extremes is incredibly unlikely, if not impossible. That is why Ozymandias is such a pertinent example; he is by no means ‘purely’ evil

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372 Ibid., Ch. 12, p27.
373 Ibid., Ch 12, p17.
or wholly good, he merely does what he thinks is necessary to save the human world. Of course, this is an unmistakably ‘good’ premise for action, but it unfortunately gets caught up in the complex web of human desire in the process. In light of this, Ozymandias is neither a ‘hero’ nor a ‘villain,’ but a heroic villain and a villainous hero, an ultimately tragic character caught up in what Derrida calls ‘striction’ between these two opposing terms.

The question of whether Ozymandias ‘did the right thing’ is a very difficult one to answer. The novel seems to be just as much an indictment of powerful politicking as it is an exposition of the complexities our lifeworld. It is clear that drastic measures were needed, as some small token action on the part of Ozymandias would have effected little change in the egoistic minds of the world leaders. Essentially, Veidt realized that he needed to induce a global trauma in order to bring about a widespread revaluation of values. It is only after the alien attack has decimated New York and traumatized the world that a sufficient destabilization of the status quo is brought about by the ineffable experience of the Real. It is arguably the trauma that Ozymandias inflicts that makes his plan, to some extent, successful, and therefore his moment of utilitarian accounting in the last chapter is valid. He really had to kill millions in order to save billions.

However, the reader is still left with Dr. Manhattan’s haunting warning that “nothing ever ends.” Whether this implies that new divides will simply emerge, or whether Rorschach’s journal will surface and be taken seriously, thereby undermining Ozymandias’ entire plot, one cannot be sure. If the news of his machinations is broken by the ‘New Frontiersman,’ all the good accomplished by his plot will arguably amount to even more suffering than was looming before. That being said, the point that perhaps outshines all the others is the fact that Ozymandias does something and although his actions are extreme, the glaring reality that humanity may have self-destructed were it not for his intervention in some way justifies his gamble. Perhaps if he had carried out a similar plan with the kind of modesty that is required by a complex environment, classifying him as a hero would have presented fewer problems. It is cogent to argue, then, that if there is one thing that the devastating nature of Veidt’s plot demonstrates undoubtedly, it is just how difficult and unclear the notion of ethical action becomes in the complex lifeworld, and just how important the acknowledgment of complexity therefore is.
4.8 The Challenge

As possibly the most famous graphic novel in history, *Watchmen* successfully conveys some rather difficult concepts into mainstream culture in a way that is impossible to ignore. Each of the characters is arguably specifically positioned so as to critique various ethical stances in such a way that once the reader has finished the novel, it is evident that emulating these persons is not plausible, and that none of them fulfill their roles as ‘heroes’ in a way that the irreducibly complex world respects. Only Ozymandias shows the kind of mettle it takes to make ethical decisions in an increasingly complex world, but as was shown, even his potential heroism is undermined by his inability to recognize his true desire. As such, all four central characters are hampered in their ‘heroism’ by the very ethical decisions they think will set them apart. In this sense, all of them turn out to be very tragic characters in the end – undermined by a world of utter complexity that very closely resembles our own. Importantly, one realizes that to act ethically in such a world (the postmodern context) is immensely difficult. In relation to this, Alan Moore has stated that:

> If Watchmen offer[s] anything, it offer[s] new possibilities as to how we perceive the environment surrounding us and the interactions and the relationships of the people within it … [The] world presented didn’t really hang together in terms of linear cause and effect but was instead some massively complex simultaneous event.374

Following this, it seems plausible to suggest that *Watchmen* issues it’s readers with a challenge: to acknowledge the implications of this non-linearity, to examine the human lifeworld and its constitution in an unfathomably complex universe, and not be rendered impotent, contemptuous or wildly reactionary, but informed. As Alan Moore explains above, *Watchmen* communicates new possibilities of perception and action to its readers. For ethics, the implications are immense; as the graphic novel demonstrates, no ‘system’ type set of rules is going to cut it in the complex lifeworld. It is only by taking complexity into account that one can attempt to embark on ethical action in the postmodern context. Hence it is worth noting Cilliers’ insistence that, “truly complex problems can only be approached with complex resources,” as *Watchmen* clearly demonstrates the futility of any over-simplified, binary, or reactionary ethical stance in complex lifeworld.

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Conclusions

Simple, elegant concepts and theoretical constructs do not match the real state of affairs.

– Hurst

We can now conceive of the complex reality of our relation to life, biology, society, and history: we possess genes that possess us; we live our life as destiny, while we mould it into experience; we make the society that makes us; we make the history that makes us.

– Morin

Duties tend to make humans alike; responsibility is what makes them into individuals.

– Bauman

In summary, what I have attempted to show in this dissertation is that the contemporary atmosphere of crisis, and the anxiety that is felt in the postmodern context, is a direct result of the failure to acknowledge the complexity of the human lifeworld. The legacy of a Newtonian paradigm of simplicity has resulted in our inability for the most part to come terms with the inevitable uncertainty and instability that are integral to all processes of self-organization and the development of life. But the recognition and acceptance of a paradigm of complexity will emphasize the dialogical relation between order and disorder, structure and entropy, cosmos and chaos which need not be neglected or reduced out of the theoretical picture any longer. This, in turn, would necessitate a rather rigorous revaluation of established ethical programs so that one may develop strategies that are suitable for this complex lifeworld. By arranging ethical programs according to outdated notions of reliable forecasting and the predictability of all systems, one merely perpetuates an inadequate paradigm and creates the conditions for more anxiety. This has prompted Bauman to claim that although “the ethical significance of our actions reaches now unprecedented heights” the unwillingness to engage critically with entrenched ethical values and programs means that “the moral tools we possess to absorb and control it remain the same as they were at the ‘cottage industry’ stage.”

I have therefore argued that it is a matter of ethical urgency that an outlook of general complexity be acknowledged and incorporated into everyday Western life, and that furthermore, following Lacan, the current experience of anxiety provides the perfect atmosphere in which such

376 Hurst, “Complexity and Human Development,” 10.
377 Morin, On Complexity. 115.
378 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, 54.
379 Ibid., 218.
ethical, paradigmatically challenging actions can take place. As a result, the demands made of ethics by such a paradigm shift must be heeded; one needs to move towards a collection of ethical ‘tools’ that surpasses the ‘cottage industry’ phase that was validated by the paradigm of simplicity. Thus, instead of clinging to the hope of a rigid, ‘objectively founded’ program for ethics, I have followed Morin and Cilliers in positing a ‘modest strategy’ that unfolds along the poststructuralist lines of Derrida’s thought. This entails a ‘deconstruction’ of traditional ethics, or ethics as a programmatic ‘piety’.

When ethics is constructed as ‘piety’ it means that making the right decisions ceases to be a matter of choice, and becomes, rather, a matter of avoidance of choice where one acts only in accordance with the ‘legitimate fictions’ of the “customary way of life.” But as was discussed in Chapter Three, the mere application of a rule cannot be counted as ethical. For an act to be ethical there must be a simultaneous application and suspension of the law. The existing law needs to be deconstructed. To reiterate, deconstruction of the law does not result in inaction, or relativism; it is rather a reminder that the certainty with which a pious ethics conducts itself is no longer fitting in the postmodern context of the complex lifeworld, or as Caputo explains:

> Deconstruction does not put up a stop sign that brings action to a halt, to the full stop of indecision; rather it installs a flashing yellow light, warning drivers who must in any case get to where they are going to proceed with caution, for the way is not safe. Undecidability does not detract from the urgency of decision; it simply underlines the difficulty.

Derrida therefore reminds one that the decision is always a risk, as judgment always requires one to calculate with the incalculable. Whilst a pious, so-called ‘objectively founded ethics attempts “to make judgment safe,”’ Derrida reminds his readers that “judgment is not safe” and that one must continue carefully.

A ‘pure’ ethical act is therefore technically not possible in the complex lifeworld, for as soon as one acts, the ecology of action sees to it that there can be no guaranteed outcome, and there is therefore always the risk of unwittingly doing violence to something, or someone. But the agent/ethical actor is nonetheless required to make a decision in full knowledge of this acute uncertainty, undecidability and urgency; that is why a complex position is necessarily modest. The inevitable uncertainty of the complex lifeworld should “neither be dismissed nor suppressed, [380]

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380 Ibid., 4.
382 Ibid., 97.
but consciously embraced.” It is one’s duty to try and visualize the future impact of an action, but only as long as one realizes that this perceived outcome can never be guaranteed.

In this sense, it is plausible to conclude that ethics without complexity is not possible, or that if it is possible, it would be a different type of ‘ethics’ to the kind I have been concerned with in this dissertation. Following Derrida, my conclusion is that it is the manner in which one negotiates the moment of aporia, suspense and undecidability that defines a decision as just, or ethical. This argument has shown that unless ethical decisions grapple with these difficult aporias one is more than likely merely acting in conformity with law and not in the realm of a truly complex ethics. Hurst articulates this well saying,

> It is precisely because things are ultimately undecidable - because nothing is absolutely possible or impossible, because individuals can neither know for sure nor claim absolute ignorance – that we are obliged to go through the singularizing ordeal or trauma of undecidability, of having to make decisions and take responsibility for them without the comfort of certainty. Thus a decision, if it is to live up to its concept, must always in principle be capable of precipitating a new configuration of rules, from which there is no return. This is not to say that every decision must precipitate something new; just that decision making in principle requires a primary openness to change, even if one ultimately elects to reinstitute the existing rules.

As Cilliers has suggested, a modest or humble position cannot guarantee success and it is therefore there hard to establish any form of moral ‘highground.’ I will therefore say that the strategy elaborated in this dissertation is perhaps the best I can imagine ‘for now,’ but this not the conclusion to end all discussion on the subject. The modest position remains open, and welcomes constructive revision as long as decisions are still being made despite the aporetic nature of ethical decision making in a complex lifeworld.

In terms of a wider ethical compass, the acknowledgment of complexity has the potential to radically change facets of the human condition that currently exacerbate the proliferation of anxiety in the postmodern context. A move to complex ethical strategizing will almost certainly affect the way in which humanity perceives its role in the postmodern context. For example, the acknowledgement that, as open systems, we are co-constituted by our environments could potentially drive home the crucial point that humanity co-creates the conditions in which the planet sustains life, and as such, actions that are harmful to the planet, are harmful to life. It

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383 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 221.

seems platitudinous to make such a point in the wake of the vast research being done on the climate and ecological crises, but it is arguably still the case that many people, particularly those in highly developed, information-saturated, but ecologically alienated parts of the developed world, fail to make this fundamental connection between earth and life. What a complexity view aims to establish is always a more holistic ‘meta-point-of-view’ in which such elemental relationships get the acknowledgment they warrant. Perhaps then the idea notion of ‘control over’ one’s environment would give way to a more constructive notion such as one’s organic co-constitution of the environment. Morin explains that this could result in a significant revitalization of the link between humanity and the “biosphere that we believe to have reduced to the rank of manipulable object.” As a result, it should become clear that if “we degrade it, we degrade ourselves, and if we destroy it, we destroy ourselves.”

Related to this is the commonly held notion that one person, or ‘little old me’ can have no meaningful effect on global trends. This kind of thinking is informed by the misconstrued belief that only interventions of a certain size can be effective in bringing about change. Thus the individual throws his or her hands up in despair and sits back, waiting for ‘the governments,’ ‘the corporations,’ or some similar heavy-weight organization to ‘do something.’ But complexity theory ushers one into the realm of non-linearities, bifurcations and tipping points, where small changes have the potential to set off disproportionately large effects, putting paid “to the argument of ‘what can I do against the tide.’” Consequently, the view from complexity is a constant reminder that “it sometimes only takes one man or one intervention to tip the balance into a new world order.” And because this can have both positive or negative outcomes, it becomes clear that “we must all, as individuals, see ourselves as potentially responsible for the future as we never know if it might be our words, our behaviour, our lives that might the be thing that might tip the balance and galvanize the mood of the times and thus avert or create disaster.” This realization hopefully gives one pause to evaluate the manner in which his or her everyday actions – which previously seemed inconsequential – may have long ranging effects on a global scale. This reality is potentially paralyzing in its magnitude, but it is also wonderfully affirmative as the notion of individual ‘impotence’ is debunked outright.

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385 Edgar Morin, “Restricted, General,” 19.
387 Ibid.
Finally, the acknowledgment of a complexity view of the human lifeworld should impress upon us the fact that as complex beings, humans are built for adaptation, just as the environment in which we reside is geared toward states of both stability and flux. As a result, radical changes in the paradigms that inform humanity’s apprehension of the lifeworld can be understood as completely natural. The idea that crisis and change are ‘unnatural,’ or alien to the human condition is therefore without ground. As John Caputo asserts, the contrary is, in fact, the case; crises and “disasters are regular occurrences, among the most familiar pieces of nature, part of its most ubiquitous, most ‘natural’ rhythms.” All systems therefore live, adapt and grow in and through crisis, and it is our definitive ability as complex systems to incorporate these changes and use them to our advantage. These events should not therefore be the cause of such widespread anxiety and resignation, but rather an incitement to engage with, evaluate and critically realign whatever paradigms are shaken by such occurrences in order that they may bring about the active affirmation of new understandings, and the creation of new values.

Importantly, though, it is only via engaging popular culture texts such as *Watchmen* that these concepts can be more broadly communicated. Such artifacts are invaluable in their vivid representation of complex themes and environments that mirror our own, and the way in which the characters are seen to navigate these complexities becomes potentially instructive for a very diverse readership. As long as texts of this nature are still reaching wide audiences, contemporary intellectuals and critics have a reliable supply of hermeneutic tools without which the risk of insular, ‘ivory tower’ postulating seems increasingly clear.

It is only once there is a broader ability to conceive the complexity of the human lifeworld that humanity might be capable of moving away from the damagingly binary and one-dimensional thought that seems to dominate the contemporary ethical milieu of the postmodern context. Morin insists that once humanity can adopt a less mutilating style of thought, the less mutilating effects it will have on human beings. When one considers the uncertainty of humanity’s future on earth, together with the crises we currently face, it seems that ethically, it is about time we embrace complexity, if only to see where it might lead us.

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References


