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The Philosophy of J. J. Abrams

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J. J. ABRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

Patricia Brace and Robert Arp

American auteur Jeffrey Jacob "J. J." Abrams has a knack for creating the kind of twisty, densely plotted TV series and films that keep us on the edge of our seats and begging for more. His particular genius seems to be in the way he combines geek appeal and broader commercial and critical successes in TV shows like *Felicity,* Emmy-nominated *Alias,* Emmy- and Golden Globe–winning *Lost,* the critically acclaimed *Fringe,* and films such as the Godzilla-inspired *Cloverfield,* the reboot of the *Star Trek* franchise, and his Spielbergian ode to the late 1970s, *Super 8.* As writer, director, producer, and even composer, he puts his particular stamp on everything he touches—a stamp that at times is rife with philosophical themes. His name on a project promises that your heart, mind, and sometimes even your soul will get a workout.

The Philosophy of J. J. Abrams is a collection of chapters by thinkers highlighting the philosophical insights present in Abrams's television and film work. Using Abrams's works as a touchstone, the book leads the reader through some basic concepts in philosophy, making it useful for an introductory philosophy course, but it also contains enough content on Abrams's individual works to satisfy his fans, media and popular culture students, film students, and people who would like to dabble in a little philosophy.

Philosophical themes may be found throughout Abrams's continuingly popular works. As cocreator of *Lost,* Abrams melded the popularity of the reality show *Survivor* to the twisted concept of a living island with incredible monsters and a fascinating set of characters—many of them named for famous philosophers—whose interactions take place in the past, present, and future via flashbacks and flash-forwards. And if that wasn't enough, in the final season we got flash-sideways into alternate pasts, presents, and futures! If any show contains philosophical analysis, it is this one. Man of

science or man of faith? Nature vs. nurture? Live together or die alone? The Island could be seen as a heavenly tabula rasa—or was it purgatory, or even hell? Would we ever get any answers to the show's many mysteries?

Continuing his pattern of having an overarching mystery move the action of a television story, Abrams next took on *Fringe,* with its "Pattern" mythology slowly revealed as we learned more about the heroes of the piece. As with his other works, relationships are central; in this case, those caught in the orbit of the unconventional and at times quite mad Dr. Walter Bishop, whose highly unethical medical experiments on young children allowed him and his partner, William Bell (played by Leonard Nimoy), to find and eventually travel to a second Earth. When Walter's son, Peter, died as a child, the grieving father kidnapped his doppelganger from the other Earth—what parent wouldn't at least contemplate it? That Peter grows up ignorant of his true origins and estranged from his father (who has gone slowly mad and been institutionalized) is just the sort of poignant irony Abrams's work celebrates.

Abrams's film work champions the ability of ordinary people to undergo transformation and become, in their own ways, heroic. In *Armageddon* the least likely guys, a bunch of rough oil drillers, face their fear of death and save the world. On a more personal level, his script for *Regarding Henry* uses a sort of reverse flashback technique to show how a damaged man regains his simple humanity. In the wrong place at the wrong time (another common problem for Abrams's heroes), Henry is shot in the head and loses his memory. His struggles to refill his blank slate reveal a portrait of a hard-driving, unethical corporate lawyer who was estranged from his family, having an affair, and ignoring his wife and child. It turns out that the damage was not the gunshot; that bullet to the brain was his salvation or a reset, bringing him into accord with his true ethical and familial center.

This "resetting of reality" is found in most of Abrams's work (in television, we see how 9/11 played out in two different ways on *Fringe* as well as seeing the alternate worlds on the final seasons of *Felicity* and *Lost* and Sydney's missing three years on *Alias*) and most recently in his big-screen version of the classic *Star Trek.* Again, a framing device provides continuity for the piece—Mr. Spock, long retired from Starfleet, has lived among the Romulans for decades, working to reunite them with their ancestors, the Vulcans. When catastrophe looms, his efforts to save their planet fall short and set into motion a series of events that will throw him back into his own past, forever altering or perhaps *creating* a new reality.

Questions of destiny loom large in all of Abrams's work. We often hear characters say, "I was meant to do this," "You're not supposed to do this," or "Nothing in my life has ever felt this right," and this is especially true in *Star Trek*. Because he has already lived it, old Spock knows that James T. Kirk is meant to captain the *Enterprise* with Spock at his side. When Kirk miraculously appears on the ice planet where he has been stranded, old Spock does what is necessary to maneuver the two younger versions of his captain and friend, and himself, together. We, the viewers, feel a sense of completion when the whole core crew—Kirk and Spock, plus the wonderfully freaked out "Bones" McCoy, sultry Uhura, boy genius Chekov, swashbuckling Sulu, and daft but deft Scotty—are finally together on-screen on the bridge of the *Enterprise.* Is this *Star Trek?* You betcha. Abrams has united the two realities in such a satisfactory way that we can remember the past fondly and still look forward to future installments of the series beyond *Star Trek into Darkness*—which totally kicked Klingon heinie, by the way.

Worry over the culture of surveillance and the changing nature of privacy has permeated the public consciousness in recent years with the advent of new technologies, from the Internet to GPS to the CCTV cameras in most large metropolitan areas. The Abrams-produced TV show *Person of Interest* taps into our unease about just what Big Brother really knows about our lives and how it uses that information. "The Machine"—created by Mr. Finch after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and used by the heroes to identify those in need of help . . . or censure—could just as easily be turned against us if in the control of the wrong people.

Friendship and collaboration are also what drive the ethical choices made by the characters in Abrams's two alien invasion/terrorism allegory scenarios, *Cloverfield* and *Super 8.* In the former, we are swept along with a group of ordinary New Yorker twentysomethings who use a handheld digital camera to record their impossible flight from the city as it is attacked by Godzilla-sized aliens and their deadly, human-sized foot soldiers. In the latter, a group of teenagers making a student horror film in 1979 are drawn into a government conspiracy when they discover the truth about a crashed alien ship and its pilot, which had been tortured by its captors.

Exploring the Genius

The chapters in this volume run the philosophical gamut: the logic of time travel and parallel universes; the metaphysics and malleability of identity;

the alienation of the individual in a technological culture; ethical decisions in tough circumstances; and death, loss, and the search for meaning. In each of these thoughtful chapters, the writers explore how Abrams's ability to tap the core of popular culture for deeper and more meaningful themes makes his works ripe for philosophical analysis. Abrams often places his characters in situations that at first seem mundane—for example, a young woman attending college or a group of people sitting on an airplane—and then sets them (and the audience) spinning, and thinking, too.

The three chapters in the first section, scene 1: Identity Issues, deal with the shifting nature of human identity. In the multi-verse of the Abrams television show *Fringe,* two or more versions of the same person may exist and issues of personal identity and responsibility become clouded. What are we? Are we the totality of our conscious memories, or are we just our brains and physiological processes, or neither? "'Grey Matters': Personal Identity in the *Fringe* Universe(s)," by A. P. Taylor and Justin Donhauser, examines how two concepts of personal identity—the Lockean-based psychological theory and the somatic or brain theory— are revealed in the events of the series and considers which seems the better fit to explain our world. In "*Person of Interest:* The Machine, Gilles Deleuze, and a Thousand Plateaus of Identity," Franklin Allaire looks at how an "ultimate event" such as 9/11 may be used as justification for the collection of intimate personal data and the implications of having the Machine grant "identity" to an individual as either perpetrator or victim, in effect making a moral judgment.

Abrams is well known for producing TV shows and films with strong female characters, and in "Are J. J. Abrams's 'Leading Ladies' Really Feminist Role Models?" Cynthia Jones finds common threads of identity in three prime examples: *Felicity*'s Felicity Porter, *Alias*'s Sydney Bristow, and *Fringe*'s Olivia Dunham. Using feminist theories to examine these characters in terms of oppression and interconnectedness, Jones finds that despite their differing life circumstances—naive college student, worldly secret agent, and paranormal investigator, respectively—the three young women are all products of their contact with and reaction to male-dominated society as they strive to create their own independent and free-acting identities.

The second section of the book, scene 2: Memento Mori, uses as its theme the quality of human life informed by the sure knowledge of death. In the first chapter, "The End Is Nigh: *Armageddon* and the Meaning of Life Found through Death," Ashley Barkman reminds us of the fact that

the least likely guys—a bunch of rough oil drillers—face their fear of death and save the world in the Abrams-penned sci-fi thriller. She uses examples from the Bible and Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* to argue that life is often best understood in the context of death, the great equalizer, which stimulates heightened awareness and tests one's genuine beliefs.

In the second chapter of this section, "The Fear of Bones: On the Dread of Space and Death," Jerry S. Piven and Jeffrey Stephenson invoke the utterances of philosophers such as Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dr. McCoy to explain how science and religion are two antithetical modes of resolving existential desire, anxiety, and dread. The yearning to comprehend the unknown can inspire creative imagination, ingenious problem solving, scientific inquiry, medical discovery, wish-fulfilling fantasies, mind-numbing faith, and even terroristic violence.

In "Do We All Need to Get Shot in the Head? *Regarding Henry,* Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Ethical Transformation," Adam Barkman argues that the Abrams-scripted film questions the ethical origins of human happiness. Just as the main character's near-death experience alters his brain (a bullet will do that, you know) as well as his perception of what is important, perhaps certain disruptions of our comforts from time to time serve as a means to refocus us on the true nature of happiness.

We deal with a few ethical considerations in the third section, scene 3: Moral Matters. Phil Smolenski and Charlene Elsby look into one of the ever-present defining questions of bioethics in "*Fringe* and 'If Science Can Do It, Then Science Ought to Do It.'" Using Hans Jonas's imperative of responsibility, they examine the technological wizardry employed by Walter Bishop in his lab in terms of the moral correctness of his (and the other characters') decision-making processes in comparison to the viewers, who identify with and value the relationships between the characters on the show.

In the next chapter in this section, "An Inconsistent Triad? Competing Ethics in *Star Trek into Darkness*," Jason T. Eberl looks at the ethical values of duty, utility, and loyalty in the second entry of Abrams's *Trek* reboot films. Using Immanuel Kant's deontology contrasted with John Stuart Mill's utilitarian perspective, Eberl looks at incidents where the Starfleet Prime Directive of noninterference is invoked as well as ignored in the film by the heroes, Kirk and Spock, as well as the villains, Khan Noonien Singh and Admiral Alexander Marcus.

Randall Auxier uses the relationships between humans and a stranded alien in the rather autobiographical Abram-directed film *Super 8* to medi-

tate on the true nature of moral empathy—and love—in "The Monster and the Mensch," which completes this section.

The fourth section, scene 4: Friends and Family, opens with Joseph Foy's "Abrams, Aristotle, and Alternate Worlds: Finding Friendship in the Final Frontier." In the *Star Trek* reboot, the classic *Trek* characters James T. Kirk and Mr. Spock triumph in one dangerous situation after another, revealing the noble individual traits that will enable them to succeed in future endeavors with the Federation. However, as Foy shows, their ultimate challenge is really overcoming an initial enmity toward one another to defeat their Romulan foes. By the end of the film, they have started a friendship that will allow them to achieve the Aristotelian goal of true collaboration, where individual excellence will be used communally to support society.

The second chapter in this section is "Heroic Love and Its Inversion in the Parent-Child Relationship in Abrams's *Star Trek*," by Charles Taliaferro and Emilie Judge-Becker, in which they use three traditional precepts of justice (*preacepta juris*)—live in a morally right way, do no harm to others, and render to each what is her or his own—to examine the duties (if any) that are owed between parents and children. This is exemplified by the *Star Trek* characters George and his son James Tiberius Kirk, and Spock and his parents, Amanda and Sarek.

In "You Can't Choose Your Family: Impartial Morality and Personal Obligations in *Alias*," Brendan Shea investigates the extent to which identity may be created and altered by one's familial relationships. The characters in the twisty spy show have to juggle loyalties to country, family, lovers, and friends that create obligations and betrayals, stretching the boundaries of morality and personal responsibility. Each must balance his or her impartial moral obligations (e.g., duties toward humanity) and personal obligations (e.g., duties toward one's children), with potentially tragic consequences.

The fifth section is titled scene 5: Metaphysically Speaking, and so these three chapters deal with questions concerning the nature of reality. Daniel Whiting's chapter, "Is Abrams's *Star Trek* a *Star Trek* Film?" ponders the nature of remakes. As Whiting sees it, the film invites us to ask about the extent to which Abrams's *Star Trek* has inherited the characteristics of the *Star Trek* series, about the parentage and pedigree of this movie. What does it take for the *Star Trek* reboot to be a *Star Trek* film? Does this reboot or reset make it a prequel or an entirely new series?

In the second chapter, "Determinism, Free Will, and Moral Responsibility in *Alias*," Vishal Garg examines the nature of predestination and free

will. He argues that despite the fact that many of the Rambaldi prophecies came true, characters in *Alias* did in fact have free will and are therefore morally culpable for their actions.

In the final chapter in this section, "Finding Directions by Indirection: The Island as a Blank Slate," Elly Vintiadis and Spyros Petrounakos revisit the complicated world of *Lost* to contemplate the Lockean concept of tabula rasa as it relates to both the characters and viewers. They argue that, for the characters, the Island is not as blank a slate as it first appears to be and that the audience is required to deconstruct many television-viewing conventions as the plot unfolds over the course of the series.

The sixth section, scene 6: Your Logic Is Flawless, begins with Andrew Fyfe's chapter on an oft-contested scientific and philosophical concept in science fiction and fantasy, namely, the logical implications of time travel. In "You Can't Change the Past: The Philosophy of Time Travel in *Star Trek* and *Lost*," Fyfe explains the three possible forms of time travel and why logical paradoxes like the grandfather paradox rule out only one of these three possibilities. Using the plots of the film and television series, he explores the reasons for thinking that there are forms of time travel that not only are logically possible but also are actual parts of our world.

The next chapter is "Rabbit's Feet, Hatches, and Monsters: Mysteries vs. Questions in J. J. Abrams's Stories," by Paul DiRado, in which he uses several of Abrams's works—including *Mission: Impossible III, Cloverfield,* and *Lost*—to examine the true nature of the mysterious. "No answer to any question, then, can ever be said to 'answer' a mystery. A mystery doesn't need an answer, but to be resolved it needs all of the various propositions discovered in a situation to make sense with one another and to cohere with previous experiences and expectations about the world." So claims DiRado near the end of his chapter.

In scene 7: Considering *Cloverfield,* the authors, well, do just that. Jeff Ewing starts the section off with "Monsters of the World, Unite! *Cloverfield,* Capital, and Ecological Crisis." He uses Karl Marx's criticism of capitalism—with its inherent greed and overaccumulation of things, which cause many problems, including ecological ones—to show how an analogy can be made between the awakening and rampage of Clover (as the monster has been called in *Cloverfield*) and the harmful impacts of capitalism.

In "*Cloverfield, Super 8,* and the Morality of Terrorism" we (Pat Brace and Rob Arp) use the Kantian deontological and Millian utilitarian arguments for why terrorism is immoral and should not be pursued as an avenue

for expressing grievances in a typical democratic-based republican regime and offer (possibly) one kind of case where terrorist activities actually may be morally justified.

In a Beatles-ish attempt to be clever (possibly not), the final section of this book is titled scene 8: Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution. *Revolution* is another one of Abrams's TV series, and it takes place some fifteen years after electricity—and, as a result, technology—all over the world suddenly becomes nonfunctioning. In a kind of postapocalyptic environment, the USA is now divvied up into five new territories, one of them called the Monroe Republic, controlled by the dictator-like Sebastian Monroe and the Monroe Militia. In his chapter, titled "A Place for Revolutions in *Revolution*? Marxism, Feminism, and the Monroe Republic," Jeff Ewing uses Marxist and feminist theories to investigate the gender, class, and identity relations of the Monroe Republic. He ultimately argues that the Monroe Republic, like other real-life totalitarian regimes, is doomed to collapse without "serious restructuring and a reprioritization of state policy" with respect to these relations.

The final chapter of the book is Michael Versteeg and Adam Barkman's "A Light in the Darkness: Ethical Reflections on *Revolution*." Thoughts of a postapocalypse will get you to start thinking about moral matters for sure, and in their chapter Versteeg and Barkman use stories from *Revolution* to investigate four prominent ethical theories: ethical subjectivism, contractarianism, utilitarianism, and natural law theory. After a critique of each theory, they ultimately settle on natural law theory as the theory of choice for moral matters in an end-of-the-world kind of environment.

The Zeitgeist of Pop Culture

J. J. Abrams's works have entered the zeitgeist of popular culture and are prime fodder for a book like this. In a way, writing about Abrams is like trying to hit a moving target. As one may see by taking a look at his profile on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), he is a prolific artist. He is very hands-on in his direction—he can be seen literally shaking the camera by hand in the DVD extras for both *Lost* and *Star Trek* to achieve a specific visually chaotic effect—and clear about his own inspirations. In a now-famous talk he gave at the March 2007 TED.com forum, he spoke about his love of the unseen mystery, which may be seen throughout his work and which is specifically discussed in the chapter by Paul DiRado.

The summer of 2010 saw the opening of the well-reviewed sci-fi thriller

Super 8, inspired by his own childhood filmmaking adventures and such Spielberg fare as *E.T.* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind.* His direction of the film was praised by his mentor Spielberg as "a milestone movie for Abrams" in which his "very original and unique voice" shines through.[1] Interestingly, 2010 was also the year when he had a conspicuous failure, the TV series *Undercovers,* which attempted to graft *Hart to Hart* with *Alias* by having an attractive spy couple engage in secret international adventures. The show failed to capture the audience's interest because it had none of the trademark twisty plots, underlying symbolism, and tortured but appealing characters that usually populate an Abrams production. It was quickly cancelled, as was the more typical Abrams series *Alcatraz,* which failed to capture a large enough audience with its one-note mystery about disappearing prisoners reappearing decades later. Every season new TV shows from Abrams's Bad Robot production company continue to premiere, including *Person of Interest* in 2011 and *Revolution* in 2012, giving critics and academics alike plenty of opportunities to analyze his ongoing oeuvre.

In the spring of 2013 it was announced that Abrams had been hand-picked by his boyhood idol, George Lucas, to helm the new series of *Star Wars* films, creating a dilemma for the often antagonistic *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* fandoms. Some critics have said his more adventure-packed, lens-flaring, and less-cerebral reimagining of the *Star Trek* universe resembled Lucas's "galaxy far, far away" more than Gene Roddenberry's original concept for the show. In the end, however, as Abrams said in his TED.com lecture, "The most incredible sort of mystery, I think, is now the question of what comes next."[2]

Notes

Patricia Brace: This book is dedicated with love to my parents, Nancy Kay and Marion Kent Brace, who showed me by example to love reading and introduced me to science fiction, both of which have served me extremely well. Robert Arp: This book is dedicated to *the other* J. J. Abrams (editor of the UPK book *The Philosophy of Stanley Kubrick*), a sharp guy who attended grad school with me at Saint Louis University.

1. Jeff Jensen, "Kids at Heart: J. J. Abrams and Steven Spielberg," *Entertainment Weekly,* June 10, 2011, http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20313460_20507915,00.html.

2. J. J. Abrams, "The Mystery Box: J. J. Abrams on TED.com," transcription by Robert Thomas Carter, *TED.com Forum,* March 2007, Monterey, California, http://blog.ted.com/2008/01/10/jj_abrams/.

Scene 1

IDENTITY ISSUES

"GREY MATTERS"

Personal Identity in the *Fringe* Universe(s)

A. P. Taylor and Justin Donhauser

> When you open your mind to the impossible, sometimes you find the truth.
> —Walter Bishop

 J. J. Abrams's *other* hit sci-fi series, *Fringe,* presents the viewer with a central philosophical puzzle: in the *Fringe* universe "there's more than one of everything." That includes people. In the mythology of the show, duplicate characters from two alternate universes square off in a showdown. In each universe there are copies of the main characters; they look, speak, and think much the same as their doubles. How would a friend or loved one know whether you had been replaced by a physically identical doppelganger? What is it that makes you, *you?* That is, what makes you the same person today that you were yesterday? Or, for that matter, what makes you the same person who experienced losing your first tooth as a child? Certainly, something makes you *you* over time. So what is it? Are we each identical to some body, or some mind, or some brain, or some conjunction of all of these things? Or are we something else entirely? Philosophers have asked these questions for generations. The philosophical study of such questions is called the *theory of personal identity.* It is these questions that form the basis of this chapter.[1]

Upon first inspection, it appears that different events in the *Fringe* universe suggest different answers to this question of what we are. For instance, FBI special agent Olivia Dunham is for a time able to communicate with her deceased FBI partner and lover, John Scott, whose memories and personality become temporarily stored in Olivia's consciousness (season 1, "Pilot" and "The Dreamscape"). This appears to imply either that John is not a person or that in the *Fringe* universe(s) other, numerically distinct

persons can somehow live within our bodies (which in turn suggests that they could survive the loss of *their* bodies). In contrast, other events suggest that persons are, at least in part, identical with bodies. For instance, the show depicts "shape-shifters," seemingly evil foot soldiers from an alternate universe that are capable of becoming other people, like FBI agent Charlie Parker, complete with their host's memories and mannerisms, by somehow assimilating their physiology. Moreover, other events suggest that persons are essentially either heads or brains. In one episode the foot soldiers are charged with stealing cryogenically preserved heads while in search of the head of their leader, Thomas Newton. Once they find his head, they successfully reanimate Newton, who is presumably a person, by grafting his head onto what we later learn is a partially robotic humanoid body (season 2, "Momentum Deferred"; season 3, "Do Shapeshifters Dream of Electric Sheep?"). These and many other events suggest that determining what persons are in the *Fringe* universe(s) will be quite challenging or maybe even that there is not a unified theory of persons underlying the show's mythology.

Even so, encouraged by the fact that the Fringe Division team often attempts the unimaginable and succeeds, we will forge on. It is surely imaginable that we could answer the question of what persons are in the *Fringe* universe(s). Moreover, it appears that *Fringe* presents us with many physically and psychologically traumatic events that reveal a way to determine an answer to the question of what we, persons, are. By analyzing the things that people in *Fringe* can endure, we can attempt to determine what persons are by process of elimination. For example, if we determined that persons can survive losing a limb, like Nina Sharp for instance, this would imply that having the particular limbs we each have is unessential to being the persons that we are. That is, we can each imagine maintaining self-consciousness prior to, during, and after the loss of a limb. By considering which of our parts we could survive losing in this manner, we should be able to discover which of our parts are vital to our continued existence *as persons.* By analyzing the traumatic events that people survive in the show, we can also attempt to determine which, if any, theory of persons appears to be true in the *Fringe* universe(s). For every particular event under consideration, we should each ask ourself, "Could I survive that if I were in a *Fringe* universe?" That is, according to what happens in the show, could you, for example, survive your bodily death and communicate with Olivia, like John Scott? Alternatively, could you survive having your head severed, cryogenically frozen, and grafted onto a borrowed human body, like Newton?

As we have said, each of the distinct events of *Fringe* may at first seem suggestive of a different answer to the question of *what* we are. Still, given that there is an overall trend of connecting the events of *Fringe* to provide the viewer with an ever more coherent explanation for what occurs, we assume that there is a coherent theory of persons underlying the *Fringe* mythology. Thus, by considering the answers to the question of what we could survive, identifying the account of persons the answer suggests, and then considering whether that account can explain all other known events of the show, we set out to determine what account of persons must be assumed true to allow for the happenings of *Fringe.* Although whether that theory is true of our universe will depend on the degree to which the actual universe resembles the universe(s) of *Fringe,* our examination should also shed some light on which theory of the nature of persons is most plausible in general.

The Animal Theory: Our Biological Traits

Fringe is often characterized, even by its own creators, as the story of a mad scientist. Accordingly, the show strives to capture cutting-edge scientific thought while pushing it forward into the realm of fiction. Because the show maintains a certain calculated level of scientific plausibility, we should start our search for the theory of persons that underlies the *Fringe* mythology by considering those that are scientifically plausible. Many contemporary philosophers working on theories of personal identity strive for such scientific plausibility in their theorizing. These thinkers are often inclined to look for naturalistic explanations of phenomena and to shun what they see as supernatural explanation. An explanation is naturalistic in the relevant sense if it involves only those entities, properties, and relations that scientists could verify in the laboratory.

If, for example, you were to throw a baseball as far as you could, as many times as you wished, we know that each time it would eventually fall to Earth. One *could* explain this phenomenon in a nonnaturalistic way; for instance, by speculating that angels abhor the sight of baseballs flying through the air. Thus, every time you throw the baseball, an angry angel grabs it and pulls it to the ground. This explanation is nonnaturalistic because its plausibility requires the existence of angels, which science has yet to confirm. Alternatively, one could explain the baseballs falling in a more naturalistic way. The enormous mass of Earth causes a warping or bending of the space-time surrounding it, and since the ball is in that surrounding space-time, it

gets caught in the "groove" and pulled uniformly toward Earth. This latter explanation relies on entities (e.g., Earth, the ball, space-time), properties (e.g., having mass), and relations (e.g., warping) that scientists have confirmed for us. Thus, in the case of the baseball, a philosopher who wishes to establish his or her scientific and naturalistic bona fides will doubtless reject the first sort of explanation (involving angels) and prefer the second.

What, then, does a naturalistic theory of personal identity look like? At the very least it will be one that uses only those sorts of entities confirmed by science. It will not, for instance, follow Descartes in supposing that each person is his or her immaterial soul, because scientists cannot empirically verify the existence of immaterial things.[2] One contemporary theory of persons that fits the bill for being scientifically plausible is the animal theory, or animalism (for short). Put simply, animalism is the view that a human person is identical to a particular human animal (a member of the species *Homo sapiens*).[3] The intuitive argument in favor of this theory is quite strong. Whenever you look in the mirror, *you* see a human animal looking back at *you*. Whenever you are alone in a room, there will be a human animal in that room, right where you are. Whenever the animal body you associate yourself with is wounded, you, and nobody else, feel the pain from that wound. Furthermore, the view has scientific merit insofar as it entails the claim that persons are an entity familiar to science, namely a certain sort of mammalian organism.[4]

Despite its intuitive and scientific appeal, however, animalism has its drawbacks. These drawbacks stem from the core animalist claim that each person is identical with his or her animal body. By reducing personal identity to the identity of the human organism in this manner, the theory constrains the ways in which human persons can conceivably survive. To explain by point of contrast, consider the Cartesian theory that we are souls for a moment. As mentioned above, according to Descartes, each person is an immaterial being, a soul, separable from any physical body. Consequently, if the Cartesian view is true, the destruction of the physical body need not necessitate the destruction of the person associated with that body. Alternatively, if, as the animalist tells us, we are merely human organisms and are thus inseparable from our bodies, it follows that the destruction of the human organism that is you would entail the destruction of the person that is you.

Although animalism is scientifically plausible, this implication of the view suggests that it is not the theory underlying the *Fringe* mythology.

Rather, many events of the show suggest that animalism is false in the universe(s) of *Fringe.* For one thing, as mentioned, John Scott survives the destruction of his physical body, cohabitating Olivia's mind (or brain). She experiences his memories and feelings, recalls things only he knew, and even speaks to him during her LSD-fueled sessions in Walter's sensory deprivation tank. If animalism were true in the *Fringe* universe(s), John would have died when the human organism he was identical with died. Moreover, what happens between Olivia and John does not stand as the only counterexample to animalism. Rather, the troubles go further for the theory as we are presented with other events that echo fictional brain-transplant puzzles of which many contemporary philosophers are quite fond.

The generic version of the relevant philosophical puzzle goes like this: imagine that medicine were to progress to the level where it is possible to remove a human brain from one head and place it the head of a donor with no loss of functionality whatsoever. Now imagine further that you have a twin and that you and your twin both suffer a horrific accident. As a result, your twin's brain is destroyed but her body is undamaged, while your body is catastrophically injured but your brain is fully functional. The doctor, seeing a chance to save at least one of you, opts for a transplant. Your brain is placed in the head of your twin. Now, when your family walks into the ICU, whom do you suppose they are going to find awake in the hospital bed? Most of us have the strong intuition that they are going to find you. Accordingly, many philosophers conclude that you go with your psychology, and not your body. Assuming that your psychology goes where your brain goes, it follows that you are the person who wakes in the hospital bed after the operation.

In the *Fringe* universe(s), this intuition regarding brain transplants is echoed in the story of Thomas Newton, the leader from the Other Side. Much like in our transplant case, his soldiers frantically search to find his cryogenically frozen head, believing that when that head is placed on a donor body, the resulting person will be Newton. Of course, they are proven correct when Newton's head is indeed grafted onto a donor body and the resulting person is indeed Newton (season 2, "Momentum Deferred"). This too suggests that animalism is not true in the *Fringe* universe(s), because animalists have a different answer to the transplant case. Since they believe that a human person is identical to a human animal, not a brain or a psychology, they conclude that in the transplant case you remain the now-brainless organism. The animalist denies that you go with your psychology. Rather,

according to animalism, losing a brain is no different from losing an arm in terms of its effect on identity, if animalism is true.

The opponents of animalism take our strongly held intuitions about brain transplants as very strong evidence against that theory. Equally, it seems that the writers of *Fringe* also have a different theory of personal identity in mind, given the success of Newton's head transplant. Though we could each conceivably survive the loss of an arm and each remain the person that we are, like Nina Sharpe, intuitively we could not survive the loss of our psychology. That is, even if we could survive the loss of our brains by having our psychology stored on a hard drive or in a synthetic robot brain, it seems that we could not survive the loss of our psychology. In line with these intuitions, contemporary philosopher Derek Parfit, for instance, famously argues that personal identity is not what we care about when considering questions of survival in cases such as transplants.[5]

Parfit contends that what we are really concerned with is some other relation, psychological continuity or connectedness. Thus he suggests that persons are just a continuous psychology. If this is true, then it needs only to be the case that you have the same psychology in order to remain yourself when you awake in your twin's body. Similarly, if this is true, then the revived Newton needs only to be psychologically continuous with the predecapitated and cryogenically frozen Newton to be the same person. Historically speaking, Parfit's sort of theory derives from the philosopher John Locke's (1632–1704) conception of our respective personal identities consisting in our own personal psychologies. As animalism appears inconsistent with the events of *Fringe,* the Lockean psychological theory looks to be a contender for the theory of persons that underlies the show's mythology.

The Psychological Theory: Is Walter Bishop Still Walter Bishop?

Among the many questions we face in trying to piece together what is going on in the *Fringe* universe(s), central is that of who Walter is. And this is not only a puzzle that we, the viewers, are trying to solve alone, but also one that Walter himself often struggles with. After a series of events that left his lab assistant dead, left Walter mentally unfit to stand trial for her death, and led to his subsequent seventeen-year institutionalization in St. Claire's Mental Hospital, Walter isn't even himself to himself. This is, as we learn, because he has forgotten things—even universe-altering things. Because he is missing memories, his psychology, or personal mental life, is incomplete. Though we

have reason to doubt even that he has the same body as he once did, given the many extraordinary events of the show, by the second season we can be reasonably certain that he does have the same body even though we learn that he is missing some portions of his brain (season 2, "Grey Matters").

In any case, in a very important sense the "old Walter" is no longer there. To our question, "could *I* survive that?" Walter's situation suggests an account that answers this in the negative, due to the loss of memories. That is, if you were missing many or even all of your memories, if you were psychologically incomplete like Walter, it seems reasonable to believe that some or all of *you* would have perished. Thus Walter's "loss of himself" is suggestive of the truth of what many refer to as the "memory criterion" of personal identity, which is more correctly characterized as the psychological theory of personal identity. Locke, the progenitor of the psychological theory, explains the view succinctly: "To find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what 'person' stands for; which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places."[6]

According to Locke's psychological theory, our personal identity consists of our *self-consciousness.* Moreover, it is via each of our personal memories, our being cognizant of our thinking at past moments, that we are aware that we are the same person now as we were at those times in the past. It is improper to call this account the "memory criterion," as it is sometimes called, because it is not just having some particular set of memories that makes you yourself to yourself. Rather, it is, as Parfit reiterates in the contemporary literature, having a continuous awareness of being you to yourself both in the past and right now. Locke explains this central role of continuous consciousness with regard to personal identity and also makes clear that we can be the same person without having the same body, saying, "The same consciousness that makes a man be himself to himself, personal identity depends on that only, whether it be annexed only to one individual substance, or can be continued in a succession of several substances."[7]

It is worth noting that Locke's view of identity consisting of psychological sameness stems from his finding that the identity of things in general (regular everyday objects like tables and chairs) results from our noticing that there is never more than one thing in one particular place at a particular time. From this, he says, "we rightly conclude that whatever exists anywhere at any time, excludes all of the same kind, and is there itself alone."[8] This is a statement of simple logical identity, that a = a, 1 = 1, Olivia = Olivia. It

is instructive to note this feature of Locke's theory of identity because it is consistent with *Fringe* mythology, according to which "there's more than one of everything." Recall that even the duplicates of things and people in the *Fringe* universe(s) are distinct, even if not in time, in space (Walter ≠ Walternate). Even if two things or people appear identical, as with the familiar characters and their alters in *Fringe,* we can tell that they are distinct owing to their being located in different parts of space—or in seemingly spatially distinct universes.[9] Locke finds that our ability to know the identity of any particular thing across time comes from comparing our present experience of that thing with memories of past encounters of it. Likewise, our ability to know our own personal identity comes from comparing our present experience of our self with memories of past encounters of it—that is, past encounters of our consciousness being "there alone itself."

Accordingly, it appears that the psychological theory being true in the *Fringe* universe(s) explains why, for instance, Walter is "not himself" to himself. This is because he has lost memories and, for that reason, lacks psychological continuity. Walter cannot compare his present self-consciousness with many memories of past events in which he was also self-conscious. Rather, there are events that he himself was not present at because he himself has no concept of being there. Accordingly, Walter circa 1990 is a different person from Walter circa 2010 because those two Walters at different times are psychologically discontinuous. Furthermore, assuming the truth of psychological theory allows us to explain other events.

For one thing, we can explain how John Scott survives in Olivia's mind after his bodily death. Remember that before John's brain dies completely Walter synchronizes Olivia's brain waves with John's. Subsequently, she communicates with him by entering their collective subconscious, connected to him via electrodes while in a sensory deprivation tank in a drug-induced sleep state. After this procedure, and after John's body is completely dead, we come to learn that he lives on in her. They are two persons in one body—not unlike genuine cases of multiple personality disorder in the real world. Thus it appears that John continues to communicate with Olivia because, following the procedure by which they shared consciousness, she retains his psychology.

For a time this procedure even results in Olivia mistaking John's memories for her own, which further suggests that she is at least partially John to herself (season 1, "Safe").[10] Eventually Olivia is able to distinguish her own memories from John's, and by recognizing that she is experiencing John's

memories she reconstructs John's personal timeline of the events leading to his death. This, remember, is how she discovers that he had secretly become involved with a bioterrorist group in an attempt to end their attacks. After learning this, in her last encounters with him, again in an induced sleep state in Walter's sensory deprivation tank, she seems to find peace in knowing that John had genuinely loved her and hadn't betrayed her (season 1, "The Transformation"). There is no indication that Olivia experiences John's memories after this. Thus we can reasonably entertain the hypothesis that because she is more psychologically complete, having found some closure, she no longer needs John's memories to make sense of her own memories regarding John. Whether or not this is what we are supposed to take away from these events, there are many other events in the show that are also explainable in terms of the psychological theory.

Midway into the second season we know that Peter Bishop is not Walter's biological son, but the son of alternate-universe doppelganger Walternate. Before this is confirmed, our initial clues to Peter's true identity come in the form of either his lacking certain childhood memories or his possessing different memories of his childhood than Walter seems to have. For instance, he doesn't remember being sick and doesn't remember collecting coins as child to take his mind off of his illness, let alone remember his favorite coin (season 1, "There's More Than One of Everything"). This is consistent with the psychological theory, given that Peter and his (now dead) alter are distinct people, precisely because they are psychologically discontinuous people. Thus the fact that we find out Peter's true identity by learning about the memories that he is missing further confirms that some sort of psychological theory is entailed in the *Fringe* mythology.

Furthermore, it seems that we can tell all of the alternates apart from their counterparts, whom we know from this world, only by noticing that they each have different memories and, hence, distinct psychologies. Prior to season 3 this is implied in a conversation in the finale of season 2 between Peter and Olivia's alternate, let's call her "Fauxlivia," as Walter dubs her (season 3, "Reciprocity").[11] After Fauxlivia delivers Peter to his "real family" home, where he stays while on the Other Side, recall that this conversation ensues (season 2, "Over There, Part 2"):

> Fauxlivia: What's she like?
> Peter: Who?
> Fauxlivia: Me.

> PETER: She's a lot like you. Darker in the eyes maybe. . . . She's always trying to make up for something. . . . "Right" some imaginary wrong. Haunted, I guess. Maybe she's nothing like you at all.

In this scene, Peter seems to start by considering how Olivia and Fauxlivia are physically similar but quickly realizes that they are indeed different people, distinguishable by their respective psychologies. Peter can tell them apart because Olivia is somehow "haunted" and Fauxlivia, it seems to him, is not—a distinction Peter later blissfully overlooks when he begins dating Fauxlivia and unknowingly impregnates her in season 3.[12] Accordingly, later in the same episode Olivia and Fauxlivia come face to face. As Olivia holds her alter at gunpoint while trying to gain her confidence and help, we learn that they are in fact not only spatially but also psychologically discontinuous. They each reveal their having different personal memories and, hence, being different people, owing to their home worlds being dramatically dissimilar. Whereas Olivia is close with her sister, Rachel, and niece, Ella, Fauxlivia's sister died in childbirth. So, too, we learn that Fauxlivia's mother is still alive, though we know that Olivia's mother has passed. These, among other things, have amounted to Olivia and Fauxlivia being different people, each with her own unique psychology.

Later, in season 3, Olivia's and Fauxlivia's distinctive memories play the central role in allowing, and in some cases disallowing, the viewer to tell them apart. Even when Olivia and Fauxlivia are made to look exactly like each other, undergoing complete physical transformations to remain undetected in each other's respective universe, they remain distinguishable via their unique psychologies. They each look like the other, to the point that Olivia dons Fauxlivia's distinctive neck tattoo and Fauxlivia removes that same tattoo. Still, even though they are so physically indistinguishable that even Peter mistakes Fauxlivia for Olivia and has a romantic relationship with her, believing she is Olivia, for the duration of the third season, we can distinguish Olivia and Fauxlivia from each other via their unique psychologies.

After she is injected with "B-lymphocytes" and has the majority of her memories replaced with Fauxlivia's, Olivia does live Fauxlivia's life and believes it is her own for a period of time (season 3, "Olivia" and "The Plateau"). Thus, in accordance with the psychological theory, it seems she becomes Fauxlivia, even to herself, by (almost) fully assimilating Fauxlivia's

psychology. However, it is also because Olivia retains her unique memories of Peter and Ella that she is able to recognize herself as Olivia, reclaim her real personal identity, and eventually escape Fauxlivia's universe and return to her own.[13] Similar suggestion of the assumption of the psychological theory is found in the season 3 episode "6B."

In that episode widow Alice Merchant has been in contact with a man she believes is the ghost of her recently deceased husband, Derek Merchant. We learn that Alice is actually in contact with Derek's alter from the other universe and that the haunting physical anomalies experienced by the residents of the Rosencrantz Building, where Alice lives, are the result of a "crack" between the universes that Alice and Dereknate's contact has begun to open. What is of interest in this case for the purposes at hand is how Alice is able to recognize that Dereknate is not her deceased Derek. As Dereknate appears as an apparition in front of Alice, Olivia, and Peter, the following conversation ensues:

> DEREKNATE: Alice, I miss you so much. And the girls miss you.
> ALICE: We never had children.
> DEREKNATE: Of course we did.
> ALICE: No. I'm not your wife. Your wife is gone. And so is my Derek.

How does Alice know that the man she is speaking with, who is identical to her Derek in nearly every way, is not in fact Derek? Because Derek would have different memories and a different psychology! He wouldn't know anything of their girls, because they didn't have any.

Each of these occurrences is consistent with the psychological theory and thus suggests that the psychological theory is true in the *Fringe* universe(s). However, as you may have already noticed, there are events in *Fringe* that we cannot explain in terms of the psychological theory. More precisely, there are events that we cannot explain without some modification of the psychological theory. Perhaps most conspicuous is all of the strange brain surgeries that occur, like the removal of pieces of Walter's brain by Newton and Bell, which changes Walter's psychology. Initially this appears to be inconsistent with the pure psychological theory, which allowed for occurrences like John's psychology persisting in Olivia's brain. This is because it implies that our personal psychology is somehow tied to our particular brain. That is, Walter's psychology is altered by physical alterations to his, and nobody else's, brain. However, a variation of the psychological theory

seems to make room for the many events of *Fringe* involving brains and brain parts being transplanted.

The Brain Theory: Are We Functions of Gray Matter?

The events of the *Fringe* universe(s) present us with counterexamples to both the animal theory and the psychological theory. In doing so they also suggest a hybrid theory of personal identity that some philosophers have embraced to capture the benefits of both of those theories while avoiding their weaknesses. According to such a hybrid theory, we are identical to neither purely psychological nor purely biological entities, but rather some conjunction of both (or a conjunction of parts of both). One such hybrid view that many contemporary philosophers have found compelling is what we will call the brain theory.

According to proponents of the brain theory, we are identical with psychologically functioning brains.[14] Psychological functioning is central to the brain theory. It is important to note that persons are not supposed to be identical with just any brain, according to the brain theory. For instance, an individual in a persistent vegetative coma lacks personal identity if the brain theory is true. This is because such individuals have a brain, but it is not a psychologically functioning brain. Thus individuals with vegetatively functioning brains are (presumably) not aware of themselves, as their brains have lost the capacity for psychology. In such cases, the person who was there previously, when his or her brain was functioning normally, has ceased to exist, if the brain theory is true.

The brain theory appears to be a more complete theory of the persons of *Fringe* than both of the previously considered theories, because it seems to provide tenable explanations for persons surviving as they do in *Fringe* that the other theories cannot. First, assuming that the brain theory is true allows us to explain the way in which John Scott survives the death of his body and brain. He lives on because his psychology is transferred to another *functioning brain,* Olivia's, which, at least temporarily, supports his continued existence. What happens there is—speaking roughly, and in view of the fact that we do not know the specifics of the physical procedure involved—like downloading an MP3 file (John) from an old, "dying" player (John's brain) onto another player (Olivia's brain). Thus, speaking analogically, his psychology can "play" in Olivia's brain because Walter synchronized their brainwaves prior to John's death, thus endowing Olivia's brain with this

capability. Similarly, though the transfer process is more mysterious, William Bell returns to life as a function of Olivia's brain after his bodily death (season 3, "Lysergic Acid Diethylamide"). The brain theory is also consistent with Walter's attempt to transfer Bell's consciousness from Olivia into a host computer—a synthetic brain.

Furthermore, the brain theory appears to overcome the difficulties the brain transplant case presented for animalism. As we strongly intuit that we each go with our personal psychology in such hypothetical scenarios, it is consistent that we each go where our psychologically functioning brain goes. Since you are, according the brain theory, a psychologically functioning brain, it follows that you will go with your brain if your brain is transplanted into some other body. Thus the brain theory also implies explanations for both the actions of Newton's soldiers in their frantic search for his frozen head and, equally, Newton's apparent psychological continuity after having his head thawed and grafted onto a new body. Furthermore, assuming that the brain theory is true in the *Fringe* universe(s) suggests that the alteration in Walter's personality results from his loss of brain tissue. Walter even suggests that he believes that some variation of the brain theory is true when referring to the effects of these procedures on his brain. For instance, he says to William Bell, "I've lost . . . seventeen years in a mental institution, William. Seventeen years! And, even now, I'm still *incomplete*. I forget things. Uh, names. Places. Connections that I used to be able to make so easily. They just . . . they just dangle, just outside of my reach. I know what you did to me. I know that you cut out pieces of my brain!" (season 2, "Over There, Part 2").

It is consistent with the brain theory that alterations in the physical makeup of the brain will necessitate an alteration of its functioning and, ipso facto, an alteration of the person concerned. Moreover, the brain theory seems to fit with many of our intuitions about personal identity, both within the context of the *Fringe* universe(s) and also within the context our own world. However, this is not to imply that theory is not without its share of counterintuitive implications. For one thing, according to the brain theory none of us was ever a fetus, or even a very young child. Rather, if the brain theory is true we each came into existence much later, when our brains began to function psychologically. For another thing, if the theory is true none of us has ever seen ourself in the mirror or held a loved one in our arms. This is because according to this theory we are functions of brains, and brains and brain functions do not have faces or arms.

To proponents of the brain theory, however, these are not serious impedi-

ments, because the theory's advantages seem to far outstrip these worries. Equally, regarding the *Fringe* universe(s)—where there are human/creature hybrids, shape-shifters, doppelgangers, persons with superhuman powers, seemingly eternal children, and so on—these consequences of the view are tolerable. This is because assuming that the brain theory underlies the *Fringe* mythology appears to allow us to explain each of the various means by which people survive in the show.

Characters as Functions of Gray Matter

Many of the major events of *Fringe* suggest an endorsement of the brain theory. It seems that in the *Fringe* universe(s) persons are their continuous psychologies, a result of the physical functions of their brains or brain parts. We seem to be able to explain all of the happenings of the show by assuming that the brain theory is true. We can explain how John Scott goes on after the death of his body and even his brain. This is because John's psychology continues as a function of Olivia's brain, made possible by her "brainwaves" being synced with his prior to his brain's cessation of functioning. Likewise, we can explain how Newton has a different body, and for some duration no body at all, but retains a continuous psychology. He just goes where his brain goes, his continuous psychology owing to his retaining the same functional brain. Sure, the functioning of his brain is suspended while his head is cryogenically frozen, but it is a plausible assumption that this is just a pause in brain function and not a cessation. This assumption is, we imagine, why people are cryogenically frozen in the first place. We can even retain our explanation of why Peter's missing memories suggest that he is not Walter's biological son. This is, of course, because Peter and his alter have different psychologies, because they have physically distinct brains. Moreover, we can retain our explanation for Walter's being different than he was prior to the events of 1991 that left him psychologically incomplete. It accords with the events of *Fringe,* and reality, that alterations to people's brains result in personality differences.

Indeed, not only may we find the truth by opening our minds to the impossible, but we may also have found what is true in the seemingly impossible *Fringe* universe(s) by identifying what is actually possible. There are many actual cases of brain traumas causing dramatic alterations in people's personalities, and also cases in which brain surgeries have alleviated symptoms of mental illness.[15] Thus it is intuitively plausible that the patients of

the *Fringe* universe(s) Hennington Mental Health Institute are miraculously cured of their rapid-onset mental problems when Walter's secretly implanted stolen brain portions are disconnected from their brains by Newton. It is equally plausible that Walter's quirky personality is the result of known operations on his brain, given that the brain theory is presumed to be true.

We are shown instances of Walter circa 1991's and Walter circa 2010's very distinct personalities, as the old Walter, Walter circa 1991, returns briefly when Newton reconnects all of the stolen brain parts back together with the rest of Walter's brain to retrieve information about opening "the door" to the alternate world (season 2, "Grey Matters"). In that moment Walter appears to act completely differently to us—he has a different, less humble personality and a more continuous psychology. It may be that observing Walternate gives us a glimpse at what Walter was like with his brain intact: noticeably less quirky and compassionate.[16] We might even speculate that the purposeful damage to Walter's brain was engineered, by himself as we learn, to make him less cold and diabolical so that he would be able to better combat Walternate and save the universe(s). In any case, whether or not we can infer anything about the old Walter from observing Walternate, every indication is that Walter circa 1991 is a different person from Walter circa 2010 because those two Walters have physically distinct brain configurations. The former literally has more gray matter than the latter, whom we have come to know and love. Because of their physically distinct brain compositions, Walter circa 1991 and Walter circa 2010 are both psychologically discontinuous and distinct.

All of this fits with the brain theory of personal identity. Given that we can explain all of the events of *Fringe* by assuming that the brain theory is true, it appears that the brain theory underlies the *Fringe* mythology. However, this may not be the end of the story—and, let's be honest, it would not be all that surprising if J. J. Abrams left us with an open-ended suggestion as to what persons are in the *Fringe* universe(s).

What about Andrew Rusk?

There is at least one series of events that we, your humble authors, cannot formulate a feasible explanation for in terms of the brain theory. The occurrences in the season 2 episode "Unearthed" undermine our commitment to the brain theory. In this episode the teenage coma patient Lisa Donovan is taken off of life support, declared dead, and moments later, while a medical

team begins to remove her organs for donation, springs to life and begins reciting a numerical code in a strange voice. We learn that she is reciting alphanumeric code that is Chief Petty Officer First Class Andrew Rusk's personal identification number conjoined with launch codes for intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Later we learn that Lisa and Rusk both died at 5:21 a.m. and that Rusk's "energy" and memories entered Lisa's body, bringing both of them back to life in Lisa's body. We are never given specific details, but Rusk is implied to have gained this ability to inhabit others as a result of being in a submarine accident in which he was exposed to high levels of radiation for sixteen hours in conjunction with his later being treated with an unknown experimental radiation inhibitor. In any case, Rusk is somehow in Lisa's body, much like John is in Olivia's. However, unlike John, Rusk quickly takes over the girl's mind and body and uses her body to exact revenge on his wife.

Rusk was murdered in what his murderer, Jake Selleg, claims is retribution for Rusk's spousal abuse. Selleg claims that Rusk violently beat his wife, Teresa Rusk, whom Selleg had befriended, and for that deserved to die. Furthermore, when Selleg murdered Rusk, he told Rusk that it was Teresa who was "sending him to hell." Thus, believing that his own wife ordered Selleg to kill him, Rusk uses Lisa's body to tie Teresa up and attempt to burn her alive. Though we might think that this is all explainable in terms of Rusk being a function of the brain(s) he inhabits, as in the case of Olivia and John, something different is going on with Rusk.

Olivia and John are united through a mechanical process that is controlled by Walter to a large extent, as their functional brains are physically connected and their functions synchronized. In contrast, Rusk is far away from both Lisa's body and the freshly dead car accident victim he inhabits after being exorcised from Lisa's body at the end of the episode. Given all that we know, it seems that the only thing that connects Rusk to his hosts is their incidental deaths overlapping with the time that he becomes disembodied. Moreover, there is no evident scientific explanation for Rusk's body jumping. Rather, in the episode there is talk of personal "energy" and "souls." In fact, the only explanation for Lisa's personality remaining in her body at all after being dead for several minutes comes via Peter reciting a passage from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead.* That passage reads, in Peter's translation, "Innermost subtle consciousness is ever present. It never leaves the body, even in death." This is, of course, far from a clear explanation of what has happened and just leaves us more confused.

Taking the events of "Unearthed" seriously, we might consider that we were wrong about the brain theory underlying the *Fringe* mythology. Maybe the events surrounding Rusk, among other things, really suggest that some other theory is being endorsed. It is true that there are explicit depictions of people altering physical reality with their minds, which initially seem to defy naturalistic explanations. For instance, we see haunting documentary footage of three-year-old Olivia causing some sort of disturbingly intense light after Walter, whom we can hear off camera, fails to calm her down (season 1, "Bad Dreams). We later learn that, because she was upset, she set the room ablaze with her mind, leaving a charred room with a pristine corner where Olivia sat during the incident (season 2, "Jacksonville"). We also know of two other Cortexiphan trial subjects, twin sisters Susan Pratt and Nancy Lewis, who have similar pyrokinetic abilities: the former dies by self-immolation and the latter burns corrupt agent Sanford Harris to death before he can kill her and Olivia (season 1, "The Road Not Taken").

Likewise, there is the mysterious method by which Walter and the remaining Cortexiphan survivors get to the alternate universe to retrieve Peter at the end of the second season: they simply stand in a circle in a theater, collectively concentrating, and are then somehow transported to the other world (season 2, "Over There, Part 1"). We learn that this travel between worlds is possible because Olivia is exercising her ability to "open a door" between universes; in the first instance the door is held open by the energies of the other Cortexiphan trial survivors, and it is later held open by the energy created by William Bell's self-induced molecular disintegration (season 2, "Over There, Part 2"). This might suggest that the travel between worlds has some explanation that is consistent with current physics. However, we have no apparent explanation for the fact that Olivia can travel between universes with the power of her mind alone, as when she return to her universe for the second time. This is not explained in terms of physical mechanisms; she just takes Cortexiphan, gets in a sensory deprivation tank, and somehow ends up in the counterpart tank in Walter's lab (season 3, "Entrada").[17]

Nonetheless, this may all be consistent with the brain theory, given that our minds are functions of our brains. In the show, all of these events are explained as true potentials of the human brain, aided by Cortexiphan treatments. Nina Sharp explains this, saying, "Doctor Bell theorized that the human mind, at birth, is infinitely capable . . . and that every force it encounters, social, physical, intellectual, . . . is the beginning of the process

he referred to as 'limitation'—a diminishing of that potential." Furthermore, she says that Cortexiphan "was meant to 'limit' that 'limitation'—to prevent the natural shrinking of that brain power" (season 1, "Ability"). This is why Walter and Bell tested Cortexiphan on young children like three-year-old Olivia, because their brain's potential had not yet been fully limited. Notwithstanding, we remain without an explanation for Rusk's means of inhabiting others. At this point, pending further information, all that we can do is speculate.

Thus we might entertain the theory that there is a third world that the episode with Rusk stands as a cryptic introduction to.[18] Although this is plausible, it is unlikely that even if there is a third world it would have a completely different basis for what persons are. Rather, there is evidence that whatever universe Rusk's inhabitations are occurring in, it is one that is connected to the others in some way. In the episode, notice that the Observer is noticeable in the background as Olivia and Lisa's mother speak outside of St. Brigid's Church. And remember that he observes events that are significant to some overarching "pattern" of interconnected events.

With this "third world" theory behind us, we might speculate further that perhaps we are wrong to assume that psychologies or minds are functions of brains in the *Fringe* universe(s). Maybe we can survive even without brains. This would suggest that some other variation of the psychological theory of persons, but not the brain theory, is a core assumption of the *Fringe* mythology. We could then speculate even further that all of the business with brains and brain parts is, perhaps, owing to the plausible assumption that having functional brains is just one means of having a continuous psychology. However, then we are left wondering what it is that our psychology consists of. Energy? Souls? If so, how does that work? Where is this "energy" in our brains? As we have said, the answer to which theory of persons underlies the events of *Fringe* is open to speculation until we have more information. We must leave it at that for now and hope that Fringe Division will help us figure this out in episodes to come.

Notes

1. Good introductions to the philosophy of mind, philosophy of personal identity, and philosophy of identity include, Keith Maslin, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Harold Noonan, *Personal Identity* (London: Routledge, 1989); John Perry, ed., *Personal Identity* (Berkeley: University of California

Press, 2008); Michael Tooley, ed., *Particulars, Actuality, and Identity over Time* (London: Routledge, 1999).

2. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,* ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

3. Eric T. Olson, *What Are We? A Study in Personal Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27; David Degrazia, *Human Identity and Bioethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Peter Van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

4. We should note that this theory does not imply "speciesism" regarding persons. That is, it does not entail the claim that only human beings are persons. Rather, the theory permits that the various genetic mutants, hybrids, and (apparently) alien beings of *Fringe* might also have personal identities of their own.

5. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

6. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2.28.9.

7. Ibid., 2.28.10.

8. Ibid., 2.28.1.

9. It is possible that the two universes are in fact spatially coincident and that perhaps the inhabitants of each are somehow psychologically blind to the features of the counteruniverse.

10. Recall that Olivia has a similar experience with Nick Lane, whom she met as a child during Cortexiphan trials and with whom she shares consciousness for a short time (season 1, "Bad Dreams").

11. Since we are entertaining various theories of personal identity, it is worth noting that our employment of the name "Fauxlivia" is not meant to signify that Olivia's alternate is any less real or lacking a distinctive personal identity. Accordingly, we also do not intend the usage of "Fauxlivia" to indicate that the character is somehow more or less immoral than Olivia.

12. It is implied that Olivia is "haunted" by an event in which she shot her estranged stepfather after he beat her mother. At the end of season 3 it remains open whether Fauxlivia has done the same and whether she too receives yearly birthday cards from her stepfather—whereabouts unknown—like Olivia.

13. The manner in which Olivia is able to travel between worlds and retain her identity, sanity, and tie to her universe is reminiscent of the manner in which Desmond Hume time-travels, or "mind-travels," in *Lost* (season 3, "Flashes Before Your Eyes"). Equally, Desmond's need to have a "constant," which for him is his lover Penny, in mind to retain his sanity and identity when traveling between times is echoed by Olivia's holding her memories of Peter and Ella constant in order to reclaim her identity and get back home.

14. For example, see Mark Johnston, "Human Beings," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 59–83.

15. For the history of personality affective brain traumas and surgeries and examples of actual cases, see Jack D. Pressman, *Last Resort: Psychosurgery and the Limits of Medicine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

16. It is worth noting that Walternate is not portrayed as being evil, nor should we presume that Walter and his universe are good, while the other is evil. Recall that, unlike Walter, Walternate seems to have rigid moral boundaries that guide his decisions. For instance, in the season 3 episode "Immortality" we learn that he is adamantly opposed to testing on children. When Cortexiphan trials appear to have a more marked effect on younger test subjects, the mention of testing on children is quickly met with a stern objection from Walternate: "No children. That is not an option." Later in the same episode he confides in his mistress, Reiko, "If you had asked me a week ago, I would have told you that I would sacrifice anything . . . to save our world. But in fact, there are lines I simply cannot cross."

17. There are various indications that Olivia needs to be in a heightened emotional state in order to traverse universes. Accordingly, having heightened emotions is supposed to be what explains Alice and Dereknate Merchant's coability to begin to traverse whatever barrier exists between the universes (season 3, "6B").

18. Speculation of a third world is mentioned at "Unearthed," Fringepedia.net, http://fringe pedia.net/wiki/Unearthed.

PERSON OF INTEREST

The Machine, Gilles Deleuze, and a Thousand Plateaus of Identity

Franklin Allaire

"You are being watched. The government has a secret system, a machine that spies on you every hour of every day." This prologue, spoken by Harold Finch (Michael Emerson) sets the tone for fans of the J. J. Abrams–produced series *Person of Interest* (*POI*). For the uninitiated, this hit television drama is built on the premise that a machine, created by Finch after 9/11 to detect acts of terrorism, uses our own electronic footprints to see everything. This includes violent crimes happening to ordinary people. People like you. The government, however, considered these crimes to be irrelevant and wouldn't act so Finch and his partner, John Reese (Jim Caviezel), decided they would work to prevent these crimes from happening.

   POI is, I believe, the first true post-9/11 series in that the entire premise of the show would not exist without the tragic events of that fateful day. Philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Ernest Becker might even go so far as to call it an *ultimate event* in that it was powerful enough in symbolism (both real and existential) to become omnipresent socially, culturally, and existentially.[1] "The horrific loss of life that resulted from the terrorist attacks of 9/11 is naturally a severe jolt to us all."[2] Americans' reactions were wide ranging, with many flocking to blood banks, hospitals, and Red Cross offices. Sales of American flags, patriotic tattoos, Osama bin Laden rifle-range targets (and toilet paper) increased. "For most Americans, paralysis, worry, anger, patriotism, and bloodlust have given way to a more sober perspective and sincere effort to understand what happened and why."[3] Meanwhile, government and military agencies turned their attention to the prevention of further attacks.

   In the *POI* universe, the aftermath of 9/11 creates an opportunity for

Finch, with help from Nathan Ingram (Brett Cullen), to create a machine in 2002 capable of using technology and our own electronic footprints to watch and ostensibly protect *everyone* from future acts of terror. (In the episode "Ghosts" Finch explains that The Machine uses cameras, electronic footprints from debit and credit cards, the Internet, voice and facial recognition software, government servers, and public and private databases.)

The existence of such a machine in the *POI* universe provides us with an opportunity to explore a wide range of philosophical topics, including morality, justice, and person liberties in the real world. My interest, however, lies with The Machine itself and how its activities relate to postmodern philosophical conceptions of our identity. How does the machine identify the person(s) in the first place? How does it take the pieces of our lives and put them together in such a way that it "predicts" who will be the victim or perpetrator of a violent crime? I'm not going to pretend to understand the intricacies of computer code, so I can't imagine what kind of programming wizardry Finch performed to enable The Machine to behave as if it has an intelligence all its own.

Popping the Hood

Throughout *POI* we've been given hints at the origins of The Machine and the processes it uses to identify individuals. Season 1 episode "Super" has provided us with the greatest insight into not only what The Machine does but how it does it.

In the "present" Finch decides to reveal to Detective Carter (Taraji P. Henson) what he and Mr. Reese do by "throwing her in the deep end of the pool" when he reveals that Derek Watson is about to commit a violent crime. In a flashback to 2005, The Machine provides the Social Security number of Gordon Kurzweil, a CIA case officer, who is revealed to be a traitor. In both cases, Detective Carter and Deputy Director Weeks want to know how The Machine was able to recognize the crimes when their own law enforcement organizations could not.

Is The Machine recognizing our identities from externally imposed definitions or is it channeling identity models suggested by Gilles Deleuze, who insists that our identities are internal self-definitions just as unique as we are? In this chapter I will approach The Machine from a philosophical standpoint that emphasizes the postmodern concept of multidimensional identities and their intersection and interaction over time.

Flesh and Blood

Who are you? The question seems so simple yet is so very complex. Are you one thing? Are you many things? Are you all things at all times? Are you some things some of the time? How do you know? More importantly, how does The Machine know? Each episode of *POI* focuses on a victim or perpetrator (or both) whose "number" has come up via The Machine. Somehow The Machine knows that this person is in trouble and it becomes Finch and Reese's priority to figure out what is going to happen and when and to try to prevent it.

At the heart of how The Machine recognizes the need to help someone is that individual's identity. Our identity is a tricky and highly complex thing. It's fluid, dynamic, and ever changing and it is difficult for us to conceptualize more than a handful of our identities at any given moment. In his own book *Difference and Repetition* (1994) and in his collaborations with Felix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (2009) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) Deleuze creates an infinitely multidimensional identity paradigm in which what we would call our identity can be understood as the result of thousands of separate individual occurrences working in conjunction with each other but not necessarily bound by a whole (identity).[4] The result is a complex array of differences that, in Deleuze's view, society typically subordinates to achieve uniformity but instead should fundamentally be the object of affirmation and not negation.[5]

Modernism, from a philosophical standpoint, is the tendency in contemporary culture and society to reduce and compartmentalize an individual's identity. Modernism is rooted in the scientific, technological, artistic, and philosophical transformation of society during the 1890s and early 1900s. Modernist models of identity are represented by frameworks based primarily on binary discourses relating to race (white vs. nonwhite), sex (male vs. female), sexual orientation (straight vs. gay), physical ability (able vs. disabled), and class (middle class vs. poor), where those who exist outside the dominant discourses are marginalized.[6]

Postmodernism, on the other hand, can be understood as a result, reaction, aftermath, denial, or rejection of modernism.[7] Postmodern philosophy is a school of thought that proposes that identity is more complex and dynamic than suggested by the objectivity of modernism. Identity is individually constructed and therefore subject to a multitude of factors (social, cultural, chronological), leading to similarities and differences that make each of us unique.

To better understand and appreciate how The Machine predicts crimes that are about to happen, especially those of Derek Watson and Gordon Kurzweil, we must "pop the hood" on what we mean when we say "identity."

Judgment

The language of identity is ubiquitous in contemporary social science; however, common usage belies the considerable variability in both its conceptual meanings and its theoretical role.[8] The term *identity* falls into three distinct and consistent usages:

1. to refer to the single dimension relating to the culture of a person, with no distinction drawn between, for example, identity and gender (both Watson and Kurzweil are male);[9]
2. as a method of identification with a collectivity or social category (Kurzweil is a longtime case officer for the U.S. government); or
3. to refer to parts of a "self" composed of the meanings that individuals attach to multiple "selves" or roles they typically play in a highly differentiated society (Watson is thirty-nine years old, male, Caucasian, a father, married [though his wife has left him] and unemployed).

This third usage of *identity* has developed among those who recognize the complexity of contemporary society and the need to accurately reflect the nature of identity. This postmodern notion of identity has given rise to a politics of difference.[10] Rather than recognizing universal similarities within a society (i.e., human or American) with an identical system of laws, rights, and freedoms, particular groups are demanding their unique identities be recognized.

As opposed to the more sociological definitions of identity mentioned previously, in philosophy *personal identity* examines how our identity (the thing or things that make us who we are) persists through time given that "each of us shares our current thoughts with countless beings that diverge from one another in the past or future."[11] This is sometimes called the *law of identity,* where an object is the same as itself: A → A (if you have A, then you have A).

As we consider all of these definitions together, The Machine's challenge becomes clear. First it needs to identify us as unique individuals, separate

and distinct from all others. Then it must also be able to recognize that each of us is the same person over some period of time.

Thinking about how our multidimensional differences might interact and intersect with each other is enough to tie your brain in knots. For convenience, society (and sometimes philosophy) tries to reduce individuals to a singular identity (e.g., ethnicity, gender, sexual preference) in order to compartmentalize us.

Identity Crisis

"In identity theory, the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance."[12] Some theorists have proposed that we have distinct components of self, called role identities, for each of the role positions in society that we occupy. There is some disagreement about whether our ability to switch between, create interactions and intersections among, or merge identities to create new identities happens internally or is externally motivated through personal and social interactions and as a product of discourse and participatory action. However, there is agreement "that the self must be seen as complex and differentiated [and] that the self must be conceptualized as constructed from diverse 'parts.' One can speak meaningfully of familial identities, political identities, occupational identities, and so on, all of which are incorporated into the self as that which is an object of self."[13]

Although multidimensional intersectionality frameworks represent a more flexible and adaptable model in which multiple dimensions of identity interact and intersect with one another, they exhibit a point of view found in other, more hierarchical, models of identity. That view, according to Deleuze, is an outside-in approach through which an individual's identities are understood only through externally generated stratified social categories.

External differentiation, as Deleuze points out, can be both positive—members of a group focus on what makes them the same—and negative—members focus on what someone is not. Unfortunately, there is a tendency for society, and those within it, to focus on the negative. The common thread that runs through the aforementioned identity models is the position of primacy afforded to identity. Deleuze proposes thinking of identity as secondary rather than primary. In doing so, he shifts the paradigm away from defining one's identity in terms of "otherness" when compared to individu-

als who do not possess (or appear not to possess) that identity. Instead, the focus would be on an individual's relationship with his or her own identities and the inherent differences between individuals with the same identity. In modern and postmodern identity theories (i.e., identity theory, social identity theory, and intersectionality), difference is seen as deriving from identity and subordinated by identity, opposition, analogy, and resemblance.

We recognize X because it is different from Y (or at least from not-X).[14] X could represent any identity, chosen or unchosen, that an individual may have.[15] Deleuze's point is that we typically define identity in terms of what something is not. In a Deleuzean ontology all identities are effects of difference rather than the other way around. From this perspective, identities are neither logically nor metaphysically prior to difference and "it is not difference which presupposes opposition but opposition which presupposes difference."[16] "Given that there exist differences of nature between things of the same genus," Deleuze argues, it stands to reason that there exist differences at any and all levels of classification and identification.[17]

Get Carter

Over the course of season 1 we have seen Detective Joss Carter become a central character in the *POI* universe. First she was a semiantagonist seeking to bring Reese to justice. Then she was a "number" that needed protecting from the very person she was trying to hunt down. Finally, toward the end of the season she became a semiaccomplice of Finch and Reese, neither condemning nor condoning their actions.

In the episode "Get Carter" we gain some insight into Detective Carter's identity by learning that she is not only a highly principled police officer but also a war veteran and a single mother. The Machine, of course, has learned much more about her than we will ever know, but this will be enough for our discussion at this time.

Let's imagine that Detective Carter's "mother" identity is represented by M. According to Deleuze, that identity is composed of an endless series of differences, where M is the difference between m_1 and m_2 and m_3 and so on. In this way, being M is *a* derivative (as opposed to *the* derivative) from dm where d is the differential between an infinite number of potentially different m's. Can other individuals also be M? Yes. But their M-ness is inherently different because of the different m's they possess. All roads may lead to M, but not everyone takes the same roads. Deleuze's conceptual framework has

three conceptual benefits. First, it places an individual's differences in a more positive light, where one must understand the nature of the differences to understand him- or herself. Second, it looks positively on both inter- and intragroup differences. Last, it creates a framework through which we can appreciate the inherent qualities of the differences on their own merits.

Deleuze challenges the typical Hegelian view in which contradiction and opposition, distinguishing between m and not-m and M and not-$M,$ are the principles underlying all difference and the principle building block of identity. In Deleuze's ontology difference goes all the way to the molecular level and results in an array of infinite potential identities independent of spatiotemporal restrictions derived from inherent differences as well as those influenced and shaped through sociocultural, historical, and political contexts. "Every organism, in its receptive and perpetual elements, but also in its viscera, is a sum of the contractions, of retentions and expectation."[18]

In other words, the different is related to the different through difference itself, without any mediation by an identity, and that difference should fundamentally be the object of affirmation and not negation. Deleuze's molecular perspective denotes the existence of the multiple within the singular, where intergroup differentiation arises from consideration that an individual exists as a collectivity.[19] Framing this point of view, Deleuze insists "that identity not be first, that it exist as a principle but as a second principle . . . that it revolve around the Different . . . which opens up the possibility of difference having its own concept, rather than being maintained under the domination of a concept in general already understood as identical."[20] "Switching to the molecular level renders things far more messy and fragmentary than their molar representation might suggest."[21] Pure difference is non-spatiotemporal—it is an idea. In contrast to his description of the previous identity theories, Deleuze does not present us with a model nor does he propose that difference transcends possible experience. Instead, differences between M and M or m and m are the conditions of actual experience and the internal difference in of itself based on that experience. A Deleuzean conception of difference and identity is not an abstraction of an experienced thing. It is a real system of differential relations that creates actual spaces, times, and sensations.[22]

When The Machine identifies both Derek Watson and Gordon Kurzweil as individuals preparing to commit crimes, it recognizes that both "possess an identity [that is] a singular, a particular, an exception, that is, in some essential way, unlike all others."[23] This level of individuation, or as Deleuze

calls it, *actualization,* is composed of ideas and multiplicities involving differential relations among heterogeneous components, whose rates of change are connected with each other.

Legacy

The Machine's actualization of Watson and Kurzweil's identities in "Super" crystalizes various dimensions of their identities to create a concretely existing real entity out of a set of virtual ideas. The Machine, therefore, follows an intensive process tracing differential virtual multiplicities with their complex gradients and multiple dimensions within the entity's overall identity to produce localized and individuated actual substances with extensive properties.[24] The actualization (or salience) of a particular individual (or individuals) by The Machine ties together Deleuze's themes of difference, multiplicity, virtuality, and intensity based on a theory of ideas, as opposed to Platonic essential models of identity, Kantian regulative models of unity, and Hegelian models of contradiction. Instead it is based on problematic and genetic models of difference.

In practice, The Machine takes all the pieces that make up the idea of Watson and Kurzweil to actualize representations of them very near the corporeal Watson, whom Detective Carter prevents from committing a crime, and Kurzweil, who is apprehended after arranging to sell weapons-grade uranium to the Iranian government.

The Machine's ability to "predict" crime lies in its capacity to collect seemingly disparate multiplicities, gradients, and differentials of our lives and to search, collate, and recognize the patterns (repetitions) among all the differences. Our human brains are capable of performing the same feat, given the appropriate resources, as demonstrated by Detective Carter's apprehension of Watson before he can assault John Dalton. It's just that The Machine is faster, more powerful, and has more time and resources.

The Fix

As if this all of this wasn't complicated enough, we also have to consider that our multidimensional identities travel across more than just the axes of x, y, and z. They also interact, intersect, and are affected by time. Remember, the typical philosophical concepts of personal identity as they relate to time can be grouped into two overarching problems. *Diachronic* problems address

the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a person at one time and a person at another time can be said to be the same person persisting through time. *Synchronic* problems, on the other hand, are grounded in the question of what feature(s) or trait(s) characterize a given person at one time. Within these overarching frameworks, there is considerable debate with regard to the continuity of bodily substance, mental substance, and consciousness over time.

In a Deleuzean ontology, not only is identity viewed differently (no pun intended) but time and its impact on identity are deconstructed. The idea that we can be grouped and our behavior predicted based on static positivist identity frameworks is even more unlikely and runs counter to another one of Deleuze's central tenets: "becoming." Deleuze used the term *becoming* in conjunction with his concept of a body without organs (BwO).[25] BwO refers to a virtual dimension of the body that complements, affects, and penetrates the actual body. The actual body has, or at least expresses, the traits, habits, movements, and qualities of our various dimensions of identity. The virtual body, on the other hand, is a reservoir of potential traits, connections, affects, movements, and qualities that exist outside of spatiotemporal limitations. Contact with other bodies (i.e., interactions and experiences) and self-activation, in which the individual actively experiments with his or her own potentials, are what Deleuze and Guattari call "becomings."

Becomings challenge the notion of "being" and complement the previously discussed ontology of internal differentiation. What may appear to be solid and stable is really "permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles."[26] Stable dimensions of identity, such as African American or military, are actually collections of flows—virtual masses of swirling potentialities that can be activated (or actualized) anytime by the actual body. The difference between The Machine and us is that our minds are capable of actualizing only a handful of these potentialities at any particular moment. The Machine, however, is capable of actualizing our entire identity based on all potentialities.

Deleuze's deconstructed "body," with its multiple dimensions of identity, reacts, merges, intersects and interacts with time in a nonlinear fashion. In his configuration Deleuze (and The Machine, presumably) conceptualizes time in terms of three different levels (syntheses) within which repetition occurs.[27]

Level one is exemplified by habit, which embeds the past in the present and gestures toward the future by transforming experience into urgency. Level two sustains relationships between more distant events through the active force of memory. Memory transforms time and "implies between successive presents non-localisable connections, actions at a distance, systems of replay, resonance and echoes, objective chances, signs, signals, and roles which transcend spatial locations and temporal successions."[28] Level three still exists in the present but in a way that breaks free of the simple repetition of time. This level refers to an *ultimate event* powerful enough in symbolism to become omnipresent (salient).[29]

Cura Te Ipsum

The postmodern/poststructural conception of identity as espoused by Deleuze is surely as complex as the reality of our own individual identities. However, the technological wizardry employed by Finch that enables The Machine to actualize individuals in need of assistance is truly remarkable when we consider that The Machine's morphogenetic process has been happening for each individual within New York City twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week since its inception in 2002. This ability takes Deleuze's themes to a whole new level in that difference, multiplicity, repetition, virtuality, and intensity are not just intersecting and interacting within one actualized individual. The Machine is processing, intersecting, and interacting these themes across millions of actualized individuals, each with thousands of differentials. And, as Ingram comments, it does this *all* the time to *all* of us.

The depth of The Machine's grasp of Deleuzean themes is apparent when Finch reveals to Ingram how Kurzweil's number came up in another flashback scene at the end of "Super" (also while reading an Internet article titled "Kurzweil Pleads Guilty to Espionage"):

> NATHAN: Now tell me, what on earth was it that made The Machine pick out Kurzweil's number?
> FINCH: You want me to pop the hood?
> NATHAN: Yeah!
> FINCH: November 2002. This isn't the first item chronologically, but it's the one that triggered a harder look.
> NATHAN: A gas station receipt.

FINCH: Eighteen of them. From a Shell station just outside of Towson, Maryland. Kurzweil stopped every third Thursday of every even month even if he filled up the day before. On three of his eighteen visits this SUV was present two hours before.

NATHAN: A dead drop.

FINCH: The SUV was registered to the wife of a Turkish oil executive that paid for plane tickets used by an Iranian suspect from the bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994. The *thinnest* thread connect Kurzweil and his contact and The Machine could see it. It knew and it was right!

While the thought of such an omniscient machine is, in Ingram's words, terrifying, it is also awe inspiring in that in many ways The Machine is able to do something that we cannot. It sees people as complex individuals with identities based on untold numbers of gradients, events, differences, and ecologies independent of our own spatiotemporal restrictions rather than falling into the social and psychological trap of reductionism. In doing so it is also able to view society as a much richer tapestry of interconnecting, intersecting, and interlocking gradients, ecologies, and happenings that affect the identities of both individuals and groups in constant states of becoming than we may ever be able to conceive.

As opposed to real people, actualized individuals developed within the mainframe of The Machine are *threshold people*—"they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system . . . to develop innovative, potentially transformative perspectives [respecting] the differences within and among the diverse groups and, simultaneously, posit commonalities."[30] These threshold people enable The Machine to see, theoretically, all potentialities and hone in on the ones most likely to lead to violent acts of crime.

The power that such a machine could give to an individual or organization is unimaginable, which is why Finch has taken careful measures to protect himself and The Machine. In the wrong hands, The Machine could be used to inflict an Orwellian nightmare on innocent citizens in an effort to maintain the safety and security of society. In the right hands it can champion the voiceless, give hope to the hopeless, and protect the innocent from those who would do them harm. All it takes is someone to act and, as Finch notes, "that, Detective Carter, is what we do."

Notes

1. See especially Deleuze's solo work, *Difference and Repetition* (1994), and his collaborations with Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (2009) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), and Becker's *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1971), *Denial of Death* (1997), and *Escape from Evil* (1975).

There is a branch of experimental social psychology that focuses on how terror and mortality salience affect human behavior, known as Terror Management Theory (TMT). "The basic gist of the theory is that humans are motivated to quell the potential for terror inherent in the human awareness of vulnerability and mortality by investing in cultural belief systems (or worldviews) that imbue life with meaning, and the individuals who subscribe to them with significance (or self-esteem). Since its inception, the theory has generated empirical research into not just the nature of self-esteem motivation and prejudice, but also a host of other forms of human social behavior. To date, over 300 studies conducted in over a dozen countries." "Terror Management Theory," http://www.tmt.missouri.edu/, updated February 1, 2008.

2. T. Pysczynski, S. Solomon, and J. Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 8.

3. Ibid., 7.

4. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

5. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

6. T. L. Robinson, "The Intersections of Dominant Discourses across Race, Gender, and Other Identities," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 77, no. 1 (1999), 73–79.

7. R. Appignanesi, C. Garratt, Z. Sardar, and P. Curry, *Introducing Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2003).

8. S. Stryker and P. J. Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2000): 284–97.

9. Culture can reference any group to which an individual may belong, including, but not limited to, those defined by ethnicity, gender, age group, and profession. This can include both conscious and unconscious identities as well as those that are chosen or unchosen.

10. C. Taylor, K. A. Appiah, J. Habermas, S. C. Rockefeller, M. Walzer, and S. Wolf, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition,* ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

11. E. T. Olson, "Personal Identity," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* revised 2010, accessed September 2012, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/identity-personal/.

12. Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2000): 224–37.

13. S. Stryker, "Identity Salience and Role Performance: The Relevance of Sym-

bolic Interaction Theory for Family Research," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 30, no. 4 (1968): 558–64.

14. In Deleuze's ontology, this denotation assumes both X and Y are relatively stable identities.

15. The idea of chosen versus unchosen identities was popularized by philosopher Amartya Sen. Chosen identities are those we consciously decide to adopt as part of our overall identity. This could include political affiliation, profession, and even identities relating to marital status. Unchosen identities are those we have no control over. These include ethnicity, sexual preference, gender (although there is some debate on that), and age. Unchosen identities can also include "accidental" identities—identities we adopt due to unforeseen circumstances. For example, a car accident may give one a paraplegic identity or the death of a spouse my give one a widow or widower identity.

16. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 51.

17. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus,* 6th ed., trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 133.

18. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 73.

19. S. D. Brown and P. Lunt, "A Genealogy of the Social Identity Tradition: Deleuze and Guattari and Social Psychology," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 41 (2002): 1–23. "Molecular" is Deleuze's preferred term, denoting the existence of the multiple within the singular.

20. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 41.

21. Brown and Lunt, "Genealogy of the Social Identity Tradition," 13. "Molar" is Deleuze's preferred term for a singular and coherent entity or identity.

22. D. Papadopoulos, "In the Ruins of Representation: Identity, Individuality, Subjectification," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 47 (2008): 139–65.

23. J. Schostak and J. Schostak, *Radical Research* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 188.

24. D. Smith and J. Protevi, "Gilles Deleuze," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* revised 2012, accessed September 2012, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/deleuze/.

25. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus.*

26. Ibid., 40.

27. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition.*

28. Ibid., 83.

29. As mentioned earlier, 9/11 represents a universal ultimate event in that it has had a global impact corporeally and existentially. Ultimate events, however, can be more localized and personalized yet still have the same deep impact. The assassination of a leader (e.g., President John F. Kennedy), the death of a spouse, or the loss of a job can resonate deep in the individual and collective psyches of those affected by the event.

30. A. Keating, "From the Borderlands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras—Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change," special issue, *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* (Summer 2006): 5–16, quote on p. 6.

Are J. J. Abrams's "Leading Ladies" Really Feminist Role Models?

Cynthia Jones

Felicity Porter of *Felicity,* Sydney Bristow of *Alias,* and Olivia Dunham of *Fringe* are rather unique female characters, especially when considered in comparison to the women seen in previous decades on American television. Until recently, even seemingly strong female leads often occupied and were defined by very traditional and stereotypical female roles, such as homemakers, wives, girlfriends, or mothers. One of the central goals of numerous current and historical feminist theorists is to achieve the freedom for women to choose their own roles and not have them chosen for them by a patriarchal system. Such role models are more important than one might imagine. A pervasive and persuasive argument from many feminists regarding role models is that strong female role models, and conversely the absence of appropriate female role models, can be very influential for young women. Not only do young women need to see powerful female role models in general, but entrance into many professions can be restricted by the lack of female professionals with whom young women can identify. If a young woman cannot see herself in a role because all the instantiations she sees are male, like physicists or astronauts, for example, then she is considerably less likely to choose that role when an opportunity arises. It is thus a worthwhile exercise to examine Abrams's central female characters and assess their suitability as feminist role models. From a feminist perspective, a significant question about Abrams's female leads in *Felicity, Alias,* and *Fringe* is whether they present positive images as feminist role models from the standpoint of three different feminist writers.

This chapter will explore the three central female characters from these television shows and evaluate them from several feminist perspectives, one from each "wave" of feminist theorizing. I will also discuss and critically evaluate Felicity, Sydney, and Olivia through the lenses, so to speak, of two of the central issues brought to light by feminist theorists: the pervasive oppression of women and the centrality of the masculine ideal of the impartial observer present in most mainstream Western philosophy. But before we can examine these topics, we should address the issue of why anyone should care about what feminists think about these characters in the first place.

What Is Feminism?

"Feminism" can be defined in numerous ways. Many people believe that feminism is about blaming current males for the past treatment of women or that "feminist" is synonymous with "man-hater." While there have been a handful of feminist thinkers who, perhaps somewhat understandably, have lashed out against the historically dominant and domineering gender, the majority of feminist theorists are not man-haters. My own experiences in grappling with this thing called "feminism" and thinkers who label themselves as "feminists" have led me to realize that many people are unfamiliar with the concepts discussed by feminist theorists and many more wonder why they should care what feminists say at all. I will admit at the outset that I am not an expert in feminist theories, although I have read many feminist thinkers, particularly those in feminist ethics. And I have firsthand experience with the negative connotations of feminism, as I have gone through the struggle myself over whether to call myself a feminist.

When I started as an assistant professor almost a decade ago, a senior colleague suggested I teach a course in feminist theories. Convinced that this was another way to say, "You're a female so you should know and teach feminism," I resisted the suggestion. But a few years later I was offered a bit of what turned out to be sage wisdom from another colleague that changed my mind. "Why should I care about what feminists think," I asked, "especially since there is such disagreement among feminist writers and since the word 'feminism' has such negative connotations for most people?" She responded simply that one of the obvious kernels of truth upon which feminism is based is that women should receive the same consideration and have the same basic human rights afforded to them as men and that agreeing with this was good enough to call yourself a feminist. If this is indeed the

case, then anyone who isn't a feminist according to this minimal criterion should be considered morally suspect indeed. Even though this minimalist answer is a good start, feminist theorizing encompasses so much more, as I have learned.

So what is feminism? I argue that both a simple as well as a more complex answer can be offered. The complex answer is that feminist theorizing has occurred in what has typically been described as three "waves" of thought and that in each of these waves feminists have been concerned with somewhat different problems and have offered somewhat different solutions. The three waves of feminist theorizing, along with a representative theorist from each period, will be discussed in greater detail in the next section; for now, the simpler answer is a better place to start.

The opening lines of Ann Cudd and Robin Andreasen's *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology* offers the following definition: "Feminist theory is the attempt to make intellectual sense of, and then to critique, the subordination of women to men. As such it has a relatively short history, for the history of seeing subordination as something that needs to be understood, rather than simply accommodated, or perhaps given a rationale, is relatively short."[1] So according to Cudd and Andreasen, feminism is at least about understanding and critiquing the oppression and subjugation of women. I think this suggests the simplest and clearest explanation that one can give: *feminism* is the recognition of the historical and current oppression of one gender, and this oppression is problematic. A *feminist* is then someone who recognizes this oppression where it can be found and hopefully draws attention to it.

To the question, "why should I care about what feminists think regarding Abrams's central female characters?" I would respond that we should care if recognizing the problematic oppression of women is important. And it is. Two of the reasons I am a fan of Abrams's work are that I appreciate his inclusion of strong and intelligent women who occupy nontraditional roles as central figures in his programs, and I think these characters represent a significant improvement over the stereotypical female television characters I experienced while growing up. We should care about what feminists think about the female central characters in Abrams's television programs because feminists care about addressing morally problematic gender inequities—inequities that have been consistently reinforced by most social structures and, for the most part, mirrored on television. If Abrams's female central characters represent a change for the better, away from some of these prob-

lematic and restrictive stereotypes, given that his shows are fairly popular and given that television can be very influential on young people's views of the world, then we should care about what Felicity, Sydney, and Olivia are teaching young people about gender roles and gender inequities.

Character Critiques from the Three Waves of Feminism

I've chosen to discuss and critically evaluate Abrams's female leads from the perspectives of three feminist theorists, each representative of one of the three periods, known as "waves," of feminist thought. From *first-wave feminism* we have Mary Wollstonecraft, whose most famous work, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792), argued for allowing women access to the educational, political, and economic spheres that had been traditionally reserved for men. As such, first-wave feminists worked mainly to achieve some educational, political, and economic freedoms for women. At the time Wollstonecraft wrote her essay, women had virtually no access to serious education, had no direct participation or voice in the political systems in Western countries, and typically lacked the right to own property or earn an income of their own. The success of the women's suffrage movement in particular seemed to satisfy some of the basics of the demands for political freedoms made by these early feminists, resulting in a significant decrease in interest in feminist writings and activism for a few decades.

From what is described as *second-wave feminism* we see the seminal work of Simone de Beauvoir, especially *The Second Sex* (1949), which is typically credited as originating this wave of feminist theorizing. Beauvoir argues for more than women's access to the educational, political, and economic spheres. She argues that the denigration of women to the category of the "Other," always the inferior of the male, is maintained through virtually all aspects of private life, relationships, and social life. Merely attaining some minimal access to the educational, political, and economic spheres is insufficient to offer any sort of real equality for women, as the oppression they face permeates much more than these spheres. It is instead central to the female gender and the forced gender roles themselves.

From the *third wave of feminism* we have bell hooks, whose writings include *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). Hooks criticizes many "civil rights" and political movements, including mainstream (second-wave) feminism, for their failure to recognize the intersection of oppression from many

sources, especially race, poverty, and gender. She also points out the failure of mainstream feminism and other movements to recognize the unique plight of black women and women of color, instead exacerbating their plight in certain ways to advance the agenda of their programs, and their failure to recognize that the oppression of women is not singular or shared in the same way by all women. Hooks offers persuasive arguments against the exclusion of men from the struggle for equality between the genders in which feminist thinkers engage, an exclusion she sees in contemporary feminism.

So what would these feminists think of Felicity, Sydney, and Olivia? One of the most significant contributions Mary Wollstonecraft offers is her critique of "sensibilities" as the cornerstone of women's understanding. During her time, and continuing to a lesser extent today, women were encouraged to "follow their hearts" rather than their heads—not surprising since the prevailing wisdom of the day was that women were not fully possessed of rational capacities like men and thus needn't be educated to make decisions like men. In this respect, Sydney and Olivia certainly seem to make largely rational and reasonable decisions. (Although a few of the rather outlandish pseudoscientific claims and bizarre medical procedures to which Olivia consents give me a bit of pause. But since a central premise of *Fringe* is the amalgam of some bizarre pseudoscience and some weird but real actual science, and since it is the somewhat insane "mad" scientist Dr. Walter Bishop who proposes most of the crazy ideas, this aspect of Olivia's personality seems both unavoidable and forgivable.) Sydney tends to follow her gut instincts at times, but this isn't the same thing exactly as advocating "sensibilities" over reason as the guide for the feminine. Instead, cognitive psychologists tell us that many well-trained individuals often follow the rational path when they follow their gut instincts in situations where a rational and well-considered assessment of the situation isn't possible. Sydney certainly finds herself in these scenarios quite frequently.

But what about Felicity? She changed her life plan based on a seemingly spur-of-the-moment decision to follow a teenage crush off to college rather than to follow the path her parents chose and that she had previously accepted without questioning. This decision certainly seems to put her in the category of employing "sensibility" over reasoning. But we gradually find out that this seemingly irrational, following-her-heart decision was really the best thing for her in terms of developing as her own person, and so her decision for independence of sorts wasn't quite based on sensibilities. Instead, the decision to eschew her parents' plans for her was in many ways

a more traditionally masculine decision. But I admit that I wish in the end she had chosen Noel over Ben, as I think that would have been a cleaner break from her past and its well-meaning oppression. Choosing Ben in the end, the young man she "ran off to New York to follow," seems to reinforce the sentimental "female" reasoning that Wollstonecraft spoke against.

First-wave feminists, however, also strove to attain access for women to the educational, political, and economic spheres, and all three of Abrams's female characters pass this mark with flying colors. When Nina Sharp offers Olivia a job at Massive Dynamic for the first time, she remarks on the male-dominated roles they both occupy and the significance of their presence in these roles. Olivia and Sydney make excellent role models from this perspective, as does Felicity, albeit to a lesser extent. But it might be argued that, in examining *Felicity* through the totality of Felicity's four years in college, she develops from a more traditionally feminine eighteen-year-old to a more confident, worldly, and better-educated twenty-two-year-old, which in itself demonstrates a move toward a more positive role model for young women. Looking at the character's progression through time and through college thus demonstrates the move toward a more positive female image from the standpoint of first-wave feminism.

How should we evaluate these three characters from the perspective of second-wave feminists like Simone de Beauvoir? Beauvoir offers compelling arguments that women are perpetually the "Other," subject to the power, education, and domination of men, and that the pervasiveness of the oppression of women isn't relegated to just a few areas. Seen from this perspective, all three of Abrams's female lead characters, especially Sydney and Olivia, seem to be good role models for demonstrating that women have abilities across the board that are the equal of men's.[2] Sydney sometimes demonstrates a need for the emotional stability and companionship of her friends, but this traditionally feminine neediness is balanced by her dedication to her profession and her obvious professional capabilities. As *Felicity* is more of a coming-of-age story, we can again look at her character throughout her four years in college as opposed to early in the show, when she seems to exemplify in many ways the meek and weak "good girl" persona. She works through her feminine naiveté and weaknesses and comes out stronger on the other end. Despite some characteristics of Felicity and Sydney that portray weakness, the characters come out well on the other side and seem to have achieved the respect of friends and colleagues for their strength and courage. And perhaps this is a good thing for a feminist role model, as it demonstrates

that even if women start out at a disadvantage, they can overcome it and fill roles or choose professions typically reserved for men.

What can we say about our three Abrams heroines from the perspective of bell hooks? Many third-wave feminists, hooks included, focus on the exclusion of women of color and poor women from the feminist movement. Third-wave feminists often note that the goals of second-wave feminism are really the goals of white, middle- and upper-class women and that not only are women of color ignored but their concerns and interests are entirely excluded as mainstream feminism strives to demonstrate that the plight of the "woman oppressed" is universal. But the oppression faced by poor women of color is different and more pervasive than that faced by the white women who defined the second wave of feminism, hooks argues. Second-wave feminists focused on women's right to work and join the professions, for example, to escape unhappy and forced work at home, where they are excluded from true participation in social and political life and power. Third-wave feminists such as hooks contend that many women of color and poor women would fight for the opportunity to stay home with their children as a matter of choice—a choice they are denied by circumstances or poverty and a choice that is ignored by second-wave feminism. Rather than apply hooks's critiques directly to Abrams's heroines, it may suffice to say that Felicity, Sydney, and Olivia are all clearly white, educated, upper-middle-class women who, although they seem in general to be good role models from the perspectives of first- and second-wave feminism, probably offer less in the way of being true role models who can be emulated by poor women or women of color. Even though there are a significant number of people of color in the three shows in question—for example, Phillip Broyles, Olivia's FBI boss, and junior agent Astrid Farnsworth from *Fringe,* as well as Felicity's friend Elena and Sydney's friend Francie—the three central female characters are obviously Anglo.

Pervasive Oppression and the "Maleness" of Self and Autonomy

One of the most significant contributions of feminism to philosophy, value theory, and many other academic disciplines is to draw attention to the importance of viewing theories, past events, and contemporary problems from different perspectives. A popular way to discuss the consideration of feminist critiques, or seeing theories or events from the perspective of feminist theorizing, is to suggest that we consider a topic from a feminist stand-

point or through a feminist "lens." This same metaphor of using different "lenses" to view theories or events has surfaced in other sorts of theorizing as well. It has become popular to say that viewing a practice through the lens of race, class, or economics can reveal different aspects that might not have surfaced without the use of those perspectives. Using a somewhat over-simplified example to illustrate, we can consider that forty-three different people have held the office of president of the United States. If we look at this situation through a feminist lens, we would surely notice that all forty-three have been male. If we consider the same fact through the lenses of race, class, and economics we would note that all have been Anglo (except President Obama) and that most have hailed from rather specific and privileged educational, economic, and class backgrounds. As a further example of the lens metaphor, we can examine some common and seemingly innocuous practices in our culture, including male door-opening behavior; the typical restaurant waitstaff's offering of the check to the man at the table; the female titles of "Miss" and "Mrs.," which express a woman's marital status, in comparison to the singular male counterpart of "Mr."; and so on. Such events and situations may be cultural in nature but viewing them through the lens of feminism can shed light on the inherent gender bias in these otherwise generally accepted practices.

I will utilize the lens metaphor here by considering the characters of Felicity, Sydney, and Olivia in light of two of the recurring and central themes in feminist theorizing. These are the recognition of the pervasive historical and current oppression of women that shapes and influences societies and individuals in both overt and subtle ways and the criticism of the traditional Western notions of self and autonomy as being gendered (that is, the impartial, unconnected, and independent observer is a male ideal, many feminist theorists argue). Again, we can use these two central themes as lenses through which to examine our three female characters. I'll call the former the "oppression lens," as it reveals how the systemic oppression of women can influence situations and events. I will call the latter the "interconnected-ness lens," as many contemporary feminist theorists suggest that people are interconnected in ways that cannot be transcended in the manner that the traditional independent male ideal of the self suggests.[3] So what can these two lenses reveal about Felicity, Sydney, and Olivia?

Looking first through the "oppression lens," we need to remember that second- and third-wave feminists argue convincingly that the oppression of one gender is considerably more far-reaching than merely their exclu-

sion from the political, social, educational, and economic spheres (as the main goal of first-wave feminism was to gain inclusion for women in these spheres). In looking at Sydney, Felicity, and Olivia through the lens of systemic oppression, the first thing I notice is that they are all survivors of sorts of some significant manipulation or deception. One of the most interesting features of these three female characters is their "coming out the other end," so to speak, after manipulation at the hands of patriarchy in one form or another.

Felicity's choice of college, ostensibly to follow a man she hardly knows and has a crush on, is really a move away from her controlling parents' (mostly her father's) expectation that she will follow in her father's path and become a physician. We find out early on that he seems to have even manipulated the system a bit to guarantee her access to Stanford in premed. Her whole life seems to have been preplanned by her parents (from the "zygote" phase on, as Felicity tells us in the first season). Paternalistic manipulation, though perhaps loving, is still paternalistic manipulation. Through repeated attempts at bribery by her parents to get her "back on track," she resists and remains in New York to find herself.

We can see Sydney's manipulation at the hands of SD-6, her father, Jack Bristow, and Arvin Sloane as clear examples of oppression—examples of the male patriarchy dominating a woman's psyche so completely that she never truly acts freely since the "self" of a person so dominated cannot ever act freely. Conceived in this way, when Sydney finds out that she does not actually work for the CIA or the U.S. government but instead is part of a major power working against both, her situation appears somewhat analogous to that of a woman who at some point recognizes her oppression and sees for the first time the feminist point that the entire political and social system within which she has been raised has been indoctrinating her into the patriarchy. When Sydney turns into a double agent and eventually brings about the downfall of the organization that has for so long held her captive, both literally and metaphorically speaking, through its lies and manipulation, she has in many ways broken free. But she is trained for, and is really quite good at, being a spy, and so she goes on in that line, thus trading one kind of oppression for another, but at least with her eyes now opened she seems to be able to "choose" her allies and allegiances a bit more freely.

Fringe begins with Olivia Dunham recognizing her own manipulation at the hands of her lover and partner, John Scott, whom she kills in the pilot episode after she risks her life to save him and he then tries to kill

her. Throughout the show, Olivia is a driving force in many ways, rather than a follower. Unlike Felicity and Sydney, outside of her manipulation by her partner, the manipulation she faces repeatedly in the show is an all-encompassing power struggle that isn't as individualized a struggle as the other two characters'. But as with Felicity and Olivia, much of what happens centers on the choices Olivia makes. All three of these characters can tell us something interesting and useful when seen through the feminist lens of oppression.

Looking through the "interconnectedness lens" we can consider whether Sydney, Felicity, and Olivia make decisions through the traditional detached male, independent observer approach. (Interestingly, the Observers from *Fringe* seem to personify this separatist and impartial masculine role in many ways.) As before, we see Sydney and Olivia occupying more independent roles, but interestingly, they do so with a strong support network. The three shows in question (*Felicity* and *Alias* more significantly) in many ways revolve around the choices made by the three female characters. Of course, the feminists who argue against adopting the "male" conception of the internal self and of "human" autonomy as an impartial and separate entity from the embodied and social creature might not see their choices as truly free, but I argue that the representation of women making intelligent choices that shape the world in meaningful ways is significant. And all three of these characters, Felicity and Sydney in particular, demonstrate that these decisions needn't be made entirely from the independent, impartial, male standpoint but rather can be made while recognizing the interconnectedness that women often more clearly represent.

Sydney Bristow and Olivia Dunham represent strong feminist role models in terms of first- and second-wave feminism. Examining Felicity Porter as a character across her four years in college (and the show) demonstrates that considering her coming-of-age tale as a whole makes her a better example of a role model than does examining many of the particular events in the show or her specific choices. None of the characters, however, really addresses the core of the issues on which third-wave feminists focus. In considering the two central feminist themes of pervasive oppression and the genderedness of the Western notion of autonomy, Abrams's three female lead characters offer interesting pictures of different aspects of these concepts. In the end, Sydney and Olivia are much closer to the traditional male ideal of detached independence than Felicity, for good or for bad. I argue that Abrams has cre-

ated three strong female characters and that feminist lessons can be learned in considering their suitability as female role models.

Notes

1. Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen, *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 1.

2. This is not to argue that men and women should be treated equally in terms of sameness but rather that they should be treated equally in terms of opportunities afforded them.

3. Of course, not all feminist theorists who note the "maleness" of traditional Western notions of self and autonomy as independent and impartial suggest that these need to be replaced with the concept of an interconnected self that encompasses the feminist notion. Some instead suggest that traditional conceptions of the self and of autonomy are the correct concepts, even if rooted in a gendered and idealized "maleness." The notion of self and the corresponding concept of autonomy are significant philosophically in numerous ways, the most compelling of which can be found in value theory and in political theory. The feminist attack on the genderedness of the impartial observer stance can be seen most significantly in the ethics of care approaches and in feminist epistemology, where feminist theorists suggest that we cannot be separate in order to make ethical decisions or to access knowledge in a truly impartial manner, as the impartial observer stance suggests.

Scene 2

MEMENTO MORI

THE END IS NIGH

Armageddon and the Meaning of Life Found through Death

Ashley Barkman

Nearly every influential philosophy or religion speculates on death, since life's meaning often hinges on one's perception of the afterlife. Arguably the four most influential philosophies spanning the East and West—Hinduism, Buddhism, Platonism, and Christianity—reveal that death is valuable as a means to grasp at a higher reality, to recognize that the real world is not this transient, material world of constant flux and decay. Facing imminent death awakens us to the weighty things of true worth. J. J. Abrams explores this theme in *Armageddon.* People live ordinary, mundane (we could almost say illusionary) lives until the threat of world extinction is discovered. Ordinary people are forced to react to a "global killer" and although there is no emphasis on the next life per se, we do see that all the characters have ethical responses. Such an ethical response is vital to Hinduism, Buddhism, Platonism, and Christianity, for metaphysics is part and parcel with ethical response. In this chapter I will argue that the threat of global disaster is valuable as a means to enlightenment, and I will develop this argument by examining the perspectives of the four aforementioned philosophies on these matters, using examples from *Armageddon* to support this thesis.

Hinduism: The Imperishable Is the Real

The Hindu worldview perceives life as inextricably intertwined with suffering: for every existent pleasure, there is a corresponding pain.[1] There is no resolution to this dynamic since the soul of every individual, shaped by karma, or the ethical choices made in life, is reincarnated to a higher or lower life form within the giant cycle of life and death, *samsāra*.[2] In *Arma-*

geddon, the working-class men who work on the oil platforms with Harry Stampers (Bruce Willis) are clearly not those who've reincarnated on the peak cycle of *samsāra.* They are the nonconformists, the rebels, outcasts, and criminals; their list of compensatory requests for their volunteer work reveals something about their simple and worldly nature: fifty-six parking tickets taken care of, two women friends made American citizens (no questions asked), eight-track tapes brought back, an Emperor's Package at Caesar's Palace, the disclosure of who killed Kennedy, a summer in the Lincoln bedroom at the White House, and never to pay taxes again. Ever. And yet their journey will change their fate forever. A new cycle of life is to unfold, a new entry into *samsāra.*

This *samsāric* kind of fate wasn't acceptable for the Hindus, who define happiness as the absence of suffering. Hindus believe that pain—which permanently resides in the *samsāric* cycle—must be obliterated in the end, much like the literal Texas-sized meteor headed for Earth in *Armageddon.* The destruction of the latter will prevent annihilation of Earth and its inhabitants. For the Hindus, believing that suffering arises out of ignorance, in particular, ignorance of reality, one must escape from the deception that one has an essential self or soul. Such intentional or unintentional ignorance fatefully ensnares the individual in perpetual reincarnation and therefore in the clutches of pain. Much like the ignorant person dwelling in the *samsāric* circle, Stampers's men are initially unable to see the consequences of their actions or even grasp at the magnitude of the task at hand—what it means for them to volunteer to save the world! Stampers chooses to help because he trusts no one else to do it, and the remainder of them volunteer out of a filial loyalty to Stampers. Oscar Choi (Owen Wilson) is the exception; his bright-eyed enthusiasm indicates that he sees this act on the mythic level—it's "deep blue hero stuff."

The enlightened individual knows reality, understanding the eternal truth, which "*does not see death, nor illness, nor pain; he sees everything as the Self, and obtains all.*"[3] Stampers's final act of self-sacrifice (detonating the nuke manually) shows that he has reached this higher level of understanding, for he gains himself by sacrificing himself; when he says to his daughter, "We win, Gracie!" he means just that: we—the unity of all reality—is revealed by the elimination of the narrow individualistic ego. Stampers obtains all by sacrificing all. Like the enlightened individual who, through meditation and spiritual exercise, comes to see that at his core he isn't an individual self at all but rather is identical to *Ātman*—the ultimate self, or

totality of all souls—which is another word for *Brahman,* or ultimate reality, Stamper recognizes a greater reality: death in his case is victory, not defeat.

Furthermore, the unenlightened individual is trapped in the illusion of *samsāra.* But the truly happy individual is the one who achieves *moksha,* or freedom from all illusions and delusions—when he realizes that there is no self, there is only Self; there is no physical world or cycle of death and rebirth, there is only reality.[4] Both the body and self/ego are illusionary and belief in these is the cause of all the woes of the world: "Fools follow the desires of the flesh and fall into the snare of all-encompassing death; but the wise, knowing the Self as eternal, seek not the things that pass away."[5]

If a Hindu sees death as illusionary in its ultimate sense, then there is no fear of dying. The Hindu's only concern is the realization of the Self. Consequently, the Hindu could take the prospect of death—for example, the prospect of meteorites destroying the ego and all that it holds on to—as a very good thing. It could be, as with Christianity, a chance to wake up to the larger concern. Moreover, acts of heroism, though again not valuable for their own sake, are still valuable as a means to eliminate the ego by focusing on others, which Stampers and his men are able to do for the chance at saving Earth.

Buddhism: Wake Up to Reality

Siddhārtha Gautama, who founded Buddhism, was an Indian prince who renounced wealth and family to become an ascetic once he was given the Four Signs, which led him to see the reality of old age, sickness, death, and most importantly, the possibility of escaping from these inevitable forms of suffering.[6] Recognizing that suffering threatened to diminish all earthly pleasures, the Buddha left everything behind in search of the means to escape from suffering. And perhaps this is the case with some of the men who volunteer with Stampers. Chick (Will Patton) seems to hold deep remorse about his failed relationship with the mother of his child and uses life away from society as a coping mechanism, and Rockhound (Steve Buscemi) is an academic genius who chooses the life of an oil driller because "the money's good, the scenery changes and they let [him] use explosives." Life on an oil platform is their form of escape from a society that they have difficulty fitting into.

Siddhārtha studied and trained with many Indian philosophers and yogis, seeking the means to eliminate suffering permanently; however, the

best they could do was temporarily suspend suffering, not obliterate it altogether. Still in search of an end to suffering, Siddhārtha accepted the Hindu doctrines of karma ("fruits of action"), *samsāra* ("the wheel of rebirth"), and most significantly, the idea that escape from *samsāra* and suffering is the highest good. When Siddhārtha ultimately achieved enlightenment and became the Buddha, he spoke of his own enlightenment as simply the inverse of Hindu enlightenment; while the Hindus spoke of enlightenment as the realization and experience of the self as *Ātman,* which is *Brahman,* or the culmination of all substantial things, the Buddha spoke of enlightenment as the realization of *anātman,* or "no-self"—the denial of any concrete reality—and the subsequent experience of the extinguishing of self, or nirvana, through such knowledge.

It's clear that the Buddha, like the Hindus, defined happiness as the absence of suffering since he denied substantial reality, including a substantial self and even a substantial law of karma; all of existence was unavoidably linked to pain and suffering. Eliminating all desires ultimately leads to an escape from *samsāra* and into nothingness.

In Buddhism death and dying are, as with Hinduism, illusionary. And, also like Hinduism, Buddhism rejects the concept of a substantial self or ego. However, while Hinduism says that the self is actually Self, or *Ātman,* Buddhism denies this. All is illusionary. But this doesn't mean that the threat of death has no value. If we restrict our talk to reincarnation within *samsāra,* then it's clear that moral actions will give us good karma, which, when accumulated, will eventually help us get to the point where we *really* understand the nature of existence and can thus achieve enlightenment. Moral actions might not be good in and of themselves, but they are certainly valuable means of self-eliminating, thus freeing us from a powerful barrier to our own happiness.

A great illustration is from the story of two Buddhist monks who saw a beautiful woman unable to cross a river. The older monk, without hesitation, picked up the woman and carried her across and then the two monks continued on their way. A short while later the younger monk accused the older monk of focusing on worldly concerns and pleasures, to which the older monk replied, "I have left her behind, but you haven't." In *Armageddon,* when Harry Stamper sacrifices himself for his future son-in-law, he performs an action that is not egocentric—he leaves himself behind for another—and so moves one step closer, in the next life, to the realization that there is no ego. Eventually, if he keeps on performing these types of

actions in future lives, he may get to the point where he finally realizes that all things are illusionary and that taking a shotgun to A. J. for romancing his daughter, Grace (Liv Tyler), is quite unnecessary and inappropriate in the grand scheme of things.

Platonism: Gazing at Reality

Plato's *Republic* attempts to define morality. In the first book, the sophist Thrasymachus argues that morality is simply a tool by which (immoral) rulers manipulate those below them, a means to an end and not something good in and of itself.[7] In the second book, this belief that morality is a social construct is refined by Socrates's friend, Glaucon. Glaucon asks, "Is morality good in all circumstances or the appearance of morality in all circumstances?"[8] Glaucon agrees with the latter, maintaining that if people can act immorally without experiencing any negative effects, such as punishment or social instability, everyone would do so since immorality is more beneficial than morality. That is, the only reason people act morally is because they are afraid of the consequences of not doing so—not because they actually think morality is good in and of itself. To make his point, Glaucon tells the story of Gyges and his magical ring:

> An ancestor of Gyges of Lydia, a shepherd by all accounts, was in the service of the Lydian ruler of the time, when a heavy rainstorm occurred and an earthquake cracked open the land to a certain extent, and a chasm appeared in the region where he was pasturing his flocks. He was fascinated by the sight, and went down into the chasm and saw there, among other artifacts, a bronze horse, which was hollow and had windows set in it; he stooped and looked in through the windows and saw a corpse inside, which seemed to be that of a giant. The corpse was naked, but had a golden ring on one finger; he took the ring off the finger and left. Now, the shepherds used to meet once a month to keep the king informed about his flocks, and our protagonist came to the meeting wearing the ring. He was sitting down among the others, and happened to twist the ring's bezel in the direction of his body, towards the inner part of his hand. When he did this, he became invisible to his neighbors, and to his astonishment they talked about him as if he'd left. While he was fiddling about with the ring again, he turned the bezel outwards and

became visible. He thought about this and experimented to see if it was the ring which had this power; in this way he eventually found that turning the bezel inwards made him invisible and turning it outwards made him visible. As soon as he realized this, he arranged to be made one of the delegates to the king; once he was inside the palace, he seduced the king's wife and with her help assaulted and killed the king, and so took possession of the throne.[9]

After telling this tale, Glaucon states, "Now suppose there were two such rings—one worn by our moral person, the other by the immoral person. There is no one, on this view, who has enough willpower to maintain his morality and find the strength of purpose to keep his hands off what doesn't belong to him."[10]

Socrates, however, disagrees with this belief that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Throughout the remainder of the book, and in his other works as well, he attempts to show that morality is something to be valued for its own sake. He asserts that power will not corrupt the virtuous man, magic rings or not. We see this exemplified in *Armageddon*—none of the men show signs of megalomania (in fact, they seem like eager children doting on a parent's response or waiting on gifts from Santa, rather than men who feel entitled to all that they've requested); none of their requests to the government seems unreasonable, and Stampers himself doesn't seem to have particular requests for his service to the world.

Socrates defends his argument of the incorruptible man with a myth-like story: The eternal world is the abode of all perfections—the source of beauty, rationality, knowledge, moral goodness, happiness, and countless other "forms." In our previous lives (a notion shared with Hinduism and Buddhism) we were disembodied rational souls who enjoyed perfect happiness insofar as we could contemplate and enjoy the vision of the world of forms. However, one day our souls, exercising imperfect control over our emotional faculties, looked away from the world of forms and fell far from it, deep into the physical world, until our souls were cloaked in matter, which caused in us a kind of trauma resulting in an almost complete loss of the memory our original home and happiness.[11] Fortunately, innate within our souls is some knowledge of and longing for our true home and happiness. However, though we have some knowledge of our true home, complete knowledge of it and the subsequent knowledge of the way to return there have been obscured through the devastating effect of following our base desires

and emotions rather than our rational desires informed by our knowledge of true happiness. Consequently, the goal of this life is to pursue knowledge and wisdom—to become lovers of wisdom, philosophers—which in turn will give us a better idea about true happiness and how we can recover it.[12]

Because true happiness is linked to perfect rationality, which is connected with goodness, the happy person is he who acts wisely and thus morally. The idea is that such a person first knows what is rational and good and then uses his desires to effectively apply these principles.[13] Desires, in other words, are not bad in and of themselves but are bad only insofar as they dominate the moral dictates derived from reason. Furthermore, because our happiness resides in rational contemplation of the world of forms, including the form of the good, morality must be good in and of itself: simply to contemplate and enjoy goodness (and the rest of the forms) constitutes our very happiness.

So even if the moral person had the power of the ring of Gyges, he wouldn't use it for evil since his happiness resides in valuing morality for its own sake. And here we can see how death and dying or the threat of dying fits in: no one actually ever dies. Yes, the body will fade, but the soul, being immortal, lives on. And moreover, since moral action helps the soul to recover its true happiness, when the body is threatened with death, moral considerations always remain. Plato would laud Stampers, who selflessly gives his life for A. J. Frost (Ben Affleck) as well as for all humanity since by performing this act of general benevolence his soul keeps its "eye" on the true and beautiful.

Christianity: Since Everything Will Be Destroyed, What Kind of People Should You Be?

The impending global annihilation in *Armageddon* is a direct reference to the biblical end times: "basically," as Dan Truman (Billy Bob Thornton) states, "the worst parts of the Bible." Derived from a Hebrew term meaning "Mountain of Megiddo" and mentioned once in the Greek New Testament, Armageddon is often ascribed as the place of the apocalyptic battle between good and evil.[14] If the title *Armageddon* alone doesn't conjure up images of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, the opening narration by the man who played Moses should, as he closes his narration by referring to the ominous inevitability of earthly destruction: "It happened before. It'll happen again. It's just a question of when."

Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism, and Platonism, Christianity perceives the afterlife as the true and eternal reality while also embracing the present reality as good in and of itself: God created the heavens and the earth and declared them "good." Though humanity is fallen because of sin, this does not mean that God's creation is utterly depraved; the story of humanity is still unfolding. Beauty and truth are intrinsic parts of existence: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."[15] The future reality is far more concrete in its clarity and beauty; the present is but a shadow to the object of grandeur that is the future, the afterlife.

Whatever is good and true exists in the here and now but is fully unveiled in the hereafter. C. S. Lewis illustrates this in his novel *The Magician's Nephew*: "'Glory be!' said the Cabby. 'I'd ha' been a better man all my life if I'd known there were things like this.'"[16] You cannot deny the ever-present good in this present reality. The heroic acts of ordinary citizens who risk all for a small chance at saving humanity is but a microcosmic reflection of this good.

All eight of the selected men volunteer to save the world. Their sense of loyalty and trust toward Stampers runs deep—all accede because they see themselves as members of Stampers's team. And whether out of loyalty or duty, these men reflect some of the good of mankind in their willingness to sacrifice their lives for the sake of saving humanity from annihilation. In this, at least, they are reflections of Christ.

Death: The Great Awakening

From the East to the West, humanity is unified by a singular response to the inescapable clutches of death. Death or impending death awakens us to the meaningful things in life—obliteration becomes illumination. The transient and superficial things that we hold dear show themselves unadorned and trivial in the face of death. Things that come into focus are relationships, forgiveness, love, and all things that fall under the category of virtue—the things of the soul and not those of the illusionary or trivial realm. Hinduism, Buddhism, Platonism, and Christianity all emphasize the importance of recognizing true reality. This life is but a journey to a destination of a greater reality, an entry into an enduring world more awake than our own. *Armageddon* expounds some of the truths relayed by the aforementioned philosophies. It demonstrates the gravity of death and how ordinary individuals act in the face of impending earthly doom. In the face of death, Harry

Stampers's crew—who've often chosen unethical paths in the past—choose to act morally and ethically as they see beyond the illusionary world and attain a glimpse of the enduring one.

Notes

1. *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal,* trans. Swami Prabhavanada and Frederick Manchester (New York: Signet, 2002), 44. Good introductions to Hinduism and many of the world's major religions include Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Warren Matthews, *World Religions* (Florence, KY: Cengage Learning, 2010).

2. Even the gods and goddesses, such as Shiva and Indra, can exist only within *saṃsāra* (albeit in one of its highest heavens) and as such still experience pleasure and pain.

3. *Upanishads,* 73 (italics in the original).

4. Ibid., 87.

5. Ibid., 20.

6. Ibid., 59.

7. Plato, *Republic,* trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 348d.

8. Ibid., 357a.

9. Ibid., 359d–360b.

10. Ibid., 360b.

11. Plato, *Phaedrus,* trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 249–50.

12. Plato, *Symposium,* trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 204d.

13. Plato, *Republic,* 410e.

14. 2 Peter 3:12, NIV.

15. 1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV.

16. C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: HarperCollins, 1955), 94.

THE FEAR OF BONES

On the Dread of Space and Death

Jerry S. Piven and Jeffrey E. Stephenson

> Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!
> —Leonard H. McCoy (also Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 1.4)

In J. J. Abrams's masterful revisioning of *Star Trek,* an unobtrusive, seemingly inconsequential dialogue between James T. Kirk and Dr. Leonard McCoy reveals some of the most profound, existential, driving emotions of the quest to explore space, as well as the passion we viewers have for the show and films. Actually, while this dialogue seems to have been more of an homage interpolated to please *Star Trek* fans who have known and loved the cantankerous, irascible, incredulous, irritable ejaculations of Dr. McCoy, the content of his unexpected tirade has interesting parallels with arguably one of the most frightening existential explorations in the history of Western philosophy, Blaise Pascal's (1623–1662) *Pensées.*[1] Both encapsulate the very human terror about mortality. However, whereas Pascal turns desperately to religion, in *Star Trek* the fear gives rise to science, medicine, and the ethic that life is precious. Dread can give birth to antithetical existential positions, and what may seem an insignificant homage in this film may actually be a fascinating encapsulation of a ubiquitous existential struggle.[2]

Throughout the *Star Trek* corpus, McCoy is always the emotional and compassionate alternative to Spock's dispassion and logic. McCoy often complains angrily about the lives lost by making so many calculated decisions, expresses outrage at the ease with which casualties can be sacrificed, and reminds Kirk and Spock that they are dealing with human beings, not expendable machines. McCoy is the irrationalist, the one who values life over politics and military strategems, the one who calls Spock a "green-blooded bast . . . Vulcan" when logic so callously ignores the human element.

In the 2009 *Star Trek* film, Abrams is delightfully true to the character developed in the original *Star Trek* television series and movies. McCoy's temperament and considered views have hardly changed, but in a few brief lines Abrams's film captures what may be most existentially significant in the entire *Star Trek* saga. Consider this brief exchange between Kirk and McCoy as they prepare to take flight:

> McCoy: I may throw up on you.
> Kirk: I think these things are pretty safe.
> McCoy: Don't pander to me, kid. One tiny crack in the hull and our blood boils in thirteen seconds. A solar flare might crop up and cook us in our seats. And wait till you're sitting pretty with a case of Andorian shingles. See if you're so relaxed when your eyeballs are bleeding. Space is disease and danger, wrapped in darkness and silence.

We can find McCoy's neurotic angst, anger, and cantankerousness amusing or endearing (or even annoying at times), but his unguarded, impassioned feelings reveal a very human reaction to absurdity, madness, injustice, suffering, and the myriad terrors that we try so hard to avoid. Many of us prefer the way Spock can control and master his emotions. Until this film, Spock was the character who (except for a few dramatic sexual meltdowns and attempts to murder his captain) exuded aplomb in the face of incipient danger, panic, horror, rage, and heartbreak. We could identify with his impenetrability, his utter control of himself, and his ability to be invulnerable where we might find ourselves emotionally defenseless.[3] Spock is the fantasy of emotional invulnerability that appeals to vulnerable people ashamed of our frailties. We also identify with the struggle to control those feelings, with that inner tumult, and Abrams provides us with a Spock who suffers from deeply human pains and conflicts.

But McCoy is ever exposed, livid, and lacks that enviable capacity to mask or conquer his panic. As much as we would like to have a Vulcanic mastery of our fears, needs, and vulnerabilities, we more unnervingly resemble McCoy. Real human beings who emulate this mode of Vulcan dispassion and utter control are often terrified of their emotionality and vulnerability and thus adopt the pose of the coldly intellectual, rational, super-sane person. It is the all too human shame of feeling that vulnerable and exposed that impels some people to broadcast this posture; but withal, it is that mask that draws

attention to the embarrassing vulnerability they are trying to hide. Interestingly, Spock can also be seen to represent one kind of existential resolution to the dread of human frailty, where people would rather hide and stifle, even punish their own emotions, than suffer the pain of humiliating neediness, embarrassment, weakness, loss, rejection, and imperfection.[4] In some cases this manifests as schizoid withdrawal, protection from being harmed, suffocated, or exposed, and sometimes this detachment resolves into the familiar way some intellectuals can become unemotional, cold, and even disdainful, revealing rage over their vulnerabilities and failings. In psychoanalytic parlance, intellectualization *can* be a rigid defense.[5]

Contrast this with McCoy, the unadorned face of our existential panic and vulnerability. This is why he is so important as the reminder of what we really are, or at least what we recognize as our natural responses and the emotional turmoil in which these responses are rooted. It is also emblematic of the existential angst that makes us human: the dread of death, nonexistence, anticipating our inescapable demise, putrefying into a worm-ridden corpse and oozing stench. As Shakespeare lamented, "Shall worms, inheritors of this excess / Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?"[6]

Contemplation as a Preparation for Death

McCoy has obviously thought about these things. He is old enough to have contemplated beginnings and endings and to have experienced enough not to be overly enthusiastic about such grand enterprises as space travel and meeting creatures from other planets. Philosophers from Socrates to Montaigne maintained that contemplation was a preparation for death. As Ernest Becker wrote, "To the self-reflexive animal, death is an absurd injustice, which thousands of years and unnumbered systems of thought have labored to explain."[7] Becker elsewhere wrote that the fear of death haunts the human animal like nothing else: "Everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness—agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same."[8] The great Leo Tolstoy asked in bleak desolation, "Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death?"[9] And Keiji Nishitani, philosopher of the Kyoto school of Zen, limned, "When one

comes face to face with death, the existence of self—one's 'self-existence'—stands out clearly in relief against the backdrop of nihility. Questions crowd in upon one: Why have I been alive? Where did I come from and where am I going? A void appears here that nothing in the world can fill; a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands. In the face of this abyss, not one of all the things that had made up the stuff of life until then is of any use."[10] These reflective quotes not only capture some of what McCoy is implicitly communicating to Kirk as they prepare to take off but also are clearly reminiscent of what Pascal intends to communicate in *Pensées.* Consider the following: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me. . . . I see nothing but infinities on all sides, enclosing me like an atom, or a shadow that lasts for only a moment and does not return. . . . The last act is bloody, however wonderful the rest of the play. At the end, earth is thrown upon the head, and that is the last of it. . . . I look in every direction, and everywhere I see only darkness."[11] Death is the worm at the core of our existence, the irrevocable fate that we try to deny, reject, ignore, dissociate, and obliterate through myriad distractions, ambitions, achievements, obsessions, and doctrines. The despair expressed by McCoy is the despair not of the depressed, but of the enlightened.

Existential dread is only exacerbated by leaving the planet and hurtling into nothingness. As Pascal himself states, "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me." As McCoy's litany implies, leaving the enwombed safety of mother earth is physical and emotional departure from known, stable, predictable, orderly, comforting existence where one has nominal control over one's life, moving into the unknown, unstable, unpredictable, chaotic, hazardous infinity of caliginous space, where an anomalous hull breach, dilithium flaw, or antimatter explosion can hurl one into silent death. (Whether one really will putrefy in the vacuum of space hardly matters.) And there be monsters too. Not just voluptuous verdant women. Space is teeming with all manner of malicious predators, porcine assassins, doomsday machines, corrupt apocalyptic probes, gargantuan viruses, honey-scented blood-sucking smog, salt-sucking succubi, homicidal brain-bonking infants, and Klingon bastards. (For the psychologist viewing *Star Trek,* it may be profoundly beguiling how the crew does not suffer PTSD symptoms, if not paranoid psychosis, after being assaulted by hideous space fiends every episode.) McCoy was entirely prescient in saying that "space is disease and danger wrapped in darkness."

Some may argue that we don't fear death, or even that philosophy has

made us realize that we don't know death, have never experienced it, and never will (because we will be dead), and thus need not fear it. Socrates certainly tried to make the case for approaching death with a more humble, less fearful attitude, as recounted by Plato.[12] It would surely be an exaggeration to claim that we are all timorous puddles of existential malaise or that the idea of death causes us so much panic every second that we are in imminent danger of nervous deliquescence. The profound subtlety of the philosophers just quoted is that they are describing the despair that lurks beneath our oblivion, the ways we flee from thoughts that terrify us, quash, reject, or repress our fears, invest in intellectual defenses, discover causes or ideas to war against, covet wealth or celebrity, or immerse ourselves in beliefs that offer consoling postmortem paradises, all pretending that they are not flights from excruciating fears of transience, annihilation, ignoble decomposition, and passing into nothing. As Kierkegaard and Heidegger aver, we hurl ourselves into oblivion, conformity, and benumbed unconsciousness, refusing to live authentically, rejecting awareness in favor of an attenuated, somnambulistic existence, not quite alive but delivered from the despair and angst of conscious awareness.

For Pascal, and for countless others, existential despair is resolved by hurling oneself into faith. One can obliterate the crushing dread of infinity by merging with God and the euphoric idea of basking in his love, eternally sequestered from pain, aloneness, dread, and decay in heaven. Indeed, according to philosophers such as Lucretius, Cicero, Hume, and others, the dread of death invented the gods. For Schopenhauer, the terror of death inspires religion and metaphysics, and for Freud (whose ideas on death are variegated and inconsistent), the fear of death inspires myths of paradisiacal afterlives and the illusion (or even delusion) of a benevolent parental God.[13] The existential resolution is toward soothing fantasies. Most recently, Richard Dawkins has echoed this analysis by writing of the God delusion, the literal belief in ideas for which there is no reasonable evidence but that nevertheless inspire, console, and stupefy those languishing in existential despair.

Oblivion or Delusion

This is precisely the point where *Star Trek* offers an existential choice beyond oblivion or delusion. The idea of a vessel departing into the unknown is simultaneously a metaphor for the psychological departure from enwombed safety, as mentioned previously, as well as an approach to life that seeks to

explore the unknown, instead of filling in the empty spaces with deliria about God and heaven. For when it comes to the darkness of infinity, one can trawl figments of the imagination into those epistemic chasms like silicon into a wounded Horta, but such theistic fancies must remain only figments, puppets, and fairies. This is why Melville could say that trying to understand God would be like a scallop trying to fathom the sun from the bottom of the ocean. Pascal can wager everything in the universe on his faith, but a fool and his quatloos are soon parted, from reality at least.

Pascal refers to human imagination as the "mistress of error and falsity." Surely the flight from encountering the real world in favor of imaginative figments is not only epistemically unjustifiable, it closes one off from all the joys and discoveries of reality. As a ship of exploration and not military conquest, the *Enterprise* sets out to discover the unknown in space scientifically. As we all remember, its mission is to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before. Science and religion are two antithetical modes of resolving existential desire, anxiety, and dread. The yearning to comprehend the unknown can inspire creative imagination, ingenious problem solving, and wish-fulfilling, terror-mollifying fantasies.

What is science? Among other things, it is the refusal to believe on the basis of hope, as C. P. Snow says. It is exploration that seeks comprehensive explanation and drops ideas that are unsupported. Science is methodical and unending examination, an epistemological enterprise that continually questions its own theories and findings and rejects hypotheses when further evidence provides more robust answers. In contrast, religious faith projects answers into an evidential vacuum, defends those ideas vociferously regardless of robust evidence to the contrary, and regards the possibility of thinking differently as some kind of divine test, a sign of wavering, sin, apostasy, blasphemy, fall from grace, the work of the devil, or otherwise evil or opprobrious threats to the sacred truth. Whereas science dissects and seeks to refute its own tenets, regardless of whether they make one feel anxious, alienated, loved, or comforted, faith rejects everything that contradicts it, ignoring or repudiating the available facts, using whatever ingenious legerdemain it can to ensure that its tenets are preserved and impervious.[14]

This isn't meant to revile or caricature all forms of religion. Whereas some modes of religion can be ethically or psychologically transformative, using metaphor, meditation, ritual, and reflection to change the self, this article is focusing on the flight into literal faith and belief as an existential

resolution to terror and dread. Some would argue that the gods of Hinduism are metaphoric stepping-stones to deeper realization, as does Huston Smith. One may or may not describe Buddhism as a religion, but certain forms of this philosophy are directed at divesting the self of attachments that cause oneself and others pain and do not inculcate literalistic beliefs in salvation, hells, demons, and so forth. Certain forms of Christianity, such as negative theologies, refuse the diminution of God and reality that literalism entails. And yet for untold numbers of people, the Abrahamic faiths, and even Buddhism and Hinduism, are forms of salvation, deliverance from death, and obeisance to divine entities. If Pascal were imploring readers to devote themselves to a deeper understanding of life, or themselves, in the face of their own greed, gluttony, and destructiveness, that would be one thing. But Pascal admonishes people to move from terror to faith, not in humanity or love or humaneness, but into the comforting faith in God, taken literally. As Pascal himself put it, "The Author of these wonders understands them. None other can do so" because the beginnings and ends of things are "hopelessly hidden" from us as an "impenetrable secret." And further, one of the final reasons for this is the possibility of going to hell if they don't believe.[15]

What we see in the distinct reactions to existentialist angst expressed by Pascal and McCoy is a commitment to literalistic faith in a deity as existential flight from encountering those elements of (perceived) reality one dreads, and as such an avoidance of the manifold complexities, ideas, and experiences of life, versus a more epistemologically humble and at the same time more robustly engaged commitment to comprehension of the complexity of life and existence. In other words, a kind of inauthentic escapism into the absolute as opposed to a less psychologically secure but more authentic exploration of contingency. Faith as defined by Pascal absconds from everything that inspires terror and manifests itself as that Heideggerian closing of the intellect, emotions, and awareness, of all the variegated splendors of experience, living a submerged, somnolent life. As Jung phrased it, this kind of religion is a defense against the experience of God.[16] For the literalistic belief not only excludes the unknown outer world that is so dreadful and intimidating, distorting all perceptions and experience to conform to that theological vision but also repudiates all thoughts, realities, and sexual experiences that are forbidden, sinful, provocative, and precluded from that rigidly defined reality. It distorts the world, inoculates one against it, forces one to interpret everything according to its fantasies, condemns all manner of other ideas and experiences, and further, disallows that discovery of

the inner self, and its complex feelings, that might tear someone away from the doctrine and faith into new discovery. Literalistic belief means defining reality rigidly and unalterably, excluding and rejecting, if not condemning, all that threatens its veracity.

Vehicles to Explore the Unknown

McCoy's movement in the world embodies the existential attitude of the scientific explorer embracing the unknown as discovered, not invented. Not content with figments of the imagination, McCoy and his scientific ken use the imagination to create real vehicles to explore the real unknown. More than a method of inquiry about the world, it is an existential attitude toward oneself. It refuses pleasing answers and is willing to tolerate the uncertainty and despair of unknowing, the anxiety of having one's truths shattered by new discovery, the terror of leaving safe answers and environs for the probable hazards of space. It is openness toward the alien and unknown. It embraces the unknown with anticipation and even some excitement (contra McCoy's expressed opinions on the matter, and even the impenetrable Spock feels a deep curiosity about the unknown). Starfleet cadets can't wait to get into space, and their imagination fuels their desire to encounter infinite possibility, whereas Pascal and his faithful crew dread the unknown, despair at infinity, and rush into the dreamland of a theological fantasy protecting them from the outer world like a level-five force field deflecting perilous reality missiles off its sheer, invisible surface.

McCoy is hardly joyous about infinity, space, and death. But this is why he is so heroic. He steps onto the shuttle anyway. He is a man of science and medicine, physic not mystic, and rather than confining himself to the comforts of the cathedral (or converting the cosmos), he braves the unknown, complaining vociferously as he may. Considering the real horrors of space (with the aforementioned monsters), his cacophony is entirely understandable and the crew's insouciance rather perplexing. McCoy is incredulous at their joie de vivre, as they warp happily into a space inhabited by the unknown.

Star Trek emblematizes the existential resolution of exploration in an even deeper way. While the *Enterprise* explores space, the crew discover the depths of their humanity. They seek bonds with other races, as well as a community of people who embrace life and exchange ideas and cultural wisdom. It sounds nauseatingly idyllic, but it is a vision of learning from the other instead of repudiating the other. The ongoing voyages are nour-

ishment for the intellect and the humane part of the self that seeks growth. And each encounter enriches the self and encourages self-reflection, reexamination of one's values and perspective, and a perpetual deepening of the self through experience with alien others, along with the trials that test one's morality, compassion, and commitment to preserving their lives and identities. When Abrams has the *Enterprise* struggle against the schismatic Romulans, for example, it is not merely yet another battle with evil villains (fun as this is), but if readers will pardon the hyperbole, a mythic struggle to forge human (and Vulcan) bonds, overcome fear, work through the frailties that have inhibited or sabotaged them throughout life, and break through those self-imposed boundaries that have prevented them from growing via mutual nourishing. Kirk and Spock become deeper, better people by struggling through their own crippling conflicts and failings. As sappy as it sounds, they discover an I-Thou relationship, the ardent embrace of the other that dissolves individual alienation and leads to real psychological development and real knowledge. It is actual human gestation and discovery through the other, rather than Pascal's flight from the unknown and feared alien into an unchangeable and rigid faith and an imaginary other, or the fanatical repudiation and destruction of the other.[17]

This leads to an insidious extension of the theological resolution to existential dread. Terror can lead one not only into rigid, dogmatic, literalized belief. It can also lead one to fear and despise other ideologies and cultures, anything unknown or different that threatens the veracity of one's protective conceptual armor. Fear and dread can inspire a flight into faith, but they can also inspire fanatical adherence to any self-soothing thought system, a metaphysics of psychological salvation and deliverance from the despair of annihilation and unknowing.[18] The existential antithesis of the *Star Trek* ethic of embracing and protecting the other is the paranoid, hostile, authoritarian repudiation of otherness and difference. This can manifest itself as orthodoxy, fundamentalism, inquisition, or terrorism, where other ways of life are so abhorrent that, as Nietzsche says, unbelievers have no right even to exist, anywhere. Terror may lead to faith, but it also leads to sanctimony, hostility, and violence. Over the past few decades studies in terror management have proved comprehensively that reminders of death engender worldview defense and increased aggression toward those deemed different.[19] There are a variety of motives for violence, but the terror of death fuels the urge to adhere rigidly to a protective worldview and incites hostility toward those who are different. As Gregory Zilboorg writes, sadism absorbs

the fear of death.[20] Where fundamentalist religions demand adherence to belief, threaten people with hellfire and excommunication, or even initiate pogroms, inquisitions, witch hunts, holy wars, and terroristic violence, the existential position of the *Star Trek* ethos is preservation of the other and inward discovery.

Abrams knows this. The Romulans are predatory and remorseless, but they also lack the capacity to understand their own pain, relinquish their anger or blame, and deracinate their malicious fantasies about the imagined calumny of Spock and the Federation. In fact, Spock raced to save Romulus from disaster. He boarded the fastest ship to save a people who had spent centuries engaged in conquistadorial violence and terrorism against innocent people and the Federation. Spock's failure was not callous disregard for Romulan life or an act of malicious violence against them. This failure was nevertheless *perceived* that way. The miner Nero was aboard his ship in space and was spared the obliteration of Romulus. Having lost his wife with the destruction of the planet, Nero became "a particularly troubled Romulan." He held Spock accountable anyway, and in his cold hatred, sought to torture Spock by destroying Vulcan. Contrary to all evidence, even to Spock's repeated lamentations over the events, Nero's rage refuses to permit even the possibility that Spock's motives were honorable. What is so fascinating philosophically, psychologically, and politically is that Nero's perceptions of the events don't correspond with their actuality. Though he howls bitterly that he saw the events happen, here we have a parabolic example of how the act of observing or experiencing an event doesn't mean one will intuit its reality: a seemingly obvious and banal notion, but one that seems so weirdly quiet when we discourse on history, current events, and political grievances.

An Intrepid and Painful Encounter with the Self

We often assume that our perceptions are lucid and rational representations of what really happened, but Abrams illustrates how utter conviction in one's perceptions means nothing. They can still be imbued with the deformative contaminants of rage, grief, and all manner of unseen psychological detritus that distort reality. Applied to history and political events, this means recognizing that accusation, blame, certainty, and ascription of evil may be no more rational or accurate than the conviction that African Americans were innately inferior, that women were secretly spell-casting witches (or just that they were sexually and intellectually demented), that Jews were

evil syphilitic vermin hiding in dark alleys waiting to contaminate pure Aryan women, that John Lennon was conspiring to bring down Nixon, or that every Muslim is an insane, ululating terrorist bent upon destroying America in a sacred, self-immolating apocalypse. On an individual level, this means acknowledging that the perceptions one takes for reality may also be distorted, that our own convictions of truth may be similarly imbued with unknown psychological shrapnel. Like Nero (even if not as enraged), we may also be a few crystals short of a full dilithium chamber, protest as we may because the thought of being irrational or crazy hurts our self-regard and calls our worldview into question.

Hence the existential position envisioned in *Star Trek* is not merely that of the scientist but that of the philosopher whose ethical mandate is deracination of one's own detritus, conflicts, and pain through an intrepid and painful encounter with the self. Walter Davis defines deracination as "the process of actively reversing one's psyche from within by eradicating every belief, value, and need that stands in the way of taking up one's responsibility to history."[21] One must be willing to dissect oneself and fathom the wounds and crises that distort perceptions and lead to suffering for the self and others. The encounter with the other requires such self-examination and vivisection, unless one is merely to perceive the other through the lenses of one's own psychological baggage. Thus Nietzsche declares, "One must wrestle for truth every step of the way, one must abandon almost everything which otherwise our heart, which our love, our faith in life hangs on."[22] He further states, "Philosophy, as I have hitherto understood and lived it, is a voluntary quest for even the most detested and notorious sides of existence." Nietzsche is conflating truth about the self and the world, for indeed, our beliefs, our truth-warping *fantasies* about self and others, are psychologically crucial to us. Reality distortion is not merely human error or fallibility. It is often an existential avoidance of knowing oneself, one's painful scars and conflicts. Unknowing the world appeases our own suffering but distorts what and whom we see, inhibits our own growth, and all too often inflicts suffering on others—friends, family, lovers, and "enemy" innocents—as recipients of our own displaced anguish. "How much truth can a spirit *endure,* how much truth does a spirit *dare*?"[23]

As Freud and Ricoeur say, the cosmos is psyche symbolized, displaced, and projected, often vengefully. No real discovery is possible when thought and perception are distorted to fit one's own perverse fantasy about the universe, nor will one be open to the other. Without that excruciating self-

deracination we succumb to the kinds of havoc, racism, sexism, speciesism, colonialism, imperialism, and genocide inflicted throughout history. Abrams shows us even in the confines of his film that such psychological detritus is self-consuming and that emergence from the encumbrance of such gravid distortions is necessary for individuation. We see Spock's father guiding his aggrieved son through the pain of loss and all the wounds incurred by sadistic Vulcan children and a society that coldly inflicts lacerating cruelty while pretending to be merely logical. Those injuries become the fault line of a volatile psyche ceaselessly tormented by the rage he feels toward the Vulcans who see his mother as contemptibly inferior and, perhaps, the catastrophic anxiety that his mother's humanity might have impaired him at the core of his being.[24] No matter how logical and scientific Spock becomes, he feels like a tormented child again when that wound is opened, as he confesses to his father after exploding in homicidal rage against Kirk, who might have been suffocated to death were it not for the admonishing voice of Sarek. Only when Spock really experiences the crisis of that loss and the conflicts over his mother's humanity does he shift existentially from a wounded vessel easily shattered by violent rage to a centered, more humane, brilliantly logical being who can finally encounter the mercurial passion and ingenuity of Kirk, which were anathema before.

The Recesses of Human Anguish

Abrams's vision of Kirk is similarly astute and complex. Kirk too needs to transcend his self-limiting conflicts, the losses and encumbrances that have impelled him to become a space-age James Dean who rebels against authority, destroys property, swaggers around and seduces countless women in annoying self-adoration, induces hostility in others, invites beatings, and squanders his own life as a way of expressing anger and avoiding his own individuation. That is, until Captain Pike tempts Kirk into Starfleet.

The rebellious posture is a clumsy attempt to impress others with one's individualism and cool disregard for social mores, but it actually broadcasts the need for attention, the anger and anxiety of a hapless child deprived of his father, who must always compare himself negatively to that heroic figure and mourn his absence while suffering the provincial tyranny of a pathetic man trying to fill the shoes of that deceased astronautical legend.

Kirk's swagger is a performance, and an overcompensation, as is his hypersexuality. Though this gargantuan libido is also true to the celebrated

Kirk legend, Abrams locates those behaviors in the recesses of human anguish. The egotism, self-sabotage, and sexual voracity have a history. Shatner may have been overacting, but Kirk is acting out. His attitudes and impulses manifest the existential crisis of a person compulsively seeking sexual pleasure, seduction, and conquest as a way of masking and soothing his own losses and feelings of being unlovable. Kirk compulsively repeats the seduction that affirms he is loved, magically reverses the trenchant pain of feeling unloved, unlovable, and abandoned.

With the marvelous aplomb and compassion of Captain Pike, Kirk also has a benign parental influence that ushers him toward the uneasy and menacing task of emulating a heroic father. Here Kirk faces the dread of failing to measure up, of being a limpid failure.[25] At the academy Kirk philanders and cheats. He reprograms the computer simulation to defeat the Kobayashi Maru. On board the *Enterprise,* he cannot accept hierarchical decisions that offend him and thus becomes so irate that the guards have to restrain him, after which he pummels them until rendered unconscious by a Vulcan neck pinch and tossed off the ship. The elder Spock is the final parental influence that, at long last, instills the notion that Kirk needs to embrace his young Vulcan nemesis, that rebellion and impulsiveness will not save human lives. Only with that elusive existential realization can Kirk begin the task of developing a mode of seriousness that the *Star Trek* ethos requires. It took only a severe beating, exile to a frozen planet, a near-death experience at the claws of a colossal ice-crustacean, and the wisdom of an archetypal sage.

What of Bones? When he first boards the shuttle he bellows about having aviaphobia, "the fear of dying in something that flies." His existential state is captured by the brief bio he imparts to Kirk, saying that he was forced into Starfleet to pay his ex-wife alimony. All she left him was his bones. Abrams doesn't merely give the genealogy of McCoy's nom de scalpel, he provides an existential genealogy as well. McCoy likens himself to a denuded skeleton whose organs and tissues were savagely gnawed or ripped away by a voracious witch. That is his Kafkaesque metamorphosis, his self-embodiment, an existential condition of flayed, eviscerated, victimized death. If Bones is denuded of flesh and humanity, forced into alimonial slave labor, he understandably wears a perpetual expression of exasperation. Bones remains a healer, however, rooted in the real and concerned with human affliction. If anything his pain has laid bare the fragility and evanescence of life, no longer honeyed over but now ravaged of illusions. To quote Charles Winquist, "An insistent sense of finitude . . . is the only credible sense of reality after serious

reflection on the experience of what it means to be human."[26] That shock of recognition, that all he has is his bones, renders life all the more precious, reminds him that it is fleeting and should not be squandered. Bones may live with the fear of dying in darkness and space, but he moves from despair to existential engagement with people and their suffering. He doesn't flee from pain and despair into stupefaction, genuflection, or genocide.

Theologian and Terrorist

This existential and ethical position is a striking divergence from the theologian or terrorist. Pascal responds to angst and despair by turning to God, even claiming that human reason is "futile." His existential response to the dread of death is unequivocal abdication and deliverance of his own intellectual judgment and autonomy to the manic fantasy of some imagined deity out there in the universe supposedly watching over him. This is the decision every theist makes when believing that one must abandon autonomy and turn meekly to a divine being (or priest, or text) for truth, morality, guidance, or judgment. In that genuflection one acknowledges that one's own attempts at reason are so futile and arrogant that one willingly sacrifices them at the altar and expects a fantasy to do one's thinking (for oneself as well as others, which is even more ominous). Epistemological humility is one thing; refusing reason in favor of receiving commands and judgments from a divine figment is another. This is why the anthropologist Weston La Barre could call every fundamentalism an intellectual lobotomy. The irony is that all those divine judgments are projections anyway and reflect the existential crises and fantasies of the pious. Fundamentalists have forsaken independent thought to receive commands from their own disgorged fantasies. At its most innocuous this means refusing to question and really assess that sacred reality or moral judgment, and at its most sinister, it means passing judgment on others, condemning or coercing them, or even slaughtering them under the auspices of a divine being whose desire and rage can only be their own.[27]

Unlike the existential position that seeks to understand the other and embrace the capacity to look inward, to examine the self and one's own psyche, the terroristic position of Nero is so fanatically wedded to its fantasies that it becomes devoid of the capacity to examine one's own beliefs or relinquish one's insidious dogmas and paranoid accusations. It is a position that is seduced by the malign pleasure of blame, condemnation, and ven-

geance, a position that recoils violently from loss, dread, and despair. The Romulans envisioned by Abrams are not one-dimensional evildoers but those so desperate to flee the excruciating pain of death and bereavement, so on the brink of desolation, wretchedness, and abjection from their sufferings, that they rage against others who are not actually to blame.

Nero abdicates reason and rationality to gratify his paranoid fantasy, and he becomes a genocidal monster. His use of the red matter to create a singularity that implodes planets is symbolic of his existential state of inner death, a cold vacuum and lifeless void. Like so many who inflict terroristic violence, Nero is obsessed with inflicting this soul-collapsed void on others, making them suffer the same torment and inner implosion he experienced, pulverizing them into icy death by forcing them to witness the collapse of a planet and experience his own extinction.[28]

Ultimately, Nero's consuming hatred is far more important than the extinguished Romulans he claims to mourn, for even in the midst of being swallowed by death, he declares that he would rather watch Romulus die a thousand times than accept compassion from such loathsome enemies. And this may well be a poignant and astute parable of so many throughout history (and more recently) who murdered those who were not responsible, who evacuated and disgorged rage onto those who weren't despicable enemies, who would rather inflict terror than experience their own human anguish and vulnerability.

Beyond terror, vengeance, and the escape from ourselves into fanatical fantasies, we may still feel dread with McCoy and choose to explore and heal instead. Throughout the *Star Trek* corpus the compassion and humanity of Bones never decay. However outraged or even tortured, Bones's passion is human life, the safety of his friends, and the categorical imperative that no sapient being is expendable.

Notes

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings,* trans. Honor Levi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

2. For more on death, dread, and existential responses, see Jerry S. Piven, *Death and Delusion: A Freudian Analysis of Mortal Terror* (Westport, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2004); Christopher Belshaw, *10 Good Questions about Life and Death* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Robert Solomon, *Existentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

3. This makes us wonder about the extent to which Americans have absorbed the psychology of Stoicism in its classical form, which parallels the more sophisticated aspects of Vulcan thinking, or whether we suffer the anxiety of irrationality for other cultural and psychological reasons.

4. Some may idealize the Vulcan philosophy as a way of transcending or containing their emotions in a mature way or liken it to a mode of Yogic or Buddhist centering rather than a repressive extirpation of humane feelings. The behavior of Vulcans doesn't bear this out, however they are envisioned. Throughout the *Star Trek* series, Vulcans come off as condescending and disdainful, and certainly in Abrams's film, Vulcan children are malicious, petty, and vindictive, using logic as a sadistic weapon, while even the head of the Science Counsel considers Spock's maternal influence a disability. This is hardly some mode of Buddhistic detachment or centering. The only Vulcan who seems centered, compassionate, or wise is Spock's father, Sarek, played beautifully in Abrams's film by Ben Cross.

5. As Walter Davis writes so appositely, intellectualization is the defense that inspires Kantian (categorical) discourse. Davis, *Deracination: Historicity, Hiroshima, and the Tragic Imperative* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 49.

6. William Shakespeare, Sonnet 146, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems,* ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

7. Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (New York: Free Press, 1972), 70.

8. Ernest Becker, *Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 27.

9. Leo Tolstoy, *Confession* (1879; reprint, New York: Norton, 1993), 35.

10. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 3.

11. Pascal, *Pensées,* 59, 73, 161, 165. Pascal is famous in philosophy for postulating "the wager": if there is no God and one does not believe, there is nothing lost. Nor does one sacrifice much if there is no God yet one does believe. If there is a God, however, and one does not believe, one risks eternity in hell. Sadly, one misconstrues both the impassioned opulence of Pascal's writing and the resounding strife and panic that inspire religion when one considers the wager alone, an infamous misleading morsel. One who actually reads Pascal's *Pensées* will find not pensive attempts at persuasion but vehemence and dread.

12. See, for example, Plato, *Apology,* trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 2001). Here Socrates puts forward an argument that goes roughly like this: Premise 1: If a person fears death, then the person thinks that she or he knows that death is the greatest of evils. Premise 2: But no one knows what the afterlife will be like, and so can't know if death is, in fact, the greatest of all evils. Conclusion 1: Therefore, a person should not fear death.

13. For a protracted discussion on this, see Piven, *Death and Delusion.*

14. There are different modes of faith, as astute Trekkers may recall from the dialogue between Spocks at the conclusion of this film. They may also remember Spock's

discourse on faith in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country,* but that is another essay. In either case, Spock is hardly rejecting science or endorsing faith in whatever metaphysical fantasy one wishes.

15. One could argue whether "choosing" to believe on the basis of probability really is faith, but elsewhere in the *Pensées* Pascal makes it clear that his terror and despair are driving this faith.

16. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Religion* (1938; reprint, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960).

17. Here we are opposing Buber's I-Thou relationship to Pascal's wager and faith. This should also alert readers to the idea that there can be different modes of religion, not only literalistic ideologies. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

18. Any thought system can be salvific, dogmatic, and authoritarian depending on how fanatically one devotes oneself to it. Sam Harris is a fantastic and brilliant writer, but he misplaces the blame when he attributes the violence and irrationality of religion to religion itself, rather than the adherence to that system. He assumes that the religious ideas are to blame instead of the psychological and existential appeal of such ideas, what those needs and fears motivate people to believe and do. Harris recognizes this in a footnote, but acknowledging it outside the confines of a note would undermine his whole thesis. Yes, religion has done despicable things and the beliefs may be scientifically and philosophically untenable, but the impetus for violence is not religion, but the vulnerable, irrational, terrified, enraged human being seeking deliverance from fear and death, who needs those ideas and will kill to defend (or impose) them. This is why other, nonreligious beliefs can inflict the same kind of bloodshed.

19. For an explanation of terror management theory and a list of several hundred publications, see Piven, *Death and Delusion*, and "Terror Management Theory," http://www.tmt.missouri.edu/.

20. Gregory Zilboorg, "The Fear of Death," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 12 (1943): 465–74.

21. Davis, *Deracination,* xx.

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist,* in *The Portable Nietzsche,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 632.

23. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* in *Portable Nietzsche,* 536.

24. This is gleaned from the innumerable instances throughout the *Star Trek* series when Spock expresses derision for human irrationality, sentiment, and illogic. It is also a series leitmotif that he wishes to purge that illogic but the struggle is severely exacerbated by his human half. Spock even seems embarrassed when he displays human irrationality or sentiment, is perplexed why his father married his human mother, and can be incited to kill Kirk (as when the captain calls him a mutinous, disloyal, computerized half-breed, an overgrown jackrabbit, an elf with a hyperactive thyroid, and a simpering, devil-eared freak whose father was a computer and his mother an ency-

clopedia. Kirk then says that Spock belongs in the circus next to the dog-faced boy, after which the Vulcan whoopage ensues). I would also suggest that (though Spock is a fictional character and not a real person), he must feel some anguish in betraying his mother with that derision toward the human, and this may further incite his volatility toward those who insult her.

25. If the reader will permit us to introduce clinical experience here, we would add that rebellious and intimidated sons who shy away from becoming their fathers are also afraid of suffering similar failures or disasters. Kirk is a fictional character, but he presents the crises of a person who intuits that resembling his father would mean suffering the same kind of horrid death.

26. Charles E. Winquist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 138.

27. As implied earlier, there are theological alternatives that do *not* bask in literalism or expect divine judgment. Such theologies use god images as stepping-stones to deeper engagement and realization. We already mentioned negative (apophatic) theologies and certain forms of Buddhism and Hinduism. For more modern examples, see the works of David L. Miller, such as *Hells and Holy Ghosts: A Theopoetics of Christian Belief* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1989).

28. For more on this psychoanalytic reading of the way violence can be an attempt to force others to experience one's own inner anguish, see Michael Eigen, *The Psychotic Core* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1986); Walter Davis, *Death's Dream Kingdom: The American Psyche since 9/11* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto, 2006); Jerry S. Piven, "Terror, Sexual Arousal, and Torture: The Question of Obedience or Ecstasy among Perpetrators," *Discourse of Sociological Practice* 8, no. 1 (2007): 1–21; Piven, "The Thread of Death, or, the Compulsion to Kill," in *Serial Killers: Being and Killing,* ed. Sara Waller and Fritz Allhoff (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 206–17; Piven, "Psychological, Theological, and Thanatological Aspects of Suicidal Terrorism," in *Top Ten Global Justice Law Review Articles 2008,* ed. Amos N. Guiora (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 285–310.

DO WE ALL NEED TO GET SHOT IN THE HEAD?

Regarding Henry, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Ethical Transformation

Adam Barkman

Regarding Henry, J. J. Abrams's first solo attempt at writing a screenplay, is one of the most underrated films of the nineties. Not only does it feature Harrison Ford at his best (which already makes it worth the price of admission), but also—more importantly—it has a clear, powerful storyline concerning one of the most important philosophical topics of all: ethical transformation. Consequently, what I'd like to do in this chapter is to examine ethical transformation—especially the ethical transformation of Henry Turner, *Regarding Henry*'s protagonist—vis-à-vis philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff's theory of justice. Ultimately my goal is to answer the question posed in this chapter's title: Do we all need to get shot in the head (in order to become better, happier people)?

You Never Apologize

Henry Turner is a man who at the beginning of the movie seems to have it all: he's a successful Manhattan attorney with a beautiful family and all the worldly goods one could hope for. If pleasure were the same as happiness, Henry would be a happy man indeed. However, they aren't the same, and Henry isn't happy.

According to Abrams's screenplay, the chief source of Henry's unhappiness is his unethical behavior. Henry's injustice extends to his wife, Sarah, whom he cheats on and to whom he "never apologizes"; his daughter, Rachel,

whom he neglects; and those on the opposite side of the legal bench, whose cases he distorts. While few will disagree that these are in fact instances of injustice, most can't clearly articulate why. Thus, justice needs to be defined to get at the precise nature of Henry's immorality and subsequent misery.

In *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (2008) Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that justice is ultimately grounded in rights, wherein rights are normative social relationships or proper bonds between persons and things.[1] People have rights to certain goods, and justice means rendering to each his, her, or its rights—treating each person or thing as he, she, or it ought to be treated.[2] For instance, Sarah Turner has a *right to* the good of being apologized to when she has been wronged, and Henry acts unjustly when he denies her this.

We'll notice from this that Wolterstorff thinks it's better to approach justice from the point of the recipient (rights) than from the point of view of the agent (duties and obligations) since "if one thinks exclusively in terms of obligations, and if, furthermore, one thinks of guilt as guilt for violating the moral law rather than guilt for wronging the other, then the person who has been wronged falls entirely out of view."[3] This is a helpful observation (especially if we remember that he is not denying that there are obligations and a moral law as well). Let's say that after cheating on his wife, Henry felt bad about it, but let's say that he felt bad because he violated the universal moral law that states that a person should, all things being equal, keep his promises (in this case, keep his marriage vows). While this sense of violating basic moral injunctions is extremely important, it's incomplete; something more needs to be said. For the sake of argument, let's agree with Wolterstorff that breaking the moral law by performing such acts as lying is to *wrong* God, who is the lawgiver behind the moral law and who has the *right* to be obeyed by his creatures. Yet even here if Henry were to ask only God for forgiveness, he would—if this were all there is to it—still be acting imperfectly since he has wronged his wife and justice demands that *her* rights be respected and upheld as well.[4] In other words, in order to be just Henry must somehow make things right with not only God (whose rights as the creator he has trampled on) but also his wife (whose right to have a faithful husband Henry has disregarded) and even, if we wished to push the case, his daughter (insofar as children have the right to be raised in a stable household).

While some may say this is all fine and well, others may want more clarification on the matter, namely, to know what *kind* of rights Henry has violated. Has he violated (leaving God aside for the moment) his wife's and

his daughter's socially conferred rights or natural rights? Socially conferred rights are rights that people have been given by society. For instance, my being free to give my students the grade they deserve has been conferred on me by my university. In contrast, natural rights are rights with which people are born. While all agree that there are socially conferred rights, not all agree that there are natural rights. Since I want to argue that Henry has violated the *natural rights* of his wife and his daughter, we need to see why there must be natural rights.

Wolterstorff argues for natural rights by distinguishing objective obligations, which are obligations that hold in general, such "do not lie," from subjective obligations, which are obligations attached to a subject or person, such "Henry should not lie to his wife." Wolterstorff then argues that all who accept that there are objective obligations (he has nothing to say to those who don't) will also accept that there are subjective obligations, since obligations aren't given in a void. Following this, Wolterstorff introduces his "principle of correlatives," which states that "if Y belongs to the sort of entity that can have rights, then X has an obligation towards Y to do or refrain from doing A if and only if Y has a right against X to X's doing or refraining from doing A."[5] For instance, if Sarah is the sort of entity who can have rights (and presumably, as a human being, she is), then Henry has an obligation to refrain from lying to her if and only if Sarah has a right to Henry's refraining from lying to her. What this means, of course, is that if Henry's subjective obligation not to lie to Sarah is *natural,* then the correlative subjective right—Sarah's right not to be lied to by Henry—is also *natural.*

So Henry Turner begins the movie as a man of the deepest kind of injustice—a man who doesn't respect the natural rights of others, a man who doesn't treat each person as he or she ought to be treated in the depths of his or her very nature. Nevertheless, it still remains to be seen why this makes Henry miserable, which is to say it still remains to be seen how happiness is connected to justice.

Starting from Scratch

One evening Henry runs out to a convenience store to buy some cigarettes but in the process interrupts a robbery, resulting in his getting shot. One bullet enters his chest, which causes internal bleeding, and another pierces his frontal lobe, which controls some rudimentary behavior. Combined, this causes anoxia or a lack of oxygen to the brain, resulting in brain damage.

Henry survives but experiences total memory loss. However, with the help of his physical therapist, Bradley, and his family, Sarah and Rachel, Henry starts to recover physically. But that's not all. Henry, we are told, is "in some ways . . . starting from scratch," meaning that Henry's having been shot in the head affords him the opportunity to look at ethical situations from a proper perspective and choose do to what is right. And this is what we see happen in three instances.

First, Henry starts to spend time with his daughter, which is to say that he respects her right to enjoy quality time with her father. Both Henry and Rachel, moreover, *like* spending time with each other, which suggests that there is some connection between happiness and justice. The final scene in the movie, when Henry essentially rescues Rachel from the boarding school she hates, says it all.

Second, Henry discovers that the malpractice suit he won in defending a crooked hospital against an elderly plaintiff is unjust since the plaintiff did in fact warn the hospital of the problem and so had a right to compensation. After turning his back on his own firm for the sake of justice, Henry is told by the plaintiff, "I like you much better now."

And third, Henry is shocked to discover both that Sarah had cheated on him and that he had also cheated on her. Nevertheless, now free from the stranglehold of vice, Henry sees that such behavior is unjust and so apologizes to his wife, who reciprocates. This leads to a renewed marriage.

Abrams's point in all this is to show that ethical transformation toward justice leads to happiness. Nevertheless, it's not clear from Abrams's screen-play what exactly happiness is, nor whether the desire for happiness is prior to the desire for justice or whether the desire for justice is prior to the desire for happiness. Both of these questions need to be answered.

I Don't Like Who I Was

Happiness is a difficult word to define, but the ancients weren't so far off when they spoke of it as "flourishing." A happy life was a "flourishing life"—a life wherein one becomes one's true self and, at least in the case of Aristotle, actively enjoys certain physical or worldly pleasures as well. Because one's true self is a rational soul, one is most one's self when one acts rationally. And because reason teaches us that we ought to obey the moral law and cultivate virtue, the happy person is he who is moral and just (plus, according to Aristotle, also enjoys certain pleasures of the body as well). Already on

this model it's easy to see why Henry becomes happier as he becomes more just—why he speaks truly when he says, "I don't like who I was." Nevertheless, Wolterstorff thinks that such an account of happiness—even the Aristotelian account, which would make Henry's renewed health and beautiful family genuine factors in his happiness—is incomplete.[6] Why?

To begin with, rights are what philosophers call "states of affairs," which in English grammar typically take the form of gerunds, such as "Sarah's not *being* lied to" or "Rachel's *receiving* quality time with her dad." More specifically, rights are states of affairs of which a person is a constituent. For example, Sarah doesn't have a right to the *sun setting.* But she may have a right of *being free to watch the sun set.* Additionally, not all states of affairs of which a person is a constituent are legitimate rights. For instance, Sarah doesn't have the right of *being happy.* But she does have the right of *being free to pursue, and of possessing a legitimate means to achieve, happiness.*[7]

To go deeper, it needs to be stressed that rights are not purely individualistic. Consider Henry's treatment of his wife. By cheating on and lying to her, Henry violates Sarah's right of being told the truth and having a faithful husband. Yet, as I suggested earlier, when Henry violates Sarah's rights, their marriage becomes unstable. This instability in turn affects Rachel, who has the right of enjoying a stable family and respectable parents. Henry's injustice toward one indirectly affects another. Truly no man is an island.

Wolterstorff, as I said, thinks the ancients' understanding of happiness is incomplete. We can now start to see why. When Henry was shot by the robber, the robber didn't just violate Henry's rights; he also violated the rights of Sarah and Rachel in that he deprived them of a husband and father and all that those offices entail. Sarah can't be completely happy if her *husband* is injured by another. But that's not all. When Henry's lawyer friends slander him *behind his back* (that is, without Henry having *any* knowledge of it), Henry has been *wronged* (even if he hasn't been *hurt*) since he has the right of *not being slandered,* period. Or again, if Henry and Sarah hadn't reconciled, then they would have wronged their future (unborn) grandchildren, whose rights of *having a stable extended family* would have been violated.

Thus, because the ancient (so-called eudaimonian) conceptions of happiness are strongly agent centered, they fail, or so Wolterstorff argues, to account for many of the recipient aspects of happiness.[8] We should say, then, that happiness entails not only being a virtuous person—which is the most important aspect of happiness—and possessing certain worldly goods, such

as health, money, and so on, but also enjoying the goods to which one has a right, which is to say, being treated as one ought to be treated.

If all this is required in order to be happy, then who could ever be happy? It's true we can't speak of any person being perfectly happy since every person has, at the very least, been slandered unapologetically once in his or her life.[9] Nevertheless, we can state the obvious truth, namely, that the closer one comes to being perfect and enjoying the goods that constitute happiness, the happier he or she will become. Thus, since Henry manages to reform his character, he has achieved the most important aspect of happiness. Indeed, even though he suffers financial problems as a result of quitting his job at the law firm and endures ridicule by his former colleagues, Henry is still happier than when he was immoral but rich and well liked by his peers. In this way, getting shot in the head was a bad thing (a violation of his right of not being shot) but it resulted in a greater good: a more moral life.

On Buying Puppies

Before we can conclude, there remains an important question that has been raised but not answered: Is the desire for justice (the desire to treat each as he or she ought to be treated) prior to the desire for happiness (the desire to be a certain kind of person and enjoy the goods to which one has a right), or vice versa?

Those who say that the desire for justice should be prior often deem those who consider the desire for happiness prior to be somehow *selfish* or *egotistical.* Conversely, those who think the desire for happiness is prior often consider those who think the desire for justice prior to be cold, robotic, and frankly, inhuman.

Although Wolterstorff doesn't equate selfishness and self-interest, he doesn't provide a clear solution to this problem. Thus I suggest we take a page from C. S. Lewis, who develops the critical distinction between selfishness and self-interest.

For Lewis, selfishness is a form of injustice: it's an instance of taking or desiring to take what doesn't belong to oneself, which, of course, entails violating the rights of others. Nonetheless, it doesn't follow from this that unselfishness is a virtue: simply to deny oneself goods and pleasures that one may have a *legitimate, natural right* to is good only in *certain* circumstances, such as if Henry gave up his right to eat his lunch so that Rachel could eat; such unselfishness is not good in *all* circumstances. To defend one's rights,

to desire that one's rights be respected and thus to desire one's own happiness, is hardly selfish or unjust *in and of itself.*[10] For instance, if Sarah married Henry simply for his money, we could say that Sarah would be selfish or unjust, since she wouldn't be treating Henry as he ought to be treated, namely, as an entity that is more than a means to money. However, it's hardly selfish or unjust of Sarah to make financial stability *one* of the considerations in her decision to marry Henry, since it's proper that a husband take care of his wife and having money is one of the ways he can achieve this.

Because happiness has to do with both what one does (especially the performance of one's obligations to develop a virtuous character) and what one receives (especially, though not exclusively, having one's rights safeguarded), it seems odd to speak about the desire for justice and the desire for one's own happiness as being totally different things. The desire for justice is *part of* the desire for happiness. For example, Henry is shown to have a *desire* to make Rachel happy, a desire that ultimately leads him to buy her a puppy. However, this desire to treat Rachel justly—that is, to respect her right of being loved by her father—is, of course, on one level connected with Henry's own desire to be happy, since he can't be happy without being just. My sense is that language is the problem here. If we say Henry shows love to his daughter out of a sense of justice, then we applaud; but if we say he does it out of a desire for his own happiness, we pause. This, however, just goes to show that we still falsely think that to desire our own happiness is always selfish, rather than properly self-interested. Perhaps this is unavoidable. More than a few of the greatest philosophers and religious leaders see man in a broken condition such that man, naturally unnaturally so to speak, desires not proper self-interest (and hence justice) but rather selfishness (and hence injustice). Perhaps in this kind of situation Abrams is wise, for by not saying what desire motivates Henry's acts of justice, he can show everyone the obvious and all-important truth, which is that justice and happiness are inextricably linked.

It Was a Test . . . I Had to Find My Life

After discovering that his wife cheated on him, Henry, in a moment of confusion, seeks out the company of his physical therapist, Bradley, who tells Henry a story of how he, Bradley, had his dreams of being a football player crushed by a bad knee injury. He goes on to tell Henry how he used this bad situation for ethical transformation, saying, "It was a test . . . I had to find my

life." This, we know, Bradley did, for he became a brilliant physical therapist and, by doing his job justly (that is, well), he also found a lot of happiness. Bradley's story, of course, foreshadows Henry's own story of ethical transformation—of being shot in the head, only to become a better man, which is also to say a happier man, for it.

Now at last we come to the question asked at the beginning of this chapter: Do we all need to get shot in the head (in order to become better, happier people)? In a perfect world—in a world where love of justice is strong enough—then the answer is certainly no. But we don't live in such a world; in our broken world, where legitimate self-interest usually becomes selfishness, most of us would probably do well to be shot, as Henry was, in the head.

Notes

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 4.

2. Wolterstorff traces a version of this definition all the way back to the Old Testament, though such a definition also has its roots in Aristotle's proportionate equality and, most clearly, in Augustine, who writes, "The righteous man is the man who values things as their true worth; he has ordered love, which prevents him from loving what is not to be loved, or not loving what is to be loved, from preferring what ought to be loved less from loving equally what ought to be loved either less or more, or from loving either less or more what ought to be loved equally." Augustine, *On Christian Teaching,* trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27.28. For both Augustine and Wolterstorff, God is the ground of ontology and axiology; it is God who created all things and his creational laws—the universal moral law being just one instance that reveals to the righteous man or the man of prudence how each thing ought to be treated.

3. Wolterstorff, *Justice,* 9. This is partly what C. S. Lewis means when he says of the universal moral law, "Only a Person can forgive." C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 339.

4. Although he doesn't discuss it, Wolterstorff, as a Christian, must somehow deal with the dynamics of rights being violated by one person yet being made right by another. For instance, even if Christianity is correct in maintaining that God, in Jesus, can forgive people for violating *his* right to be obeyed, what can be said of the person who has been wronged but never made right by the person who has wronged him? Is injustice thus ever enduring? I expect that Wolterstorff would like to say that *God* rights the wrongs that have been inflicted. This may work if we think of it in this way: if person A stole ten dollars from person B and person C gave person B the money to make up for the loss, person B's wrongs seem to have been made right. However, there is still a sense—perhaps an unreasonable sense—in which person B is still in a state of being

wronged. Perhaps this sense is that the *emotional* damage hasn't been made right; there is a sense that person B is owed something, namely, an apology from person A. Again, Wolterstorff could say that person C's surplus of kindness is both financial and emotional and hence in both ways it makes up for the deficiency felt at the hands of person A. This seems to be a tolerable solution to the problem, but obviously even if there is a God who is willing to forgive all things and right all wrongs in the next life, this hardly changes the fact that people in this life ought to have their rights respected by *all* people.

5. Wolterstorff, *Justice,* 34.

6. Ibid., 136.

7. See C. S. Lewis, "We Have No 'Right to Happiness,'" in *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces,* ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 388–92.

8. Wolterstorff, *Justice,* 176.

9. Moreover, if Wolterstorff is right, then it's not clear to me how he would be able to maintain that God is the perfection of happiness, since surely God has been wronged many times. I suppose he could argue that because God is simple and impassable, God can't be affected by others. But this, then, would mean that God couldn't have a real relationship with his creatures: He could relate to them only via his ideas of them. While it's not the purpose of this chapter, I'd suggest that the problem Wolterstorff's position raises is one that is best left unresolved. It's best to take a page from the sceptics who would suggest temporary agnosticism in this matter since it seems equally intolerable to deny both that rights and material objects are goods and that God doesn't actually relate to his creatures in a genuine way.

10. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection*, 99.

Scene 3

MORAL MATTERS

FRINGE AND "IF SCIENCE CAN DO IT, THEN SCIENCE OUGHT TO DO IT"

Phil Smolenski and Charlene Elsby

> Technological progress is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal.
> —Albert Einstein

> For the sake of one life, you will destroy the world. Some things are not ours to tamper with. Some things are God's.
> —Carla Warren (Walter's assistant in 1985)

This chapter will focus on the broadening range of what is ethically significant when we take into account advancements in science. On *Fringe,* we encounter scientific and technological advancements that range from the plausible to the impossible, at least as we gaze upon it from within our current context. The particular examples we see on the show do resemble our own advancements to the extent that they present ethical dilemmas where technology is concerned, for while our technologies might be different, the constant development of new technology broadens the range of ethically significant action in both the real and fictional universes.

The first part of this chapter will provide a discussion of the benefits of technological advance and the cautiously optimistic attitude we must take when producing technology that, depending on how it is used, could be detrimental to society as a whole. Using Hans Jonas's *imperative of responsibility,* we will examine the desirability of restraining science, in effect discouraging certain types of innovation. The imperative of responsibility teaches us that we *should* act in ways conducive to continuing human life and not destructive to it. Jonas's dual imperatives should teach us to call

into question the familiar scientific credo of "if science can do it, then science ought to do it."

The second part of this chapter will examine our own ethical tendencies when confronted with the situations we meet in the show, taking into account our relationship to the fictional characters with whom we have become familiar over several years and assuming that we would react to the fictional situation in the same way we would react to a similar ethical scenario in the real world. Thus in the second section we consider how our experience of the ethical dilemmas on *Fringe* can give us an indication of what we *would* do, whereas the first section focuses on what we *should* do. We conclude that, in facing our natural tendency not always to use technology to the benefit of all, the restrictions suggested in the chapter's first section are justified.

Science Should vs. Science Can

We want to cast a cautious gaze on the role that science and technological progress play on *Fringe* by looking at their effects on society through an ethical lens. We will begin with a discussion of the benefits that technology can bring us, because there is a strong sense of optimism within our society when it comes to technological progress and the good that may come as a result. New technologies expand the realm of what is possible and have the potential to enhance our lives in innumerable ways. But alongside these developments, and our desire to push the limits of what is possible, come developments that should rouse strong feelings of suspicion and apprehension. Here we shall discuss the desirability of putting constraints on science in order to temper our appetite for innovation and discovery in an attempt to articulate Han Jonas's imperative of responsibility through his ethics of responsibility.

Then we will shift the discussion toward two specific examples from *Fringe:* Massive Dynamic's development of nanotechnology and the Observers' use of advanced technologies to save their society from planetary destruction. While both cases may initially seem far removed from our own scientific realities, properly relegating such developments to the realm of science fiction, our aim is to draw an analogy between the fanciful world depicted on *Fringe* with our own prospects in the not so distant future. The imperative of responsibility teaches us two things: to act in ways that are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life and to act so that

the effects of your action are not destructive to the possibility of such life. Jonas's dual imperatives call into question the ethos of "if science can do it, then science ought to do it."

Technological Progress and Its Benefits to Society

Before getting into the doom and gloom portion of this chapter, we would like to look at the ways in which science and technology have benefited us. We may not have the hover cars and colonies on the moon that our parents' generation was promised with the dawn of the twenty-first century (neither in our own world nor in the *Fringe*-verse), but nevertheless we still encounter some astonishing technologies on *Fringe.* One piece of technology that is of particular interest is the transdimensional window, a portal of sorts that allows us to peer into the alternate universe.

We learn that by 1985, Walter had developed a window to look into the other side. The society he found there was very similar to ours but more advanced in some areas. Although he is unable to cross into the alternate universe at this time, Walter is able to copy its advanced technology, some of which was sold to the military to benefit the world at large. Those whose well-being would be significantly diminished without their beloved smartphones have Walter and his window to thank for that. In 1985 Walter mentions that the technology for a digital cell phone is thirty years away in our universe, yet by 1988 we already have the first digital cell phone on our side; kudos, Dr. Bishop!

But when we are discussing *Fringe* and technology, we can't help thinking of Massive Dynamic. On the show, Massive Dynamic represents the pinnacle of technological progress. It was founded by William Bell, who aspired to "satisfy the technological needs of this century and the next." One of Massive Dynamic's early contributions was new developments in prosthetics; in fact, Nina Sharp's robotic replacement arm was an invention by Bell himself. This innovation couldn't have come at a better time. The Persian Gulf War had just concluded, and with the help of these new technological advances, Massive Dynamic (then named BELLMEDICS) gave a new sense of hope to soldiers who lost their limbs in conflict.[1] When technology is viewed from an instrumental perspective like this, it generally implies a positive ethical assessment: technology's ability to increase the possibilities and capabilities of humans generally seems desirable.

What we should take from this discussion is that we do not necessarily

have to oppose increased industrialization or new technology. Nor should we concern ourselves with Martin Heidegger's hostility to technology as a threat to essence, preventing us from seeing a more primal truth. Modern developments in technology can help increase someone's well-being and allow them the means to function, something that wouldn't be possible for those soldiers had it not been for the innovations in prosthetics made at Massive Dynamic.

However, we should not dismiss outright all critiques of technological progress just because they do not share our technoenthusiasm. If we get bound up in a narrow focus on scientific discovery, we may get caught up in our own hubris. Traditionally, scientists view scientific progress and discovery as an unqualified good that should be exploited at all costs. We do not deny that we should strive for progress and development, only that we should critically reflect on whether technological progress is an *unqualified* good.

Science as an Unqualified Good, or in Need of Constraints?

In an impassioned speech at U.S. Army Research Headquarters, Walter explains, "Our success thus far should serve as an example of our ability to achieve that which most can't even imagine. What you must understand is that, as scientists, we must embrace every possibility. No limitations. No boundaries. There is no reason for them." Implicit in Walter's argument is an endorsement of the neutrality thesis, which holds that technologies are value-neutral tools. They are used to perform valued functions, but the moral characteristics that we attribute to them can be attributed only to the use of technology, not to the technologies themselves or their creators. Certainly Walter would not deny that technologies can be put to good or bad uses, but he holds that there should be no constraints on scientific discovery. Walter is trying to express the worry that governmental—and, for that matter, moral—regulations would stifle scientific research and potentially inhibit the development of beneficial innovations.

A philosopher who would be leery of Walter's enthusiasm about scientific discovery is Han Jonas, whose book *The Imperative of Responsibility* calls into question the neutrality of science and technology, in effect imposing moral responsibility on scientists and their research.[2] Drawing on a philosopher who wrote about technology in the 1970s may seem curious in light of all the developments in technology since then, but this discussion is meant to illustrate the importance—if not a growing importance—of Jonas's pleas.

Jonas begins with the observation that the promise of modern technology has turned into a threat of disaster. New and unknown forces have been conferred upon us by science, which has allowed power to become its own master. We have turned the perspective of salvation into apocalypse through the ability of a single life form—humankind—to endanger all life forms. According to Jonas, this calls for a new ethical theory. Traditional ethical theories prove deficient because they are limited to interactions with individuals, while the power of modern technology bestows upon us control over nature. In the *Fringe*-verse, that includes power over alternate universes.

Crossing Over to the Other Side: The Case for Moral Responsibility

New dimensions of responsibility come into play with modern technology because of the irreversible and cumulative character of our actions on the living world. For moral responsibility to apply, however, three conditions must be met: first is casual power, so that action can have an impact on the world; second, the action must be under the agent's control; and third, the agent must foresee the consequences to some extent. We see a prime example of this when Walter seeks to cross over into the alternate universe to save their Peter.

Watching his son die for a second time through his transdimensional window, Walter presses on with his research to find a gateway to the other side. Even before Walter attempts to cross through the bridge, we know of the potential dangers in crossing over. Walter's assistant, Carla Warren, urges him not to go through with it, reminding him that shattering the wall between the universes could rupture the fundamental constants of nature. In a somber voice, Walter acknowledges the threats but seems willing to disregard them, saying, "It's a theory, and we don't know that to be true." Walter's attempts to dismiss the dangers as purely theoretical seem to skirt the implications of the consequences.

At later points in the show—once we discover the actual effects Walter's crossing had on the alternate universe—we find that Walter was more aware of the potential consequences than he let on. Here we find all of Jonas's conditions for responsibility met: Walter's crossing over creates tears in the alternate universe; his actions were clearly his own, motivated by his desire to save the alternate Peter; and the potential consequences were at least foreseeable (if only in theory, but a good theory, Carla would add). By denying

that there is a line that cannot be crossed, denying that there is a threshold of danger that should urge us to take heed, and denying that there are some matters that belong only to God, Walter embodies the drive for unbridled scientific discovery. But despite his violation of the imperative of responsibility, perhaps we can find grounds to excuse Walter for his actions.

The Desire to Play God, or the Need for Humility in Science

The Walter we meet delivering the speech at U.S. Army Research Headquarters presents a stark contrast to the gentle old man that we are introduced to in the *Fringe* present. Here we find a man humbled by experience and the sheer power that science can have on the world, much like what happened to Robert Oppenheimer when he witnessed the destructive effects of the atomic bomb. We can contrast this response to that of Walter's former colleague, William Bell.

In the season 4 finale ("Brave New World") we discover that David Robert Jones and the members of ZFT are actually colluding with Bell in an effort to realize Bell's sinister plans to destroy both universes. Bell, slowly dying of cancer despite effects of Cortexiphan, became disillusioned with his condition and began to reflect on the younger, more naïve Walter's scientific outlook. It occurs to him that Walter's earlier pronouncements about science were right: there should no limitations, no boundaries—there is no reason for them. Bell believed that "if we are capable of being Gods, then it is our destiny to do so." Here Bell embodies the scientific ethos of if science can do it, then science ought to do it.

After losing Peter twice, Walter comes to question how any God could allow for so much suffering. He embarks on a path to create a universe that would operate by his own rules. The experience also changes Walter's disposition regarding unbridled scientific research and its (inevitable) application. Jonas would explain this as the beginnings of a new consciousness awakened by the euphoria of big victories, which allows for the harsh daylight of dangers to impose on us the barriers of responsibility.

According to Jonas, our arrogance needs to be replaced by humility, which stems from the discrepancy between our power to harm and destroy and our incapacity to predict and take responsibility for the consequences on the other. Fear and trembling will keep our power from overwhelming us or those who follow us. It was this realization on Walter's part—that he was smart enough to actually construct his own universe—that frightened

his past hubris out of him. This stark realization induced Walter to ask Bell to cut out a portion of his brain to prevent Walter from bringing his universe to fruition: "We cut those ideas out of your head to literally put 'the Genie' back into the bottle."

Walter's story shows us that the traditional claim by pure science to freedom of research cannot be maintained. The distinction between pure science and applied technology is being increasing blurred, according to Jonas. A further lesson that we can take from Walter's story is that it should behove us to refute Nina Sharp's prediction that "suffice to say, we've reached a point where science and technology have advanced for such an exponential rate for so long, it may be beyond our ability to regulate and control them."

Instead, we should promote Jonas's dual imperative for responsibility to "act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life" and to "act so that the effects of your actions are not destructive to the future possibility of such life." The final two sections of this part of the chapter take up each imperative in turn, first considering nanotechnology and then the case of the Observers.

Is Nanotechnology Incompatible with the Permanence of Genuine Human Life?

Developments in nanotechnologies have the potential to pose profound challenges not only to our traditional ethical notions, but also to human life as we know it. Advocates hail the development of nanotechnology for its potential to solve environmental problems, offer alternative fuels, and provide innumerable medical benefits. Critics warn of the potential negative effects on human health and the environment and the social disruption that nanotechnology may cause.

On *Fringe,* commenting on the development of nanotechnologies, Nina Sharp says to a room full of board members: "Nanotechnology—the bloom is not off the rose. Because of the far-ranging claims that have been made about potential applications of nanotechnology, a number of serious concerns have been raised about how this will affect our society if realized, and what actions, if any are deemed appropriate, might be needed to mitigate these risks. This is not Massive Dynamic's concern. We create technology. How it is used is not our concern. We just own the patents." Nina's remarks express that scientific ethos of uninhibited pursuit of research and development with complete and utter disregard for its societal impacts. What we

have been urging throughout this chapter is the need for some sort of constraints on science and technology, not a condemnation of scientific progress.

As shown on *Fringe,* nanotechnologies have tremendous potential to contribute to medical research. When the two *Fringe* teams encounter each other for the first time in the alternate universe, Agent Lee is left with third-degree burns over 90 percent of his body. If this happened on our side, he would not have much of a chance. In the alternate universe they developed cellular regenerative nanotechnologies that were able to heal Agent Lee in a matter of days.

Yet we also encounter a more malicious side of nanotechnologies when they are weaponized and targeted against civilian populations. On the season 4 finale, the *Fringe* team is sent to investigate a case where two dozen people appear to have spontaneously combusted. Turns out Bell created nanites that embedded themselves into people's bodies and caused the body to overheat as the nanites reacted to the body's kinetic energy. However, the same type of technology can be put to positive uses: research is currently being conducted on the possibility of running a cellular phone battery off nanites, which would recharge the battery from the body's kinetic energy.

While the potential dangers that come from nanotechnologies can have a highly destructive impact on human life as we know it, this does not mean that we should put an end to the development of nanotechnologies. Not even Jonas would call for complete abolishment; rather, nanotechnologies should be developed with Jonas's first imperative in mind, so that they are consistent with the permanence of genuine human life. What Jonas tell us is that the scientists at Massive Dynamic themselves must be held morally responsible for their research. Responsibility does not fall merely on the user but resides with the scientists and the corporations that develop the technology. What we can derive from this claim is that we may pursue research that has the potential to enhance human life. If we were able to use the *Fringe* alternative universe's advances in medical research, it might be possible to regenerate organs and limbs for individuals in need, for example.

The Observers and the Destruction of Human Life

In *Fringe,* we learn that by the year 2609 the Observers had made our planet uninhabitable. The Earth was destroyed ecologically, making the air and water toxic. By utilizing technology from their time period, the Observers were able to exist "outside of time." Having ruined their planet, the only

option they had was to travel back in time to a healthier planet. The year 2015 became known as the purge, as that was the year that the Observers arrived on "present-day" Earth, enslaving humans. Whereas Jonas's second imperative holds that our actions should not be destructive to the future possibility of life, we find an inversion of the imperative operating here on past human life.

The arrival of the Observers themselves would not have been problematic in itself. Perhaps their futuristic cell phone technology and their collapsible binoculars would be useful. But their arrival on Earth proves to be destructive to potential future human life. Finding the planet's air too oxygenated during our time, they emit extra carbon monoxide. Henrietta Bishop tells us that the effects will soon be irreversible and lower the average age of natives (the human population) to approximately forty-five.

According to Jonas, we have mortgaged future life for our present short-term gains and needs. What we do in our present—whatever time that may be—has a massive effect on countless lives who have no say in the matter. Jonas concedes that perhaps this is inevitable and there is no way of avoiding our impact on the future (or the past, in the case of the Observers), so our actions should express a concern for posterity, "namely in such a way that their chance of coping with that mortgage has not been compromised in advance."

A further lesson can be drawn from the case of the Observers. When Windmark—the Observer who seems to be in charge of native affairs—gets asked by Colonel Broyles, "What did you do up there in the future to get yourself such a 'crap detail'?" Windmarks responds with an amused tone in his voice: "I like animals." *Fringe* is suggesting that according to the Observers we are nothing but a bunch of animals. This draws an interesting parallel: if we feel so morally violated when the Observers enslave us and proceed to destroy our own planet, why do we not feel the same way when the same happens to animals?

Our traditional anthropocentric ethics are being challenged here. What we should take from this case is that when we are developing technologies, perhaps we should expand our circle of ethical concern to include animal life. Jonas highlights the need to broaden our ethical concern because of how the power that technology gives us expands our dimensions of responsibility. Our concerns should then include, at least, any living being's interests—past, present, or future—when our powers of action have a causal effect on their well-being.

What We Want to Happen

In the *Fringe* universe, we regularly encounter scenarios where scientific advances may be used for the good of the many and the detriment of the few, or conversely, for the good of the few and the detriment of the many. There is a certain sense in which these scenarios, as presented in the show, are no longer hypothetical. The rational "What *would* you do?" question of the hypothetical situation becomes a visceral "What do you *want* to happen?" We feel for these characters; we get anxious when they are in danger, and we want them to always succeed. If we didn't, we would be watching very bad television. No one would care what happens next, and all the characters might as well get hit by buses.

So it is safe to assume, based on the fact that we watch the show at all, that we *do* care about the characters, we *do* care about what's going to happen next, and we *don't* want them to suffer. And so it is often the case that our rational considerations about what would be best for the *Fringe* universe(s) become subordinate to our visceral response to their plights. And we want the best things to happen to the characters we're most used to; we like them the best, and we favor their happiness over others'. We want to save Peter, other universe be damned.

We also cannot dismiss this reaction by telling ourselves *this is only a TV show.* By the same logic that would permit our favoring the main characters, we should not care about them at all. But that is certainly not the case. And so we take it as given that we do care about what happens in the *Fringe* world and we favor the main characters over any random extra (they were probably introduced only to be sacrificed anyway). The fact that we do this is analogous to how we normally live. The purpose of this portion of the chapter will be to take a look at *why* we look at *Fringe* with these particular goggles on and *how it is possible to do so in the first place.*

We will examine some common notions first of all as to why viewers seem to enjoy television, particularly why we prefer certain characters over others and how we react to the situations we're presented with, far removed from our daily experience as they may be. We have probably all heard that we like characters we can relate to, but this is a simplification of what's really going on. We've also probably heard that we like to see familiar scenarios (it can't all be techno wars, where's the romance?). Here we're getting closer to something coherent. And more recently, we've heard that watching reruns of your favorite TV show produces the same mental benefit as hanging out

with old friends—Olivia Dunham is awesome and I can predict exactly what she's going to do—way better than real people.[3] There's a better philosophical interpretation of this phenomenon, though the common theme of our analysis is identified, one that constitutes a broader philosophical issue: how we deal with fictional worlds, how we relate to the people in them, and what we can learn by examining our relation to the fictional. The individual examination should have generalizable conclusions: how we form preferences that influence our decisions is by no means individual. By looking at ourselves with a critical eye, we can infer similarities with other people by analogy.

Our Relationship to Fictional Characters

Our relationship to fictional characters is analogous to our relation to actual people. Though they seem like simplified versions of real people, we can imagine any number of ways in which their being can be complicated, and it is often the case that they *are.* For instance, sometimes we introduce a back story that happens to explain why so-and-so acts in a particular way in situation X. We undergo the same process in getting to know a fictional character as we do a real person. And we *like* them.

This introduces a philosophical problem: Why do we like the people we do? And there's a corresponding problem for fictional characters: Why do we prefer certain characters over others?

As we stated earlier, we prefer familiar characters over unfamiliar ones. We feel closer to Peter Bishop than we do to office worker number four, even though we are not international criminals of boundless genius. *Familiarity* is an important factor in why we prefer certain people (fictional or otherwise) over others, and this may be just a function of how often we see them on-screen. Nevertheless, this familiarity determines whether we think Peter should sacrifice himself for the good of humanity or stick around. Consider, for instance, when Peter disappears into the Machine in order to save both universes. The fact that he does so willingly certainly helps us to feel better about his doing it, but we also want him to come back. And when he does, we want the old Peter back, not the one who has no place in the current universe. We want him to be happy.

But this contradicts some of our basic assumptions about the people we like. We assume that we like the characters who are most like us, but *Fringe* introduces such a diverse range of possible character traits that it seems impossible one should find one's television doppelganger among its cast.

We take this as evidence that the most important factor in our relationship with fictional characters is *not* that we feel we have the most in common with them *with respect to the attributes of their character*. Most viewers are not mad scientists, nor telepathic FBI agents, nor international men of mystery. Therefore, we're looking for something more basic. This observation extends to real people as well; it is not always the people with whom one has the most in common that one becomes friends. And so if we cannot say that the only reason we care about fictional characters is because we think we have so much in common with them (at this superficial level), we must entertain another possibility.

The second contender for the reason why we care about fictional characters is that we think of them not as television versions of ourselves but as (imaginary) friends. Perhaps we don't think we are closely related in character to the people we are watching, but we find their characters likeable and fun to be around. Walter Bishop is totally awesome, and we should hang out. While this certainly is true (call me, Walter, we'll set something up), this still doesn't completely account for our relationship to fictional characters. The analogy to real friends is once again enlightening. Where we interact with real people, we are an important part of the relationship. We *have* some relationship with our real friends, something that is most definitely lacking within our posited relation to a fictional character. When something bad happens to them, we are there to comfort them, and we ask for their opinions on particular things relevant to our lives. But our television friends act of their own accord, no matter what we think they should do. They don't even ask us. (How rude; frankly, they're putting our friendship in jeopardy.)

Nevertheless, we do *care* about them in some way. If it's not because they represent ourselves or that we relate to them as friends, we submit that it is *only* a function of familiarity that we care what happens to our characters. But this raises another issue: Why do we get so attached to familiar things? We might say we simply hate change, but you'd think, what with the world changing all the time around us, coupled with the fact that we're not currently suffering as a result of it, that change is not the monster here. At least, not change in an unqualified sense. What our television viewership can teach us is that we're absolutely fine with change; what we hate is change we can't anticipate. Once we become accustomed to a character, we can predict what he or she will do in a given situation, and we're happy that we can. If Peter is running around killing shape-shifters, he probably has a good reason. We base this judgment on our past experience of the character,

and we're angry if television writers have our characters do something that doesn't fit with the sense we've acquired of them. The fact that familiarity is primary in a fictional world as well as a real one evidences a more general claim: given that nothing that happens on *Fringe* can be to our personal detriment in any way, and yet familiarity seems important to us, we cannot claim that we as human beings fear the unfamiliar; rather, we just like the familiar. That's all there is to it.

So no matter what kind of man Peter is, we want him around, and we want him to *be Peter.* We've grown attached to him as he is. And this is why we get that visceral reaction to his being endangered, despite the fact that in the *Fringe* universes there are billions of people we could also just as easily have come to know and like; but kill them all if our Peter is threatened— unless, perhaps, we're shown a very sympathetic shot of some particularly sympathetic person about to be harmed by our choices.

Our Relationship to Fictional Situations

In addition to having empathic relationships with fictional characters (regardless of their being similar to ourselves or being some kind of analog to real friends), there are certain situations in which we feel an immediate reaction. And the strength of our reaction is dependent on our proximity to the situation. We can all look at a poverty-stricken child on television (especially a particularly cute one) and get all weepy-eyed. "Help them!" our empathic response cries out; then another commercial comes on and we develop a sudden craving for toaster strudel.[4]

The reason that they show you *one* child suffering is because you will have a greater reaction to one child that you can see than one million that you cannot. Perhaps it's a very simple corollary of what we concluded in the previous section: our caring is a function of our familiarity. You've known that television child for thirty seconds now, and those other million you've never even seen. The point is that when we are presented with a particular situation we find troublesome, and with *someone in that situation,* we have an immediate response, regardless of whether we've gotten to know that individual over the past four seasons. *Somebody* is suffering; but they have to be a definite somebody in order for us to have a visceral reaction (as opposed to a purely rational, "Gee, that sucks for them").

This is where our analysis might be able to say something about ethical motivations in the application of scientific technology *in general.* In the

vast majority of situations, all we can have is a rational response. Yes, we should improve agricultural techniques so that the world's resources become sufficient to provide for its entire population. Of course we should reduce, reuse, and recycle to protect the environment, even though the landfills are currently far from my own backyard. And even though we don't know anyone from Hiroshima, we know the guy who pressed the button on that one was a murderous jerk.

Fringe provides us with the opportunity to see how very abstract questions about the ethical significance of scientific advancement may come down to personal considerations. Because we're aware that the closer we get to a situation, the more our opinion of the ethicality of that situation will change. Twelve children were drugged—okay, we've got plenty more of those around, at least they're not starving to death and working in sweatshops. Olivia was drugged—Oh no! Those bastards. The general observation we can make here is that, when it comes to making ethical decisions, we tend to take ourselves out of the situation we're evaluating, unless we're forced into it. Our relationship to fictional characters is forcing us into the situation, and if we take a second to think about it, it's scary to think what we would have done to the universe to help those few fake people. And we're certainly not alone on this one.

What We Can Deduce about Scientific Ethics from Our Experience

If we constantly made rational decisions about using science for the benefit of humankind as a whole, we would all be watching a television program where the characters seem to do nothing but make horrible decisions that are an affront to our better judgment. And nobody wants to watch *that* show. Nor would we want to watch it if they constantly made decisions that disregarded our empathic affiliation with the characters we like. It *is* the tug-of-war between our rationality and a natural empathic response that makes *Fringe* interesting, dramatic, and, in the end, frightening. For the fact is that it is not the general public that decides what is an appropriate use for technology. We have to trust in a small set of individuals who do have that power, and if they're anything like us, we wouldn't extoll them as pinnacles of rationality with *our* best interests at heart. More likely they respond to ethical scenarios in the same way that we do: inconsistently and with the interests of those closest to them in mind, taking risks that would

seem completely inappropriate to anyone looking in from the outside but that make perfect sense from an alternate perspective.

But we also see, every so often, what an individual *does* do when the burden is placed on him or her to consider his or her own benefits when compared with those of a much larger group of individuals: in the end, Peter gets into the machine. We can also imagine, then, that when the burden is placed on us to decide what *we* should do (what some abstract individual should do), whether it would be better to do something horribly unpleasant for the sake of others or to live with ourselves as moral scum. This example seems more representative of what the average person might do when encumbered by some moral burden than some other examples we've seen (for example, William Bell destroying the universe because he thinks it would be fun). A large part of how we define the heroes and villains of our story is how well their *motivations* fit with our own; and if we take this into account, the fact that we identify with the self-sacrificing Peter to a much greater extent than the self-worshipping William Bell means perhaps there's hope for humanity after all in the face of a potential doomsday. But we cannot take this as an indication that we should be comforted by the immediate moral response of the average person (assuming it's the "good" choice); what William Bell's exploits have to tell us is that, if we're going to use some fictitious or future technology to destroy the universe, *it only takes one.* Now it seems like a more palpable problem, for certainly we can imagine there existing *one* individual somewhere in the world who would use scientific advancements to do horrible things to us, no matter how loudly and often we tell them they're defying moral principles.

Einstein's words in the epigraph to this chapter serve as a sobering warning about the potentially devastating effects that science and technology can have in the wrong hands. Through technological progress science has brought us some of our greatest achievements, such as insulin and the Special Theory of Relativity. But our history of technological progress is not without its darker moments, one of the most regrettable occurrences being the development of the atomic bomb.[5] On *Fringe* we encounter science and technology that sit on the brink of what is plausible, sometimes bordering on the improbable, and often delving into the downright impossible. Sitting around at home, we are left wondering (and hoping sometimes) whether there is someone out there working on this new technology.

Notes

1. Massive Dynamic website, http://www.massivedynamic.com.

2. Han Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for a Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

3. See, for instance, research on the social surrogacy hypothesis, such as Jaye Derrick, "Energized by Television: Familiar Fictional Worlds Restore Self-Control," *Social Psychology and Personality Science* (August 2012), 1–9; and Jaye Derrick et al., "Social Surrogacy: How Favored Television Programs Provide the Experience of Belonging," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45, no. 2 (2009): 352–62.

4. For an excellent exposition of how and why this happens, see Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy,* trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS, 1989), as well as the relevant portions of Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations,* trans. Dorian Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1977).

5. While it is a common misconception that Einstein was part of the Manhattan Project itself, it was his special theory of relativity that served as the basis for the bomb and a letter penned to former president Theodore Roosevelt that some say proved to be the decisive factor in initiating the bomb's development. When Einstein was informed about the devastating effects of the bomb, he said that he wished he had become a watchmaker, indicating perhaps that would have been better than becoming a scientist.

An Inconsistent Triad?

Competing Ethics in *Star Trek into Darkness*

Jason T. Eberl

While surveying the planet Nibiru, the crew of the U.S.S. *Enterprise* discover that the primitive native population is threatened with extinction by the imminent eruption of a massive volcano. Our spacefaring heroes, under the command of the young and impetuous Captain James T. Kirk, decide they could save the natives by detonating a cold fusion device within the heart of the volcano. They construct a plan to accomplish their Good Samaritan mission while at the same time disguising their presence in keeping with Starfleet's Prime Directive: "No identification of self or mission. No interference with the social development of said planet. No references to space or the fact that there are other worlds or civilizations."[1] Unfortunately, we all know what may happen to even the best laid plans, and the *Enterprise*'s first officer, Commander Spock, is trapped in the heart of the volcano with a mere thirty seconds until the cold fusion device will go off and, in addition to extinguishing the volcano, "render him inert."[2]

The only means of saving Spock is to fly the *Enterprise,* which has been hiding at the bottom of the Nibiru ocean, to the volcano and beam him out within line of sight. Spock, however, objects:

> SPOCK: The *Enterprise* is too large. If utilized in a rescue effort, it would be revealed to the indigenous species.
> KIRK: Spock, nobody knows the rules better than you, but there has got to be an exception.
> SPOCK: No, such action violates the Prime Directive.
> McCOY: Shut up, Spock! We're trying to save you, damnit!
> SPOCK: Doctor, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.
> KIRK: Spock, we're talking about your life!

> Spock: The rule cannot be broken under any circumstances.
> [*Communication is lost.*]
> Kirk: If Spock were here, and I were there, what would he do?
> McCoy: He'd let you die.

Kirk decides that "the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many" and saves Spock just in the nick of time.[3] Safely beamed into the *Enterprise*'s transporter room to a smiling Kirk, Spock immediately protests, with a certain degree of shock, "You violated the Prime Directive!" As the *Enterprise* flies away from Nibiru, the indigenous chieftain is seen drawing an image of the grand starship that lifted out of the water like a giant leviathan, flew into the heart of hell itself, and stopped the fiery eruptions from killing them all. Is this a new religion being born?[4]

Clearly, the *Enterprise* crew's actions that day will have a profound impact on the people of Nibiru. Even detonating the cold fusion device to stop the volcanic eruption in the first place interfered with the natural course of events on that planet, although it arguably makes little sense to follow a rule concerning noninterference with an indigenous society if that society will be rendered extinct unless one takes action. The wisdom of the Prime Directive is aptly described by a later captain of the *Enterprise,* Jean-Luc Picard: "The Prime Directive is not just a set of rules. It is a philosophy, and a very correct one. History has proven again and again that whenever mankind interferes with a less developed civilization, no matter how well intentioned that interference may be, the results are invariably disastrous."[5] The various attitudes portrayed concerning the Prime Directive and what's at stake whether it is adhered to or not in a given situation illustrate three distinctive moral viewpoints. First, there is Spock's absolute adherence to the Prime Directive, a *duty* for which he's willing to sacrifice his own life. Second, the Prime Directive itself is justified by a *utilitarian* concern to maximize the best overall consequences, even if doing so involves sacrificing the interests, or even the lives, of a smaller number of people. Finally, there is Kirk's motivation in violating the Prime Directive to save Spock, which the latter learns about only when faced with Kirk's own sacrifice to save the *Enterprise* and her crew:

> Kirk: I wanted you to know why I couldn't let you die . . . why I went
>   back for you . . .
> Spock: Because you are my friend.

Loyalty is what binds family, friends, and communities together. Kirk's loyalty to Spock is what motivates him to violate the Prime Directive. Kirk's loyalty to his ship and crew is also what motivates him to give up his own life later on.

Duty, utility, and loyalty . . . these ethical values and the theories built around each are often understood as contrary to one another, and typically taught that way in undergraduate philosophy courses. But perhaps they may be successfully combined into a coherent ethic. The attempt to express these multiple moral attitudes simultaneously is, I believe, at the heart of the philosophical drama that unfolds throughout J. J. Abrams's *Star Trek into Darkness* (*STID*).

KAAAAANT!!!

Although Spock is grateful to his captain for saving his life, he nevertheless files a report on the Nibiru mission to Admiral Christopher Pike that describes in detail what Kirk decides to omit from his captain's log. Pike is understandably upset at Kirk on two counts: (1) he violated the Prime Directive, and (2) he falsified his log entry. He tells Kirk, "You think the rules don't apply to you because you disagree with them. . . . I saw greatness in you, and now I see you haven't got an ounce of humility." Kirk retorts that his penchant for "changing the conditions" in his favor is exactly what Pike thought Starfleet had lost and why he recruited Kirk to enlist in the first place. In fact, Kirk hadn't even made it out of Starfleet Academy when he cheated on the Kobyashi Maru "no win scenario" test. Pike and the rest of the Starfleet admiralty overlook the fact that Kirk's academic misconduct hearing was interrupted when the Romulan Nero attacked Vulcan. Apparently, Kirk's leading the *Enterprise* to save Earth, rescue Pike, and defeat Nero excuses his earlier indiscretion. However, his present violation of the Prime Directive on Nibiru can't be so easily dismissed. Kirk is stripped of his captaincy and is initially going to be sent back to Starfleet Academy, where he will learn to "respect the chair," which includes strict adherence to the Prime Directive.

Some philosophers are as much sticklers for the rules as the Starfleet admiralty. *Deontology* is a moral theory in which one is bound to fulfill certain duties—the Greek word *deon* means "duty"—and not to violate such duties even if doing so would result in better overall consequences. Certainly, the consequences would've been dire if the *Enterprise* crew hadn't interfered

with the Nibiru at all by attempting to stop the volcano from erupting—which is what Admiral Pike says he'd have done in that situation. But even the consequence of the loss of one life suffices in Kirk's conscience for him to violate his sworn duty as a Starfleet officer.

Furthermore, while deontologists may disagree on what our specific moral duties are, some hold that we have a strict moral duty not to lie, even from an altruistic motive intended to spare someone's feelings being hurt or to save an innocent life. The "father" of deontology, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), is quite clear in stating his absolute prohibition on lying: "By a lie a human being throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being. A human being who does not himself believe what he tells another . . . has even less worth than if he were a mere thing."[6] Kant isn't simply being melodramatic in portraying his ethical distaste for lying. Rather, the prohibition is premised upon his concept of the intrinsic *dignity* human beings possess as *rational* and *autonomous* beings who are capable of understanding their moral duties and self-legislating their own actions: "What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent;* what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity . . . morality, and humanity insofar as it is capable of morality, is that which alone has dignity."[7] We'll return later to discuss further implications of Kant's view of human dignity, but the point here is that our dignity is founded upon our existence as moral beings. Those who fail to use their reason or autonomy properly—that is, in order to understand and govern their behavior by moral duties—violate the very foundation of their dignity. If we agree with Captain Picard that the Prime Directive represents a "very correct philosophy," then Admiral Pike is correct that Kirk fails Kant's test of moral virtue twice over: by violating the Prime Directive and by lying about it in his log.

But wait just a goddamn minute! (As Dr. McCoy might say.) Kirk didn't "lie" per se in his log. He merely *omitted* the truth of all that happened on Nibiru. Well, he did report that the mission was "uneventful," and that word certainly doesn't seem to capture accurately the opening scenes of *STID.* Furthermore, while Kant does distinguish telling a lie from omitting the truth, he allows for the latter only in a particular type of situation: "If an enemy, for example, takes me by the throat and demands to know where my money is kept, I can hide the information here, since he means to misuse the truth. That is still no lie, for the other knows that I shall withhold the information, and that he also has no right whatever to demand the truth

from me."[8] One may justifiably omit the truth from a person who has no right to the truth and intends to misuse the information. Spock Prime is thereby justified in "exaggerating" in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) when he substitutes "days" for "hours" in reporting to Kirk on how long it'll take to repair the *Enterprise* while suspecting that Khan may be eavesdropping.[9] He avoids lying to Kirk by referring to the fact that he's going "by the book," meaning that he's dutifully following regulations against uncoded transmissions during battle; thus, Kirk is able to easily discern the truth that Spock is clandestinely communicating. And while Spock is arguably lying to Khan, as pointed out by his protégé, Lieutenant Saavik, Khan has no right to the truth of the *Enterprise*'s condition and would misuse that information to destroy the starship. Unfortunately for Kirk in *STID,* Admiral Pike isn't Khan and doesn't fit the bill as someone who has no right to the truth. Thus his falsified log is nothing more than an ass-covering maneuver that unequivocally falters under Kant's strict test of moral behavior. No way to "change the conditions" of *this* test.

"I'm Not Going to Take Ethics Lessons from a Robot"

Spock, on the other hand, looks to be a thoroughgoing Kantian insofar as he rigidly adheres to the Prime Directive, even to the point of sacrificing his own life, and, as he likes to remind everyone, Vulcans are incapable of lying—although they do "embrace technicalities" and, as noted above, may "exaggerate." Spock's adamant refusal to violate the Prime Directive, however, is premised upon *consequentialist* reasons, and his willingness to give up his life is based upon a *calculation* of benefits and harms in accord with the Vulcan dictum that "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."[10]

For Kant, because of our inherent dignity, individual persons cannot be weighed in the scales such that the interests or lives of a smaller number of people could be sacrificed for the sake of a larger number. Rather, each person is of *infinite* value, such that the life or well-being of one person can't be mathematically compared to that of one or more others. Spock's life, singular though it is, has a value of ∞, as does each Nibiru life; let's say there are five hundred Nibiru Spock will save by detonating the cold fusion device while still trapped in the volcano. $500 \times \infty = \infty$, but $1 \times \infty = \infty$ too! This premise underwrites one of Kant's formulations of his own version of the Prime Directive—the Categorical Imperative: "So act that you use human-

ity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."[11]

Utilitarians, however, disagree with Kant and other deontologists on this score. As consequentialists, utilitarians contend that each moral decision should result from a calculus in which all benefits and harms, and the number of people who will receive the benefits or suffer the harms, is evaluated for each possible action one may take in the given circumstances. Or, alternatively, a *rule* may be devised that guarantees the maximization of the best consequences over time—which is evidently the purpose of the Prime Directive. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), one of the two founders of utilitarianism, states the theory's moral axiom thus: "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure."[12] In calculating which action or rule can be reasonably expected to produce the greatest amount of happiness, the well-being or life of each person who may be affected positively or negatively has to be taken into account, but no person's well-being or life should be considered any more important than another's: "[T]he happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator."[13] Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), Mill's mentor, in describing the mathematical values of the *utility calculus*—that is, how to estimate the overall positive or negative value of each benefit or harm—states that the well-being or life of each person potentially affected by one's action is to count as one and no more than one.[14] Unlike Kant, then, utilitarians hold that individual persons don't possess infinite value but rather a value of *one,* which may thus be multiplied in terms of the number of individuals affected by a moral action. Hence, when comparing Spock's life to that of five hundred Nibiru, a simple calculation shows that the lives and well-being of the Nibiru outweigh that of a single individual.

While the utilitarian principle of strict impartiality may lead to heroic self-sacrifices such as Spock's, or Kirk's at the end of *STID,* there is a dark side of the theory that leads some critics of utilitarianism to charge its adherents with moral *corruption.*[15] Admiral Alexander Marcus betrays his "corrupt mind" by utilizing the historical arch-villain Khan Noonien Singh,

cryopreserved for over three hundred years since he and other genetically enhanced "supermen" were exiled after controlling more than three-quarters of the world during the Eugenics Wars.[16] Concerned about the advanced weaponry displayed by the Romulan Nero's future warship (*Star Trek* [2009]) and an impending war with the Klingon Empire, Marcus has Khan revived and holds the rest of his people, seventy-two in all, hostage so that Khan will help him protect the Federation:

> KHAN: Alexander Marcus needed to respond to an uncivilized threat in a civilized time, and for that, he needed a warrior's mind—my mind—to design weapons and warships.
>
> SPOCK: You are suggesting the Admiral violated every regulation he vowed to uphold, simply because he wanted to exploit your intellect.
>
> KHAN: He wanted to exploit my savagery! Intellect alone is useless in a fight, Mr. Spock. You can't even break a rule, how can you be expected to break bone?

With Khan's help, Marcus designs a savagely lethal *Dreadnought*-class starship, the U.S.S. *Vengeance,* and is prepared to use it to destroy the *Enterprise* to safeguard his secret war machine. When confronted by Kirk, Marcus declares unapologetically, "War is coming! And who's gonna lead us, *you?* If I'm not in charge, our entire way of life is decimated!"

Unlike Khan, Marcus isn't "homicidal, power-mad, despotic." He truly believes that he's doing what's best for the Federation and is willing to sacrifice not only the lives of the *Enterprise* crew and Khan's own people but even the respect and love of his daughter, Carol, who can't believe that the dad who raised her would be willing to take such drastic action. Marcus threatens Khan with the lives of those he considers *family*—his fellow "augments"—Kirk sacrifices his own life to save those he considers family—his crew—and the tragedy of Admiral Marcus is that, even before he's brutally killed by Khan, he suffers the loss of his own family when Carol slaps him in disgust.[17]

"Is There Anything You Would Not Do for Your Family?"

We're first introduced to Khan in *STID,* offering to save the life of a little girl dying in a hospital. Being genetically enhanced, Khan's blood contains advanced healing properties. The girl's father, a Starfleet officer, strikes a Faus-

tian bargain to save his daughter at the cost of his own life when he becomes a suicide bomber, destroying a secret Starfleet facility run by the shadowy Section 31.[18] Clearly, a father's love is a powerful motivator that could drive one to commit even the most heinous of crimes, blinding a person to his moral obligations to others—hence, the utilitarian doctrine of strict *impartiality*. But even nonutilitarians, such as contemporary philosopher Marcia Baron, agree that "moral reasoning and moral conduct demand that one be impartial, that one not play favorites."[19] Famed Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) goes even further in asserting that loyalty to one's family, friends, or nation is a matter of "bigotry and superstition."[20]

Other philosophers, however, such as American philosopher Josiah Royce (1855–1916), consider loyalty to be a bedrock of morality. Royce defines loyalty as "the willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause."[21] This definition isn't complete, however, as loyalty to an abstract "cause" often goes hand in hand with loyalty to one's fellow adherents to the cause, and especially the leaders of the cause. Soldiers who fought in World War II were willing to go into harm's way both for the cause of their country and for the sake of the "band of brothers" formed among groups of infantrymen, sailors, and pilots. They were also willing to follow certain military leaders without question. One U.S. Navy sailor, not realizing that famed admiral William "Bull" Halsey was walking right behind him, said to his fellow sailor, "I'd go to hell for that old son of a bitch."[22] Of course, not every cause, group, or individual to whom one may be loyal may be morally worthwhile, but the question remains whether loyalty is something we ought to value despite it being loyalty to a disreputable cause, person, or group.

One view is that loyalty can be a virtue only if it's a bond between virtuous individuals. In other words, I must be loyal only to persons or causes that are themselves virtuous—while being virtuous myself. Thus, contemporary ethicist John Ladd contends, "A loyal Nazi is a contradiction in terms."[23] Khan, while apparently loyal to his fellow augments, cannot be *truly* loyal to them given his evident ruthlessness and brutality, nor would it be virtuous for them to be loyal to him, as many sailors were to Admiral Halsey, if he were to unfreeze them. R. E. Ewin counters Ladd, though, arguing, "The question to consider is this: is a disloyal Nazi better than a loyal Nazi? There are problems in the Nazism, but is there anything wrong with the loyalty? A disloyal Nazi, after all, still has all the vices of Nazism and has added disloyalty to them. . . . It is yet another thing to be held against him and yet another reason for us not to trust him."[24] On this view, the tears Khan

sheds for his fellow augments may be his one saving grace, the one virtue that, while perhaps not justifying, at least reasonably motivates his actions against Starfleet, and Admiral Marcus in particular. We don't have to agree with Khan's actions to be sympathetic to his motives.

On the flip side, Kirk's loyalty to Spock, which motivates him to violate the Prime Directive, and his loyalty to his ship and crew, which motivates his own self-sacrifice, is a clearly laudable virtue—even if strict Kantians or utilitarians might have let Spock die in the volcano. Part of Abrams's purpose with *STID,* in fact, is to cement the bond of *friendship* between Kirk and Spock, a bond already well-established in Spock's heart-wrenching death scene in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan.* Kirk's and Spock's respective deaths in the two alternate timelines—and miraculous resurrections, thanks, in both cases, to Khan (detonating the Genesis device in one timeline and possessing "super-blood" in the other)—poetically bookend their friendship.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 b.c.e.) argues that friendship is an essential component of human happiness and living a virtuous life: "Further, [friendship] is most necessary for our life. For no one would choose to live without friends even if he had all the other goods. Indeed rich people and holders of powerful positions, even more than other people, seem to need friends. For how would one benefit from such prosperity if one had no opportunity for beneficence, which is most often displayed, and most highly praised, in relation to friends?"[25] He goes on to define three distinct types of friendship. The first are friends who are merely useful to each other. While it would certainly be a stretch to call Admiral Marcus and Khan "friends," whatever level of relationship existed between them that allowed Marcus to benefit from Khan's intellect and savagery is based merely on utility. The second is friendship merely for the sake of pleasure. Kirk's numerous sexual liaisons—including Uhura's Orion roommate in *Star Trek* (2009), a Caitian double-team in *STID,* and, apparently, Christine Chapel—involve only shared pleasure. The third, true friendship, involves "those who wish goods to their friend for the friend's own sake" and can only be shared, according to Aristotle, among the virtuous.[26] This is the type of friendship Kirk and Spock are cultivating.

A similar distinction also separates true *romantic* relationships, as we see between Uhura and Spock, from Kirk's hedonistic dalliances—when Carol Marcus mentions Chapel, Kirk doesn't even remember her. Aristotle claims that a person can't be in love with many people simultaneously, as erotic love involves excessive feeling toward one person.[27] When Spock is

facing imminent death in the volcano on Nibiru, his love for Uhura actually motivates him to close off his feelings at that moment. Uhura is upset that Spock would allow himself to die and leave her behind without any thought to her grief, but Spock explains that the excessive feeling she arouses in him—especially given that Vulcan emotions are more intense than humans experience—necessitated that he render himself emotionally numb; otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to perform his duty and face his death with equanimity. Later, he does allow himself to express excessive feeling at the moment of Kirk's death.

Another key relationship Aristotle discusses is between parents and children: "The friendship of children to a parent . . . is friendship toward what is good and superior. For the parent conferred the greatest benefits on his children, since he is the cause of their being and nature and of their education once they have been born."[28] This is depicted most clearly in *STID* between Kirk and Admiral Pike. Having lost his biological father when he was born, a rebellious Jim Kirk needed a straight talking-to from someone "good and superior" after the "epic beating" he provoked with some hot-headed Starfleet cadets (*Star Trek* [2009]). Pike challenges Kirk to an even greater degree of heroism than his father; yet it's Pike himself who becomes Kirk's inspirational "father figure" to meet that challenge—believing in Kirk even after dressing him down for what happened on Nibiru.

Aristotle contends that parents know their children better than the latter know themselves, and Pike persistently trusts in Kirk's character and ability—from initially making him first officer of the *Enterprise,* to supporting his promotion to captain, to reinstating him as first officer after the Nibiru incident.[29] While Pike isn't literally responsible for Kirk's "being and nature," he's instrumental in Kirk's *becoming* the captain we all know he's destined to be—as well as being literally responsible for Kirk's education to help him achieve his future destiny. When Kirk recites the "Captain's Oath" at the *Enterprise*'s recommissioning ceremony, he admits that he didn't fully appreciate the words the first time Pike had him recite them; now, having "acquired some comprehension, or [at least] perception" due to the events in *STID,* Kirk can better appreciate the paternal lessons of his elder.[30]

"You Seem to Have a Conscience, Mr. Kirk"

We've seen how duty, utility, and loyalty motivate our moral behavior and could lead to both laudable and condemnable actions. And while these

motivations may lead to divergent moral decisions, sometimes they coincide. When Kirk enters the irradiated warp core to repair it and save the *Enterprise,* his action is praiseworthy from all three moral perspectives: he's fulfilling his duty as a starship captain to put his ship and crew first, he's putting the needs of the many ahead of those of the one, and he's expressing his loyalty to his "family." Unfortunately, not all moral decisions will combine these three motivations in such a tight package; Kirk did have to violate his duty to the Prime Directive and the utility maxim to save Spock out of loyalty to his friend.

By the end of *STID,* having seen how Marcus's loyalty to the Federation and Khan's loyalty to his fellow augments have morally corrupted them, Kirk is able to give the first of what will surely be many "soapbox" speeches during the *Enterprise*'s ensuing five-year mission: "There will always be those who mean to do us harm. To stop them, we risk awakening the same evil within ourselves. Our first instinct is to seek revenge when those we love are taken from us. But that's not who we are." Khan deliberately destroys a Section 31 facility, attacks Starfleet headquarters, and crashes the *Vengeance* into San Francisco—potentially killing thousands of innocent people to avenge what he falsely believes was the death of his fellow augments. Kirk himself immediately wants to hunt down Khan to avenge Pike's death. Only Spock's constant moralizing, along Kantian lines of never using a person—even an evil person like Khan—merely as a means toward the end of satisfying one's desire for vengeance, leads him to capture Khan instead of killing him outright.

Spock's ability to stand up to Kirk and remind him of his moral duty is a sign of his loyalty to his captain, which is not the same as blind obedience to authority. We also see this virtuous form of loyalty when Scotty refuses to sign for the top-secret torpedoes being loaded onto the *Enterprise* without any technical schematics. Not knowing how they might interact with the warp core, Scotty exercises his primary duty to safeguard the ship, to the point of resigning his post when Kirk directly orders him to authorize loading the torpedoes. Despite this seemingly disloyal act on Scotty's part, he's ready to come to the aid of "Captain James T. 'Perfect Hair'" when the latter comes calling—leading him to be at just the right place at the right time to save the *Enterprise.* Scotty isn't disloyal to Kirk, the virtuous captain, but only refuses to obey the morally blind captain who's hell-bent on vengeance no matter the risk to his crew.

When Kirk welcomes Carol Marcus aboard the *Enterprise* as "part of the family," we can easily imagine future violations of the Prime Directive

when the life of one or more of Kirk's crew is at stake. But that might be okay so long as the intrepid crew of the *Enterprise* remain virtuous and thereby worthy of the loyalty they share among themselves. Khan's loyalty fueled wrathful vengeance; Kirk's will fuel only self-sacrifice and the occasional rule bending. Who'd you rather have as the head of *your* family?

Notes

I'm grateful to the editors for inviting me to contribute to this volume and for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

1. *Star Trek: The Original Series,* "Bread and Circuses" (1968).

2. All quotations, unless otherwise cited, are from *Star Trek into Darkness* (2013).

3. Kirk utilizes this axiom to justify sacrificing his career and the *Enterprise* to save Spock in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984).

4. Other examples from the *Star Trek* universe in which crew members have been mistaken for gods, or devils, include the *Original Series* episodes "The Omega Glory" (1968) and "The Paradise Syndrome" (1968) as well as the *Next Generation* episode "Who Watches the Watchers" (1989).

5. *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* "Symbiosis" (1988).

6. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 182.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42. While Kant consistently refers to "human beings" and "humanity" as having dignity, that is because he doesn't consider that there may be other creatures who possess rationality and autonomy as we do. If Kant were living and writing in the twenty-third century, he wouldn't be so "speciesist" and would include beings such as the Vulcans and the Nibiru as having dignity. Hereafter, unless quoting directly from Kant, I'll use the term "person" to refer to any rational and autonomous being who thereby possesses intrinsic dignity.

8. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics,* trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 203.

9. "Spock Prime" is the designation used within *Star Trek* fandom to refer to Ambassador Spock—portrayed by Leonard Nimoy—who journeys back in time along with Nero, instigating the new timeline depicted in J. J. Abrams's *Star Trek* films.

10. This same dictum justifies Spock Prime's sacrificing his life to save the *Enterprise* in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*—a reversal of Kirk's sacrifice in *STID*.

11. Kant, *Groundwork,* 38.

12. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism,* ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 7.

13. Ibid., 17.

14. See Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 1988).

15. See Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 23 (1957): 16–17.

16. For a clever depiction of how Khan and his followers could control most of the world from 1992 through 1996, as cited in the *Original Series* episode "Space Seed" (1967), without those of us who lived through those years knowing about it, see Greg Cox, *The Eugenics Wars: The Rise and Fall of Khan Noonien Singh,* 2 vols. (New York: Pocket Books, 2001–2002).

17. Additional portrayals of genetically enhanced "augments" in the *Star Trek* universe include the *Star Trek: Enterprise* episodes "Borderland," "Cold Station 12," and "The Augments" (2004). For further discussion of the philosophical themes raised in these episodes, see Jason T. Eberl, "'Killing Your Own Clone Is Still Murder': Genetics, Ethics, and Khaaaaan!" in *Star Trek and Philosophy: The Wrath of Kant,* ed. Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker (Chicago: Open Court, 2008).

18. Section 31 has existed since the birth of Starfleet and is first depicted in the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* episode "Inquisition" (1998).

19. Marcia Baron, *The Moral Status of Loyalty* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1984), 5.

20. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 359.

21. Josiah Royce, *The Possibility of Loyalty* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 16–17.

22. As quoted in Walter R. Borneman, *The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King—the Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 473.

23. John Ladd, "Loyalty," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Donald M. Borchert, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 2006), 596.

24. R. E. Ewin, "Loyalty and Virtues," *Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (1992): 418.

25. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 8.1.1155a5–11.

26. Ibid., 8.3.1156b7–13.

27. Ibid., 8.6.1158a11–14.

28. Ibid., 8.12.1162a5–7.

29. Ibid., 8.12.1161b20.

30. Ibid., 8.12.1161b25–26.

THE MONSTER AND THE MENSCH

Randall E. Auxier

Why save the best bits? J. J. Abrams's film *Super 8* reaches its climax when the young hero, Joe Lamb, and heroine, Alice Dainard, are being chased through the subterranean nest of an escaped alien being—a being something like a giant spider. We have had the grand moment set up for well over an hour with various characters indicating that the "monster" is empathic and it communicates by touch. We have also been prepared to assume that Joe really understands monsters. He spends his free time building models of them, and when it is time for Alice to play a zombie in the kids' own Super 8 film, she asks Joe how to do it. His description, while still kid-like, is on the money and Alice turns out to be a natural.

We also have the information that our monster (1) is hungry, (2) is terrified, and (3) wants to go home. I felt that way when I saw the first *Alien* movie. That isn't a good combination for anyone, least of all an intelligent being that has been imprisoned for over twenty years and held among aliens it regards as hideous insects (i.e., we humans). And our *Super 8* monster has every reason to see us this way. After all, we never touch the creature except with probes and prods, and for it, touching is the basis of communication, and hence the primary evidence of the existence of a moral conscience. As far as the monster can discern, humans have no such capabilities. To analogize, at best we seem like reptiles to this being, and at worst, yes, cockroaches. In twenty years of imprisonment, the alien has never had the opportunity to discover that we have any moral feeling at all.

Thus, in the key moment, the alien catches Joe, scoops him up, and starts to eat him, but feels (and thereby notices) that Joe, while perhaps afraid, is trying to *see* the monster, to study the monster's face. Studying faces is another thing Joe does, as is made abundantly evident in his work as a makeup artist. In that crucial instant, the monster pauses, ponders, *feels*

Joe seeing him, offers his own eyes for Joe to look into, and then suddenly grasps that human beings do with their eyes what the alien beings do by touching. The alien realizes that Joe is "touching" *with* his eyes, and while it is a strange thing, and hard to understand, the alien is, after all, far more intelligent than a human being, so the matter is puzzled out. The alien is able to grasp, in that moment, *why* all the humans have responded as they have. To them, the visual appearance of such a spiderly alien is terrifying, while to the alien, the withholding of touch is barbaric, a kind of unimaginable torture. But now the alien knows that humans did not understand, *could not understand,* its own moral frame of reference.

In that climactic realization, the alien becomes aware that it is wrong to feed on these beings and that its first and only imperative is to *get off this planet and go home.* And what is more, the alien being now knows *how* to do it—how to build a ship that will take it home. It may not be obvious to those who haven't reflected on the matter, but the motive force that creates the alien's spacecraft is a kind of *love,* in the form of desire to touch, to hold, to be near, to possess. The parts are drawn together by empathy. That is why the sad little piece of the alien spaceship that Joe takes home from the site of the train wreck "wants" to be with the other pieces. The ship is made of and powered by something like *longing.*

When the alien becomes aware that humans actually do have love, or more precisely, *longing* within themselves, it also realizes that it can use *anything* that *anyone* loves (in the relevant sense) to rebuild its craft. That is why, in the denouement, only *some things* are drawn upward into the water tower and fused into the ship. The things being drawn up are things that someone *loves.* That gun the soldier won't relinquish, that cool car, and yes, the necklace that Joe's mother wore and that he has invested with every ounce of his personal longing. Giving the locket to the alien is, as we know, a "Spielberg moment," but I think the philosophy transcends Steven Spielberg's typical (and unhappily simplistic) moral messages. In Abrams's hand, it isn't actually unselfishness or agapic love that is relevant, nor is it *eros* of any kind. He has thought this through more carefully. The operative kind of desire is, as I said, *longing.* But what is that? Abrams tells us, by way of Alice Dainard, who, *unlike Joe* (who depends on his eyes for understanding), is an empath. It does not occur to Alice that not everyone who is touched by the monster comes to understand the monster. Only some people do, like Alice and Dr. Woodward. Alice gets it and reports it to Joe, just before he is scooped up. It is crucial for

the story that Joe *believes* Alice completely, even if he can't feel it himself. He has *seen* what she can do. She says longing is a mix of (1) hunger, (2) terror, and (3) wanting to go home.

The thematic suggestion made by the movie is, therefore, that when it comes to making the monster into a mensch (that favored trope of the movies endowed to us by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), the trick is to grasp that *longing* is the connection we have with the monster. And beyond Abrams's insight about longing there looms a really tough philosophical question. Is this "longing" what empathy really means? Can we, as humans (or even including other species), share, at any equally profound level, any *other* form of desire? Or is the bottom line that we can all be afraid, hungry, and far from home together, and *that's* about the long and short of who we are? Can agapic love or friendship or erotic attraction go deep enough to contribute *anything* to empathy? Or is empathy really just a power to develop that moment of longing within ourselves *by sharing it with others?* In my view, that is what *Super 8* is about, and it's a little more far-reaching than the usual Spielberg questions.

Now that you know *what* this essay is about, let me take a few steps back to examine *how* Abrams accomplishes his aims. There are many monsters in Abrams's head, and not all follow the patterns established in *Super 8.* I will privilege this movie and this monster in what follows, as a clue for understanding Abrams, and I will not argue for that assumption apart from saying that I feel this movie and this monster are special for him. I think they show something about the man that he hasn't put into his other projects, at least not so fully as this one.

Hunger: The Peculiar Appetite of Film

Quotationalism is a word culture critics created to describe the (apparently infinite) capacity of mass culture to digest and regurgitate itself in allusions of allusions, parodies of parodies, and tributes of tributes.[1] Perhaps television is most gluttonous among the various media, but long before the advent of television or even commercial movies, books were already about other books. What has changed in the last hundred years is that a new *feast* of morsels for quotation has been cooked up in appetizing visual images and delicious lines that make memorable sound bites (rather than highbrow fare, where people show off their stale Shakespeare or their crusty Byron). And for dessert, there is recorded music in general, which, please recall, didn't

exist until a little over a century ago (so yes, it's a processed food, but who can resist Twinkies and Ding-Dongs?).

Yet the appetite isn't limited to the *content* of mass culture. Everyone knows, I think, that movie making has the advantage of consuming every other artistic *form* and commercial medium, using them to their fullest as dependent art forms. In the same way that sculpture was absorbed into architecture during the Middle Ages but then broke free again in the Renaissance, many art forms are simply absorbed by other art forms for a time, and no art form ever existed that is more voracious than the movies. Obviously, a symphony, created independently and aimed only at its own musical target, can accomplish artistic ends that a film cannot. And that is also why we often comment that a movie "wasn't as good as the book," and so on. What we mean is that a book can tell a story in a way the movies cannot equal. No major medium of artistic expression is at its very best when it becomes a mere ingredient in another, but it has to be admitted that feature-length movies can preserve *more* of what makes another artistic medium valuable in its own right than any other art form. What a canvas of space, time, image, word, and sound! Makes me sort of hungry.

And in a way, we go to the movies *because* we are hungry for something— not just images and stories, but the sequence of feelings these evoke when we eat them with our eyes and ears. We want to devour all the forms at once. A feature film can bring to the table an orchestral piece or song, for example, as the music it *really is*—there is enough time for that in a full-length feature. I savor, emotionally speaking, the scores of John Williams—especially the only two scores that ever actually made me cry, which were *Goodbye Mr. Chips* and *Amistad*—and I wonder, would these amazing works of orchestral music exist *without* the films? No, I don't think so; although it is true that the music is subordinated to the film, it is also the case that sometimes the music swells and overtakes the film and seems to drive the whole flavor.

Of course, the genre of the musical adds in so much music that it becomes the main course. When one considers a smorgasbord like the long scene in *An American in Paris,* in which Leslie Caron and Gene Kelly dance their way through a dozen styles of French painting to the strains of Gershwin, well, I don't need to say more about this phenomenon. My point is that emotional and aesthetic desire fall within the limits of hunger, humanly understood. There is, as Kant insisted, a subjective universality that connects at this level any being worthy of the name "human" to all the others.[2]

And the fact is that because the film industry has been able to spend

hundreds of billions of dollars *on art* during its great commercial century, artists who wanted to make a living have been drawn to and have been willing to develop their gifts and expend their creativity in service of the meta–art form of movie making. People who would have gone into different arts or who wouldn't have had artistic careers at all were drawn into the movies. The simple fact that people were willing to pay handsomely to dine on the results of all that cooking did most of the work.

When we consider the auteur director in this light, a sort of magnificent chef of images and emotions, it is tempting to wonder what any one of our famous directors might have done for a living in the centuries before the invention of film. I think Spielberg, for instance, belongs to the Hans Christian Andersen and Brothers Grimm line of writers and story collectors. It is clear to me that for all his imagistic prowess, Spielberg is no painter. He really is a storyteller first, but he might also have found work as an illustrator. The kinds of stories he tells are fairy tales, in the best sense of the word. I think it is pretty clear that Hitchcock would have directed plays and run a theater. I think Tarantino would have been a playwright. And Abrams? What of him? I will answer that question at the end of this essay. If I say it now, it invites controversy. Yes, all this is just my opinion, but, as with the three opinions I expressed about those other directors, there is a *case* for the opinion.

But where it concerns quotationalism, every art form consumes every other in the feeding frenzy of global mass culture. Abrams seems to understand this and has indeed begun the process of perfecting it, but his use of the film within a film device as the B-story in this movie shows that he wants to be lighthearted about this part of the structure of the film and its narrative. Like Tarantino, Abrams understands that what you quote becomes part and parcel of the Warholian identity you beget in the public mind. Abrams is crafting his own image in his choices. It's a kind of artistic styling made from lots of little squeals that say, "I like this!" I think of the moment in *Super 8* when a *Starsky and Hutch* 1974 Gran Torino crosses a distant intersection just as the camera fades away from a scene. That is playful. The movie is literally made of such quotations.

So it is an artistic styling made in little squeals, sideways whispers, and elbows nudging at your ribs. In the same way that Kid Rock can assert his redneck credentials, his love of redneck Michigan, and his redneck conservatism by combining, of all things, a groove from Warren Zevon, a guitar lick from Lynyrd Skynyrd, and a piano tinkle from Bob Seeger into a musi-

cal manifesto . . . well, let's just say that if a dim bulb like Kid Rock can pull that off, even if it makes me want to barf, someone with Abrams's cultural background has plenty to choose from. But when you're hungry for a series of feelings, there's nothing quite like going to the movies—or making one.

Fear Itself: 1979

As we know, Abrams wrote, directed, and produced *Super 8,* but he took his baby boomer adoptive Uncle Steven along for the ride. Abrams's penchant for quoting Spielberg in images, in cinematic style, in script style, and in theme has been commented on by everyone. Some people can't stomach this level of hero worship. To be honest, if I personally believed that was the real story, I wouldn't be writing this essay. I like Spielberg's films just fine, and I never miss one, but he annoys me enough to discourage any writing from my end (I'm sure he's devastated . . .). Spielberg's simplistic moralizing, his inability to recognize when he's said enough, the out-and-out obviousness of his symbol choices, the total absence of subtlety, and most of all the self-serious self-indulgence . . . well, *I* have said enough, but he insults the intelligence of his audience and leaves nothing to *their* imaginations. Yet I prefer him to most of his generational cohort, since it doesn't look like he sold out.

On the other hand, I like Abrams's version of Spielberg better than Spielberg. There is a deconstruction of Spielberg in Abrams (I am far from the first to say this, of course). Part of the reason I like Abrams is that, in a way, the Goonies are *better* the second time around. The setting of *Super 8* is exactly calibrated with Abrams's own childhood (more on that shortly)— it was a weird, in-between time to grow up. Abrams is too young to be a baby boomer, but as the oldest of the Gen Xers, he really isn't quite a child of the eighties either. The year 1979, when this movie is set, was a cultural void. Disco and southern rock had gone rancid, Zeppelin was moribund, Springsteen was on hiatus, and we were still listening to *Hotel California.* Stirrings of the eighties were under way, for sure, but Abrams chose not to bring in the music of 1979. That was a conscious decision, I'm sure. He must have judged that it would detract from the mood he wanted to create. This was not primarily about nostalgia for that year. It was more about what was *scary* that year.

The Iranian Revolution was under way (but no one understood what it meant). Carter was still president, but the country wasn't going to be recovering from Vietnam, Watergate, and the oil crisis. The president had given a

speech, now dubbed the "malaise" speech, in which he told us that we were living beyond our means and that if we didn't make sacrifices now, consume less, and pay down our debts, our economic future was very uncertain. That displaced feeling of being betwixt and between, a sort of aimlessness as the nation's industrial base disintegrates, pervades *Super 8.* One hardly knows what to think today, as the film opens with a scene of a still-functioning steel mill, something that would be extinct before too many more years elapsed. Abrams said in an interview that the whole film grew from the idea of having someone change the safety sign at a steel mill. If that writing decision doesn't give us a clue that this movie is about *truly* scary stuff, then we are pretty slow.

But fear isn't the same as terror. They are related, but it isn't easy to understand how vague fears grow into total terror, especially for kids who haven't got enough life experience to have their fear generalized into existential angst. As every storyteller knows, things have to come apart gradually and build into an apocalyptic moment. You can't escalate fear into terror by having things jump out from behind trees. Terror takes time.

Abrams wanted to capture that transitional time in our history, a time almost no one takes the trouble to remember—post-seventies, pre-eighties —and to make it vaguely scary. Not much was going on, but there was one thing good about 1979: the box office. It is important to remember that Abrams grew up in L.A., in a movie-making family. It was a big year out in L.A. There was *Apocalypse Now* and the (very) first *Star Trek* movie (ironically), and *Kramer vs. Kramer,* and most importantly, this was the year *Alien* came out. Our monster in *Super 8* is modeled on the monster from *Alien,* and the camera technique of Ridley Scott and Derek Vanlint, showing parts of the alien without allowing the audience to get a sense of the monster as a whole, is repeated in *Super 8.* Obviously they weren't the first to come up with the idea, but the technique had become a cliché by 1979. Scott and Vanlint resurrected it with powerful effect.

Many writers and critics have remarked that *Alien* signaled a real change in Hollywood. It had been foreshadowed with *Jaws* (1975) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), but with the release of *Alien,* no longer would moviegoers be bothered with the complexity of needing to empathize with the monster. In 1979 the requirement of conscience that marked the sixties and seventies, in which Mary Shelley's softer sensibilities about monsters would dominate, suddenly retrogressed to the fifties (taking Sigourney Weaver's pants along with it—so not *everything* would be like the fifties . . .). Back in the

duck-and-cover fifties, you were allowed, nay, *expected* simply to be horrified at the alien invaders, at their shear otherness. You weren't expecting the Frankenstein scenario, the misunderstood-monster-is-the-mensch moment. Weaver's nemesis in *Alien* wasn't misunderstood, it was evil, violent, and planning to eat us all.

The residents of 1979 live on the cusp of Reagan's cruel world, and they don't know it. The slow creepiness of the eighties hasn't yet poked its way out of their bellies and into their consciousness. These characters still think it's the seventies, and in a way it is. But the struggle for the souls of moviegoers was well under way (after all, one last monster-mensch needed to phone home, in 1982, before the good guys lost), and the main change was that the public was given permission to refuse the moral chore of seeking the monster's point of view. Abrams remembers all this. In retrospect he has also been able to see something of its meaning, so the writing, set decoration, art direction, and even the acting in *Super 8* capture that time and its insensibility of the future. It's a world with no war-mongering neoconservatives, a world in which airlines and utilities and the telephone company are regulated by the government in the public interest, and a time when steel mills still made steel. No Wal-Mart, no Internet, no stadium seating at the movies, no MTV, and, by the way, no Rubik's cubes (Abrams missed that detail—but the geek squad on imdb.com has several dozen other anachronisms you might want to note; none of them hurts the film). The more you study the details of the movie, the more you'll be able to grasp the comparative innocence of the moment.

(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding?

So, if that's 1979, then *why 1979?* The movie is autobiographical in many ways, and Abrams came from a movie-making family and started making Super 8 movies when he was about eight years old, so by the time he was thirteen, he was probably pretty far into what he would do for a living. He did enter film contests when he was a kid, and I wouldn't be shocked if there was a Super 8 zombie movie in a can somewhere from, oh, about 1979. But nothing depends on that hypothesis. Instead, I stake my case on this: we all have to concede that age thirteen is the paradigm for the last year of innocence. Many critics have remarked how good this movie is at making them feel like kids again, and there is the *gotcha* device that the film uses to make you care, to evoke not just your sympathy but your empathy, your

identification with the characters. Not all of us lost our mothers or had drunk fathers, but we all were thirteen once. If I were a writer-director and I wanted to capture thirteen, I would use my memory rather than just my imagination. Setting this film in 1979 enables Abrams simply to remember his way through a million decisions.

But I think there is more. I see the middle-aged man Abrams, at the height of his artistic powers, reflectively at work here too. There is a retrospective understanding that intensifies this particular year, this time, and it isn't nostalgia. These kids are the first Gen Xers, but of course, they also don't know *that* yet. Capturing this variable innocence and ignorance in his characters as well as his setting was, in my view, important to the message Abrams wanted to convey, and it is the retrospective understanding that is crucial to building the terror. I think most thirteen-year-old kids in America during that year heard Elvis Costello ring out the death knell of the seventies with the following repeated lament:

> So where are the strong?
> And who are the trusted?
> And where is the harmony?[3]

I suppose one could say that 1979 was the year that we collectively ceased pretending to care about the absurd Age of Aquarius and the ridiculous promise of Woodstock. It was the year the baby boomers became honest with themselves about wanting a lot of money. Not everyone went along, of course. Spielberg didn't, for example. But for Abrams, the experience of Gen X was beginning. The baby boomers were too self-absorbed to notice the path of cultural and political destruction they were leaving in their wake. There was nothing but scraps and hair bands for a boy like Abrams, born in 1966. But my oh my, there *were* scraps. *Super 8* doesn't just quote them, it is *made of* them.

Tom Wolfe famously described the 1970s as the "Me Decade," in contrast with the sixties, and with some justice. But if that was true of the seventies, then the eighties must have been the "not you" decade, for then, in our boredom, we took the opportunity to ignore interests beyond our own narrowest ones, deregulating everything and everyone, declaring war on labor, taxes, public support for education. Our free-market fundamentalists opened the gates to global exploitation of the poorest of the poor so that we could send domestic working-class jobs to places with no laws or unions

protecting the men, women, and children who took on the work—often suffering on the brink of starvation, but conveniently out of sight. We decided to arm any group of thugs who would do our bidding in tiny countries too poor to resist their tyranny and, unsatisfied with doing this sort of thing passively, we organized coups to take down independent-minded democracies. Yes, all was done with the cooperation and full approval of the baby boomers. They didn't want jobs in the steel mills, they wanted executive salaries, and they didn't want to think about what some child was doing for food in Bangladesh or Indonesia. By 1989 it was over—both the Cold War and the transformation of the Third World into the unseen, unheard, and underfed sweatshop to sate our consumerist appetites (not that they ever *can* be sated, really).

In short, in 1979 we were about to take our selfishness global in a neo-imperialism aimed at making others pay for our party back here at home. That was the alternative Carter failed to mention in his malaise speech.[4] There may have been *better* parties had on the backs of oppressed and starving people, under the reign of Caligula, for example, but I doubt there has ever been a *bigger* one. I give you genuine human terror. We have met the enemy. We looked in the mirror and failed to recognize that Ridley Scott's alien was looking back at us. It was a baby boomer's reflection, a selfish, violent, inhuman consumption machine. It was the USA, in the hands of 78.3 million spoiled fools who have yet to turn loose and probably never will. If I weren't a baby boomer myself, I'd be pretty cynical.

Generation X watched helplessly and tried to understand. They still do. This younger group collected a reputation for cynicism, for being without ambition and without distinct achievement. Still, it isn't easy to imagine what they could have done, and many have not been slow to wag a finger at the boomers and say, "Look at the mess you made of everything, you unfeeling murderers of all hope." And here, *here* I believe we reach the heart of the matter. The problem that constitutes the moral backdrop for *Super 8* just *is* the problem of empathy. The baby boomers lack it in *Super 8*—although the only examples we are given would be chubby Charles Kaznyk's sexpot older sister, Jen, and her drugged-out, lusty admirer, Donny. These fine citizens will soon be in charge of everything.

The adults in the movie are people born during the Depression or during the Second World War itself. They have lost their power of empathy, not due to hunger for the pleasures of the flesh and pure consumption but from fear itself. The Depression, the war, and the Cold War have done them

in. They were the officers in the Vietnam era, taking their orders from veterans of the Second World War and carrying them out without asking too many questions. After all, their elders won the big war and they knew what is best. Not one of the Depression babies would ever serve as U.S. president. They are a silent and lost generation, and the movie captures this, but it also provides one exception: the science teacher, Dr. Woodward, who essentially sacrifices his life to help an alien creature. His last words, to the evil air force colonel Nelec, is an assertion of the primacy of empathy, which comes down to saying that the alien is *in* him and he is *in* it. Nelec is unmoved and orders another black soldier to execute Woodward. That's pretty much how you kill conscience.

It is fair to note that if Dr. Woodward had a Ph.D. in some sort of biological science in 1958, when he was among the scientists the air force chose to study the alien, he was something of a pioneer. There were precious few black Ph.D.s in that day, and those who were around had *reason* to understand the alien's predicament. Being surrounded by white people who were completely unconscious of their privilege and in deep denial about their racism must bear some analogy to the predicament of the alien. Woodward is transformed by the alien's touch, but we are not told whether the alien is aware of it—an important detail.

In any case, Dr. Woodward understands that the basic moral requirement in this situation, for any intelligent being, is that the creature must be set free, at any personal cost. That alien's treatment is thus a symbol of what fear does to us over time. In short, Dr. Woodward becomes conscious of the *genuine* terror, and that is the idea of a world full of pod people, people who refuse to feel the longing of others, who would defend their own physical safety, and their power and privilege, at the cost of their souls. Being robbed of peace and love for two generations, we lost our capacity for understanding. It isn't funny.

Thus the terror relevant to *longing* is the way in which we can come to fear losing ourselves, our very souls, to any set of social protocols that requires us to be, well, zombies. The kids in *Super 8* are *surrounded* by zombies—hunger zombies and fear zombies, like those in the military. What are they? As Joe says to Alice, "Pretty much be a lifeless ghoul, with no soul. Dead eyes. Scary. Did you ever have Mrs. Mullin?" All the adults they know are terrifying and terrified, even though no one knows it, because that is what fear will do over time. The Cold War was so old by 1979 that no one could even remember what it was like *not* to live on the brink of apocalypse, and

so in Abrams's script, the zombie apocalypse *did* happen. But it was gradual, so no one knew when to declare it openly. The effect of two generations of Cold War was that no one noticed when our souls were gone and we just became hungry, frightened, consumerist pod people. We were ready for Wal-Mart. And so Abrams did actually make a zombie movie, in the scariest sense of the word.

So Far from Home: Empathic Longing

The problem of empathy doesn't have a long history in philosophy—at least, not when compared to other long-standing problems in Western thought. For most of our history in the West, the prevailing view was that the power of reason is the distinguishing trait of humanity. In all fairness, people in the Eastern world were talking about whether the power of sympathy might be the distinguishing trait of humanity for over two thousand years.[5] And there were certainly wise ones in the West who placed great value on fellow feeling. But in the West, somehow these common-sense observations never became a central part of the *philosophical* conversation.

Philosophers from Plato onward were critical of anyone who deployed human intelligence or persuasive speech for the purpose of stirring up the emotions of those who heard or read such rhetoric, and over time the general opinion came to hold that emotion in general degrades and distorts our powers of reason. One could say we chose to philosophize like zombies, and having developed the habit of doing so, we came to be unfamiliar with the very real (and positive, constructive) relations between feeling and reasoning. It's kind of scary, actually, but we got used to it.

So it came as something of a radical suggestion in 1755 when Jean-Jacques Rousseau asserted that our power of sympathy (along with our power of healthy self-love) is essential to our humanity.[6] Obviously there is a very great difference between sympathy—the pity we feel when we witness suffering—and empathy, which is feeling *exactly* what another person (or being) feels. But the question of empathy doesn't arise philosophically in the West until the questions of sympathy and *healthy* self-love are under discussion.

Most of the attention of philosophers in the nineteenth century, insofar as they addressed this question at all, was devoted either to justifying or attacking self-love and sorting out the good from the bad kinds of love. There was significant discussion of sympathy, but the prevailing opinion among those Europeans who had colonized the world, and who intended

to exploit and oppress it further—almost like alien invaders—was that sympathy makes human beings weak and unable to do what is necessary for the advancement of the race. (Granting that the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Italians, and Germans had very different ideas of what *would* advance the human race, they seemed to agree that sympathy was a luxury no powerful nation could afford.) The colonizers had Herbert Spencer and August Comte and Charles Darwin and T. H. Huxley and Arthur Schopenhauer to gird up their colonizing loins and assure them that all the invasion and murder of less civilized people was absolutely necessary, or at least not morally significant. The Marxist reaction to all this slaughter and misery wasn't exactly characterized by an emphasis on compassion. Thus, after Rousseau's assertion, it took another 150 years before any major Western philosopher took up *empathy* as a subject.

The group of thinkers who finally examined the question were phenomenologists. They were committed to giving reflective descriptions of subjective experience. They took for granted that, as a matter of necessity, *my* experience is *mine* and *yours* is *yours,* so the issue of whether *we* could have "the same feeling" posed a number of formal problems. Since your feeling is *in* you and mine is *in* me, so the story goes, they can't be "identical," and so if they are somehow the "same" feeling, they must have either the same *form* or the same *content,* or both, but they are different instances—in sort of the way that two sisters can belong to the "same family" or the "same parents." But obviously siblings are also different. By analogy, wouldn't there be differences between *my* version of, say, feeling *your* suffering and your version of it or of *your* version of feeling *my* suffering and *my* version of the same? And would the difference be greater still if someone steps on your toe and I say "ouch" and reach for my own toe in empathy? At what point do we simply just admit they are different, or different enough that empathy is not real, just a story we tell ourselves?

Questions such as these are addressed in the writings of Max Scheler (1874–1928) and Edith Stein (1891–1942). In 1913 Scheler criticized in detail those thinkers after Rousseau, from Adam Smith to Sigmund Freud, who collapsed sympathy into self-love and insisted that the roots of sympathy lie in self-interest. That, Scheler believed, was a very great mistake. Scheler sorted out the various modes and types of sympathy, including fellow feeling, identification, egoism, love, hate, emotional infection, and empathy.[7]

In 1916 Stein (who subsequently was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church) framed and published her theory of empathy—the word in German

is revealing: *Einfühlung,* or single-feeling. Stein believed that the questions associated with the experience of empathy were among the most revealing philosophical questions we can ask. The very structure of *all* human experience is bound up with feeling what others feel. Without belaboring the subtle story, Stein claims that what *I* experience, what is truly *mine* in an experience, is the *act* of experiencing. The *content* of my experience, whether it is a memory, a fantasy, an anticipation, or a feeling, is not exclusively mine—even if it is *my* memory, the immediate mine-ness is in the *act,* not in the *content.* The content, whatever it may be, "announces" itself to the act of experiencing. So even my own memories must be announced and relived to be experienced at all.

If this is right, then there is no requirement that any content of experience must be the private possession of the experiencer. When we empathize, then, we do not *infer* what another is feeling (by interpreting bodily responses or facial expressions), and we do not *project* our so-called private feelings onto others, and we do not *make conjectures* or guesses. Rather, the content of the experience "announces" itself *to* the *act* of experiencing. Hence, we really could *share* a memory, an anticipation, or a fantasy as well as a *feeling.* In empathizing, we actually share the same *feeling* in two different acts, yours and mine (which need not even be simultaneous). Stein does not claim that the feeling content is identical in every respect, but she does claim that ideally it *could* be.[8]

This brings us back to Abrams's exhibition of empathy in *Super 8.* What is it, for him? It isn't the self-sacrificing love Christians call agape. Agapic love is not a *kind* of understanding, it *passes* understanding. It is self-sacrifice for those who cannot understand, either what they are doing or what is being done *for* them by a being that is morally superior. Neither our Goonies nor our alien is in any such frame of mind. Dr. Woodward might be, but he dies vowing revenge, and Abrams makes sure he gets it, so I don't think this is agape.

Is it friendship? Friendship (*philia* in Greek) in the highest sense is based on equality, Aristotle says; one discovers a sort of "second self," and the two souls are alike not just coincidentally but in their moral achievements and judgments. They are alike in virtue, and that is the basis of such friendship.[9] One would expect an ideal empathy in such friends, and I think that is what happens. But the interesting thing about empathy is that it can exist across great distances and differences—in time, place, virtue, even species. Whatever it is that enables us to *share the same feeling,* it does not require very

much sameness of circumstance, or of past experience, or even of physiology. Empathy is not a kind of friendship.

Is it erotic attraction? Not in Abrams's view. First of all, Abrams is very, very careful not to objectify or sexualize any characters in the movie except Jen Kaznyk and lusty Donny. The relationship between Joe and Alice is basically nonerotic—yes, he thinks she is sad and beautiful, but he is awestruck, not enamored. Abrams is very careful in how he frames the shots Alice is in so as never to do with her what (male) directors always do with pretty young girls, which is to make sure we lecherous men can gawk at their bodies. And even on a set with an entire passel of young boys, Abrams steers away from having them even so much as notice how attractive she is; they are amazed by her acting ability and that she has the guts to take off in her father's car.

No, Abrams refuses the standard moves and that is because he wants to show us the *person,* not the *thing* that Alice is. So she sneaks out to see Joe, knocks on his window, and the romantic possibilities become an empathy-fest. That, friends and neighbors, is *deliberate* on Abrams's part. It blocks our voyeuristic efforts to sexualize Alice. He is saying, "Hey, you, zombie pervert in the tenth row, yeah you with your mind in the gutter, I'm talking to you. Would you give your lizard brain a rest and think about something else for the balance of this movie?" And this shows, pretty clearly, that Abrams is aware that erotic feeling really isn't empathic at all; it takes us beyond ourselves, projects us into a realm of desire that *seems* to be shared with another for a time, but that relation turns out to be unsustainable. Yes, the soul grows wings under the sway of eros, but the wings get tired and the soul descends. We do not know whether the alien is male or female, or whether gender applies to it at all. The reason is simple. This isn't about eros.

And empathy is *not* self-transcendence and it is *not* ecstatic or mystical. There is just no religion or spirituality in this film. No preachers, no prophets, and no churches. The funeral scene at the beginning of the movie would have been the obvious moment for at least a shot of a church, whether interior or exterior. Abrams explicitly avoids this. It's a conscious decision. There will be no revelations in Lillian, Ohio, in 1979. The people will have to solve their problems without that kind of help.

For Abrams, empathy is centered in the body, not the soul, and it does not, by itself, cause action. Yet empathy is also not strictly passive or a passion of any kind. It is not something we suffer. What the devil is it, then? It is clear rather than cloudy, a clear moment of understanding of some sort. It doesn't lift us up and it doesn't bring us back down, so it isn't levity

or gravity. It's a moment of presence. I think Abrams thinks that we come to recognize empathy when *together* we find that we are, together, hungry, afraid, and homesick. The solidarity of the friends in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* provides a paradigm.

We recognize that combination in others, across the most varied of circumstances, but it is difficult to do so when we are *sated, secure,* and *home.* In fact, the killers of our empathy for others are just those three things, which is why Americans of the Second Gulf War era don't give a tinker's damn about their own troops, either when they are fighting or when they come home ruined. There is something cloudy and grave about satiety and security, especially when we think that home is something we can possess and defend. I, for one, would sooner be homeless than call the United States the "Homeland." Who cannot see that this view of "home" is the essential ingredient in fascism? No, we shall have no homeland, and here I am pretty sure that I simply state Abrams's (and Spielberg's) view of the matter.

And it is good to be aware that the hunger *without* the terror is just as dangerous as the terror without the hunger. I think I just described the two American political parties, but they seem to agree on the homeland idea. What have we become? Yet at the very bottom of the well of *longing* is the *absence* of home. The truth is that humans are vagrants on the doorstep of being; we are frail, stupid, dying creatures with nothing to guide us back to our cosmic Kansas except our own pathetic cries and yelps of pain. That is why we can feel each other's feelings. It isn't our intelligence, it's our emptiness, our homelessness, that we can share.

Go home again? But we have no homes, at least not after about age thirteen. I guess 1979 was the thirteen of U.S. history. Sometimes we do feel, together, that there is no home, no place where the steel mills are still open, no way back to Lillian, Ohio. The only aftermath of the zombie-alien apocalypse we get in *Super 8* is the kids' movie itself. It lacks much in the way of "production value," but it's innocent. We notice our homelessness when we reflect on lost innocence. And we wouldn't want to have known then what we know now. And we are in the frame of mind to make this leap into the emotional arms of others mostly when we are hungry and frightened and far from home, in some sense of those words. I think this is why we still like to leave home and go to the movies, with strangers, and munch on overpriced popcorn, and get the shit scared out of us by monsters, and feel the same things everyone else is feeling, alone, in the dark, with our friends, and with others.

The longing that brings us out of our homes is what we really share, it is our civic bond, a resoluteness to come clear about our weaknesses and that is what makes us human. Obviously the twist in *Super 8* is that the alien's moral decency is never really in question: *ours is.* Any being, whether divine or alien, that can see the longing in us can also know that our weaknesses are understandable. And that isn't redemption, exactly, but it isn't damnation either. Once the *alien* understands that the monsters are the menschen, it's time to go home, and that's true whether you're *in* the movie or you just went to *see* it.

And, as promised early on, here is the opinion: I think Abrams would have been a healer of some kind, perhaps a veterinarian, if there were no movies. I leave it to you to puzzle out why I might think that, but I will offer this much of a hint. Abrams has a whole stable of monsters, and he seems to be responsible for their care and feeding, and when they get sick, monsters can't *tell* you what's wrong with them. They don't know. But remember, as you consider this opinion, who the monsters are in *Super 8*.

Notes

1. See the informative essay by Carl Matheson, "*The Simpsons,* Hyper-irony and the Meaning of Life," in *The Simpsons and Philosophy,* ed. William Irwin, Mark Conard, and Aeon Skoble (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 2001), 108–28 (chap. 8). The entire essay is about quotationalism.

2. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 89–90.

3. These are lyrics from the Nick Lowe song "(What's so Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding," written in 1974 but recorded by Elvis Costello and the Attractions and released as the B-side of a Nick Lowe single in 1978. Recognizing the song was going to be popular, the record company added it to the American release of Costello's 1979 album *Armed Forces,* and it proceeded to end up in the record collections of a high percentage of thirteen-year-old kids that year (including, unless I miss my guess, Abrams).

4. There is an outstanding analysis of this time, and especially Carter's malaise speech, in Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Macmillan, 2008).

5. The entire philosophical school of Daoism grows from insights relevant to empathy. Consult the *Daodejing*.

6. These assertions were part of the argument in Rousseau's famous "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," also known as his "Second Discourse," which has been

translated a number of times. I prefer the translation by Roger and Judith Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969).

    7. See Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy,* trans. Peter Heath, 2nd ed. (New York: Archon Books, 1970).

    8. See Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy,* in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein,* vol. 3, trans. Waltraut Stein, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1989).

    9. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* books 8–9.

Scene 4

FRIENDS AND FAMILY

ABRAMS, ARISTOTLE, AND ALTERNATE WORLDS

Finding Friendship in the Final Frontier

Joseph J. Foy

In 2009 J. J. Abrams successfully engaged in a reboot of the *Star Trek* franchise, freeing him from the canonical constraints of the classic original series and allowing him to re-create the iconic figures of Captain James T. Kirk and Mr. Spock. However, rather than radically departing from the well-known narrative, Abrams instead reaffirmed the importance of the friendship that defined Kirk and Spock and provided insight into the significance of community in the final frontier.

In this chapter I will explore the philosophies of Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) on friendship and virtue that underlie Abrams's *Star Trek*.[1] Using an alternate timeline to enable a look into the formation of community among the crew, Abrams reveals how critical friendships formed generally, and between Kirk and Spock in particular. His film suggests that it is the bonds developed at these formative stages that lead to the success of the heroic mission of exploration and the quest for knowledge aboard the famed U.S.S. *Enterprise.*

In the vernacular of popular culture studies, a "reboot" is when an artist takes a known franchise and gives it new life, all but dismissing any previously established continuity or storyline commitments. Abrams successfully accomplishes a reboot of the original *Trek* through the creation of a parallel universe formed from time-travel through a black hole. This enables him to engage in a type of counterfactual (or subjunctive) conditional analysis of the development and nature of the relationships aboard the starship *Enterprise.*[2]

In the timeline set in the original *Trek* canon, a star goes into supernova, threatening to destroy the galaxy. Using red matter, Spock Prime creates a

black hole capable of absorbing the explosion.[3] While he is able to fire a drop of the red matter into the exploding star, he is not fast enough to save planet Romulus. Immediately following the creation of the black hole, Spock Prime is intercepted by a Romulan named Nero, who holds the Vulcan accountable for the destruction of his home world. While Spock Prime attempts to escape the Romulan intent on revenge, both Spock Prime's and Nero's ships are pulled into the black hole, which opens a door to a time 129 years in the past. It is there that Nero destroys the U.S.S. *Kelvin,* a ship whose command is assumed by George Kirk (James's biological father) after the Romulan kills its original captain for professing no knowledge of an "Ambassador Spock." The destruction of the *Kelvin* upsets the known timeline, effectively creating an alternate universe in which Abrams is able to recast the adventures of the crew aboard the U.S.S. *Enterprise.*

Of course, the parallel universe concept is not unique to the *Star Trek* franchise. For example, fans will likely recall that in *Star Trek: The Original Series,* an ion storm causes a transporter malfunction that sends Kirk, McCoy, Scotty, and Uhura to a parallel universe in which the *Enterprise* is a cutthroat vessel carrying out the dictatorial orders of the savage Terran Empire.[4] However, Abrams's film uses the possibility of parallel universes in a manner otherwise unexplored in any other *Trek* series. Rather than using the alternate reality as a plot complication in which the heroes ultimately return to their own universe, Abrams's *Star Trek* is based in a parallel universe, which allows Abrams to reboot the franchise and recast the lives of the familiar characters.

While the use of the alternate timeline allows Abrams to depart from the known *Trek* storyline, he remains faithful to the essence of the characters portrayed in *The Original Series.* It is here that Abrams inserts himself into the rich philosophical discussion about the nature of "transworld identity" and whether an individual might maintain similar identity properties across possible worlds. In this case, is it possible that James T. Kirk in one universe will necessarily share most major identity characteristics with a James T. Kirk existing in a parallel universe while having a few somewhat different qualities and properties?

This question is not a simple one to answer. In fact, the *Trek* franchise gives multiple accounts of possible worlds that only seem to confuse the debate. In *The Original Series* episode "Mirror, Mirror," the Kirk shown to exist in the parallel universe shares some traits and characteristics with Kirk in the prime world. However, this other Kirk is also sadistic, self-serving,

and dictatorial, which is a radical departure from the Captain Kirk we are familiar with in the prime universe. In his film, however, Abrams suggests that it is possible that the crew of the *Enterprise* will share similar, significant properties in both worlds (which accounts for Sulu's fencing expertise and Chekov's pronunciation of the word vessel as "wessel," as well as the fact that the crew all maintain their respective duties and functions on the *Enterprise* in both worlds). Although this is likely a controversial position among some philosophers who posit a theory of multiple worlds, Abrams attempts to create an identical world up to the point where Nero's vessel passes through the black hole, creating divergence. This would mean that there are similar biological and environmental influences among the crew members in both worlds to that point of deviation from the established timeline.[5]

This exploration of transworld identity is important for understanding the philosophy, and primary purpose, underlying Abrams's revisioning of *Star Trek*. Through his counterfactual timeline, Abrams suggests that while the experiences of the crew of the *Enterprise* in their early years did shape and influence them in some ways, it is actually their interactions with one another that formatively define their identities and characters. For Abrams, it is possible for Kirk to develop into the noble captain he is commonly understood to be even absent the influence of his biological father as long as he develops his relationships with Spock and the rest of the crew. To understand why, however, we must better understand the nature of their friendship and the nature of the community that forms aboard the *Enterprise.*

I Have Been, and Always Shall Be, Your Friend

When rewriting the history of the characters of Kirk and Spock, Abrams is committed to providing a backstory that sets up the important relationship and friendship that will ultimately shape both of their lives dramatically. The focus on the emerging friendship between the future captain and first officer (and science officer) of the U.S.S. *Enterprise* was, for Abrams, the foundation of his film. Speaking about the film prior to its release, Abrams explained, "I never saw how Kirk and Spock became so connected. That's what this movie does."[6] As a filmmaker, Abrams sought to explore the origins of the familiar bond between the captain and his first officer. In doing so, he offers a narrative for understanding the bourgeoning friendship between Kirk and Spock that reflects principles elucidated by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. For Aristotle, friendship constitutes a bond that is "most

necessary with a view to living."[7] Abrams demonstrates elements of this line of thinking while portraying the development of the partnership that will define Kirk and Spock in the future.

The friendship between Kirk and Spock is well established in the canon of the *Star Trek* franchise. In *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan,* Spock twice tells Kirk, "I have been, and always shall be, your friend." It is clear throughout that when Spock uses the term "friend" it is meant to carry significant weight. Spock Prime repeats this sentiment in Abrams's film after saving the young Kirk from an alien creature on Delta Vega (the ice planet upon which he was marooned). However, the tension and competition that develop between the young Kirk and Spock in Abrams's movie make Kirk doubtful that these two could ever have the deep respect and care for one another that are the hallmarks of true friendship. As Kirk responds to Spock Prime, "If you were Spock you would know that we're not friends, at all. You hate me. You marooned me here for mutiny."[8] Interestingly, however, the hostilities and conflicts between the young Kirk and Spock seem to be setting the foundation for a mutual respect that will later form between them. As Aristotle notes, "Such friendship requires time and familiarity . . . nor can they admit each other to friendship or be friends till each has been found lovable and been trusted by each."[9]

The relationship between Kirk and Spock mirrors Aristotle's understanding of the soul as being divided into two distinct parts, the rational and the nonrational. He argues that while the rational part of the soul is superior because it is based in reason, the nonrational part, defined by appetites and desires, "exists for the sake of the better or superior."[10] The nonrational part of the soul is capable of being controlled via deliberative rationality, but it is important to the moral growth of the individual that both parts are properly cultivated. Aristotle suggests, "We call a man in any way good because he has the virtues of these two parts."[11] While both Kirk and Spock have the capacity for the development of excellence of the soul through self-mastery and the learning and practice of virtuous behavior, it is clear that prior to their friendship their lives are dominated by improperly balanced souls. That Abrams picks up on their lives when they are younger may account for such imbalance, as Aristotle suggests that no youth can be virtuous because they lack experience.

Abrams's Kirk shares similarities with but is different from the admirable Captain James Tiberius Kirk of *The Original Series.* In the Abrams recasting, Kirk is rough and impetuous, lacking clear or deliberative thinking. In

Iowa, he is arrested as a youth for stealing his stepfather's antique car, driving with reckless abandon, and ignoring the police. He is discovered by Captain Pike after he gets into a fight with four Starfleet Academy cadets at a bar after drunkenly (albeit playfully) harassing Uhura, and while Pike tries to convince him to join Starfleet he describes Kirk as being a "genius-level repeat offender" whose "instinct to leap without looking" was one that was shared by Kirk's father.

Kirk is a man controlled by appetite, which overwhelms his "off-the-chart" aptitude tests and rational self. Yet, despite his drunken shenanigans and run-ins with the law, Pike sees in Kirk—even if from wishful thinking rather than clear insight—the same nobility of spirit he knew in Kirk's father. To reach the youth, he makes an appeal to his noble sense of honor and virtue by reminding Kirk of his father's heroism aboard the *Kelvin.* He tells Kirk, "You know, your father was captain of a starship for twelve minutes. He saved eight hundred lives, including yours and your mother's. I dare you to do better." The words awaken in Kirk that desire to make something more of himself, something he simply cannot do outside the company of others who will challenge him to become great.

Similarly, Spock embodies another extreme. Trained in the Vulcan ways of logic and the suppression of emotion, Spock seemingly represents a life consisting entirely of rationality. On one level this commitment to logic and reason is consistent with Aristotle's notion of rationality being the higher form of the soul. In book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle finds the life of contemplation, what he considers to be a God-like life, to be best. Spock's father suggests as much to a preadolescent Spock after he has just gotten into a fight with three bullies who insulted his human mother, calling her a whore. His father offers him advice that echoes the wisdom of Aristotle: "Logic offers us serenity that humans seldom experience; the control of feelings so that they do not control you."

However, Aristotle also recognizes that, as social creatures, human beings need social connections and community in order to live a flourishing life (what Aristotle labels "eudaimonia"). Spock's half-human nature comes through strongly here. When he attempts to suppress emotion, he cuts himself off from the care of others, which means denying the social part of human yearnings. This in turn leads to the repression of his happiness. He clearly cares for his mother, as witnessed in his emotional responses whenever she is negatively invoked by others, and he also cares romantically for Uhura. He seems to also desire acceptance from his father and his peers and takes

a considerable degree of pride in his accomplishments (as demonstrated in his displeasure with Kirk's cheating to "beat" Spock's Kobayashi Maru—the "unwinnable situation"—program at Starfleet Academy). Aristotle would argue that, when they are appropriate, Spock might be more fulfilled by experiencing such emotions. His emotional suppression causes Spock to seem at times tortured and confused. His self-denial actually seems to work against the well-being and happiness that, for Aristotle, represent the highest possibility of life.[12]

As representations of the Aristotelian conception of the soul, Kirk and Spock complete one another. It is perhaps in this vein that Aristotle refers to friendship as a "second-self." Both Kirk and Spock are capable in their own right of high-level rationality and passion, and both demonstrate these capacities in a number of ways. However, it is through the interactions they have with one another that they truly achieve a state of excellence in their actions and achieve a state of self-mastery. When Kirk tells Spock Prime that "coming back in time, changing history . . . that's cheating," the Vulcan responds, "A trick I learned from an old friend." Spock Prime is made whole by his comradeship with Kirk Prime, just as the young Kirk and Spock eventually complete one another through the virtue born from their impending friendship. As Spock Prime tells his younger, alternate self when explaining why he led Kirk to believe that the two Spocks could never meet, "You needed each other. I could not deprive you of the revelation of all that you could accomplish together, of a friendship that will define you both in ways you cannot yet realize."

The friendship between Kirk and Spock is important from an Aristotelian perspective because such friendship between two potentially great figures will ultimately produce in them virtuous behavior and right action. Not only does friendship provide meaning and depth to life, the care that develops between friends makes them strive to act honorably, courageously, truthfully, and with temperance because they want what is best for their friends and want to be viewed positively in return. As Aristotle writes, "Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves. . . . Those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends." He goes on to describe how all friendship seeks the good, or happiness, and asserts that friendship is "based on a certain resemblance; and to a friendship of good men all the qualities we have named belong in the virtue of the nature of the friends themselves."[13] Both Kirk and Spock

have incredible potential, but it is only through mutual respect and a relationship between them as beings of equal worth and qualities that will allow them to fully realize all that is possible within each other. And for Aristotle, such actualization will yield a personal flourishing for each, which is what is truly best.

I Like This Ship! You Know, It's Exciting!

Beyond the burgeoning friendship that will shape the destinies of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, Abrams's *Star Trek* explores the relationships that establish a particular kind of community aboard the *Enterprise.* Here again the film reflects significant aspects of Aristotelian philosophy about ethics and human development. Aristotle argues in *The Politics* that "a social instinct is implanted in all men by nature," meaning that individuals are naturally drawn to community and the formation of social relationships with others.[14] In fact, for Aristotle, ethics and virtue are discovered through interaction and are therefore born from community. However, in order to educate individuals on virtuous behavior and provide for their moral development, the community itself must be properly organized.

It is important to note that, just as in *The Original Series,* the characters in *Star Trek* are in large part defined by the roles they play on the ship. Reflecting the Aristotelian notion of a community as being properly ordered when everyone performs well the roles for which they are best suited, each crew member on the *Enterprise* ensures the well-being of his or her fellows by committing to excellence in his or her job. Spock is capable of command, but that is not the function most apt for him. Just as Bones is best suited for his position overseeing sick bay and Scotty for serving in engineering, Spock's background and training on Vulcan, as well as his personality, make him best equipped to be chief science officer and second in command. After Pike is taken hostage, Kirk assumes command not because of a personal desire to ascend in rank but because he is convinced by Spock Prime that it is the role he has to take on to best serve the community. As Aristotle notes, "Both the common people and those of the better class wish the best men to rule; for thus and thus alone do all get what they aim at."[15] The *Enterprise* allows each individual to flourish because each serves in the capacity for which he or she is best suited, which leads to the public betterment of the crew as a whole.

Moreover, the crew, like Kirk and Spock, are getting to know one another

and are establishing the grounds for a community based upon dignity and mutual respect. Nyota Uhura proves her superior capabilities in communications and xenolinguistics (the study and deciphering of alien languages) by decoding the signal linked to Nero's *Narada* vessel, and Montgomery "Scotty" Scott proves his own genius with warp technologies that allow Kirk, Spock, and Pike to be beamed back aboard the *Enterprise* at warp speed from multiple locations (a feat previously thought to be impossible) when they destroy the *Narada.* Dr. Leonard "Bones" McCoy not only brilliantly uses his medical insights and knowledge to smuggle Kirk aboard the *Enterprise* when it is first set to depart but also takes command of sick bay after the death of the previous chief medical officer when the *Enterprise* first encounters and is attacked by Nero's ship. Hikaru Sulu proves to be a master of hand-to-hand combat and, with a sword, volunteers for the dangerous mission to try and destroy the *Narada*'s drilling platform above the planet Vulcan, and Pavel Chekov deciphers Nero's plan to use red matter to destroy all of Vulcan. As separate individuals, each is skilled in his or her own way. As a community working toward a single end, however, they are able to accomplish great things that no other ship in the vast Federation is able to achieve.

What Abrams establishes on the *Enterprise* is the beginnings of what Aristotle referred to as *koinonia,* a type of solidarity that defines a community based on affective friendship toward one's fellows. Community members develop a deep respect for one another and their capabilities despite their individual differences and unique traits. These bonds develop among the crew a type of harmony that Aristotle refers to as *concord,* a feature of friendship in which members of a community "have the same opinions about what is to their interest" when it comes to the larger, core questions and values of the community.[16] As Aristotle suggests about such a community, its members need not find common agreement on all things, and dissent is not only possible but will likely occur from time to time (Bones referring to Spock as a "green-blooded hobgoblin" following a disagreement about whether the acting captain should have marooned Kirk on Delta Vega, for example), but ultimately their bonds will enable them to share a commitment to the public good of all and to create consensus around the goals and mission of the *Enterprise.*

But what keeps a community organized in this regard? Why is there not more infighting or intrigue on the *Enterprise*? Certainly Aristotle understands the potential for political communities to break down so that the

public good gives way to private interests. He describes how "bad men cannot be in accord except to a small extent, any more than they can be friends, since they aim at getting more than their share of advantages, while in labor and public service they fall short of their share; and each man wishing for advantage for himself criticizes his neighbor and stands in his way."[17] The resulting competition would ultimately destroy the commonwealth and pit individuals and factions against each other rather than unifying them in advancing the public good.

One might be tempted to argue that the community is disrupted in this way when Kirk angers Spock to the point where he has to relieve himself of command under the provisions of Starfleet Regulation 619, a provision that asserts that a commanding officer who is emotionally compromised must resign command. However, Spock Prime had convinced Kirk to use this as a means of getting the young Spock angry so that he would resign his duties as the acting captain of the *Enterprise* for the larger public good, not for personal gain. Kirk has little difficulty in getting Spock to lash out with great anger, since the Vulcan has just witnessed the destruction of his entire planet, including the death of his mother. The goal, however, is not one of personal gain for Kirk. Instead, it is to stop Nero from further unleashing his destructive vengeance on the Federation, and Spock Prime knows that the only person who can stop Nero is Kirk. Beyond that action, done only to further override concerns for the common good, power plays for the benefit of fulfilling the personal desires of individual crew members are all but nonexistent.

An Aristotelian answer to the question of why the crew aboard the *Enterprise* begins to mesh into a cohesive unit dedicated to the public good is, once again, because of the social benefits of friendship. In this case the *Enterprise* can be viewed as a microcosm of the polis (a political, self-governing community). The crew receive orders from higher-ranking officials within the Federation, but ultimately their internal command structures cause them to act as a governance body. What develops from a community of this kind, when sharing a commitment to common values, is an esprit de corps (a sense of group spirit). Aristotle writes, "Such concord is found among good men; for they are in accord both in themselves and with one another, being, so to say, of one mind . . . and they wish for what is just and what is advantageous, and these are the objects of their common endeavor as well."[18] Each crew member aboard the *Enterprise* displays excellence within his or her respective functions and the evolving relationships among them make

possible their commitment to one another toward a common aim. They are able rationally to suppress desires of advancement and pursuit of higher and higher ranks and accolades because of their virtuous respect for the dignity of one another and their common commitment to the good of the mission and the rest of the crew.

Live Long and Prosper

Friendship is important to Aristotelian conceptions of virtue and the moral progress of the individual. In Abrams's *Star Trek,* the clashes and tensions between Kirk and Spock lay the groundwork for the kind of friendship that will ultimately pave the path for their heroic future. Likewise, Aristotle's notions of the proper development and arrangement of the soul as being cultivated by the justly ordered society are deeply embedded in the community that has formed among the crew of the *Enterprise.*

Into Darkness finds Kirk risking his career by violating the Prime Directive to save Spock. Spock's disagreement with the decision further reflects the interplay of reason and appetite in two men who need one another to be whole. Clearly the philosophy of Aristotle continues to pervade the story lines and adventures of Kirk, Spock, and the rest of the crew. In rebooting the franchise, Abrams has left his own unique mark on the classic characters and has carved out a parallel universe in which die-hard Trekkies and new fans alike can enjoy watching the U.S.S. *Enterprise* once again "boldly go where no man has gone before."

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For the purposes of this chapter, I use *Star Trek* when referring to the Abrams movie. References to the various television series and films in the franchise will use the long form of their titles.

2. A counterfactual conditional is a thought experiment used by philosophers to ask what would be the case in a given scenario if some preceding variable to a known series of events had changed. For example, Abrams can ask the question, How would James Kirk's life be different if his father had been destroyed in a heroic act to save the life of his wife, his newborn son, and hundreds of other people? To answer, he would assume all other things to that point to be equal with what we know about them in their original state (in this case, *Star Trek: The Original Series*) and explore what might change from the point of divergence where he alters the established timeline.

3. "Spock Prime" is used to distinguish the aged Spock of the original *Trek* timeline from the young Spock in Abrams's alternate universe.

4. Jerome Bixby (writer) and Marc Daniels (director), "Mirror, Mirror," *Star Trek: The Original Series,* season 2, episode 33, original airdate October 6, 1967. In *Star Trek: The Original Series,* Captain Kirk is also temporarily thrust into a parallel dimension when he is trapped in a spatial interphase, a rift in space that had also affected Captain Jonathan Archer in *Star Trek: Enterprise.* In *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,* an accident caused by the failure of the warp field on their runabout to drop properly while entering into the Bajoran wormhole sends Major Kira and Doctor Bashir into an alternate timeline in which a Klingon-Cardassian Alliance has established authoritarian control over the Bajoran sector. See Judy Burns and Chet Richards (writers) and Herb Wallerstein (director), "The Tholian Web," *Star Trek: The Original Series,* season 3, episode 9, original airdate November 15, 1968; Mike Sussman (writer) and James L. Conway (director), "In a Mirror, Darkly, Parts 1 and 2," *Star Trek: Enterprise,* season 4, episodes 18 and 19, original airdates April 22, 2005, and April 29, 2005; Peter Allen Fields and Michael Piller (writers) and David Livingston (director),"Crossover," *Star Trek: Deep Space 9,* season 2, episode 23, original airdate May 15, 1994.

5. Surely this answer will not suffice to satisfy all, but it helps to account for the philosophic principles Abrams expresses in his film. Further elaboration would require an accounting of whether it is possible that the alternate universe was created from Spock Prime's exploding of the red matter in the supernova or whether that universe existed simultaneously and the black hole merely opened up a gateway across worlds and through time. Such questions, while interesting, go beyond the scope of this essay by extending outside of the evidence that Abrams provides in his film. For more on transworld identity, see: David Kaplan, "Transworld Heir Lines," in *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality,* ed. Michael J. Loux (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 88–109.

6. Fred Topel, "*Star Trek* Scoop: Hunky Spock and iPhones in Space," *E! Online,* July 18, 2008, http://www.eonline.com/uberblog/b3179_star_trek_scoop_hunky_spock_iphones_in.html. Considering the multiple-worlds scenario Abrams establishes, it seems as though some of the potential consistency of keeping the parallel universes distinct is lost with Abrams's suggestion here. Clearly he is unable to explore the formation of the friendship established in *The Original Series* because of the differences between the prime universe and the one in which he bases his film. However, it is reasonable to assume, given the similarities of character and identity properties, that he wants to capture an idea of what *might* have led to the strong bonds of friendship in *The Original Series.* Regardless, the philosophy of friendship he presents is relevant to understanding the foundations of friendship between the young Kirk and Spock in the world Abrams has created.

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1155a5.

8. It is worth mentioning that the characteristics of friendship described here, as well as Kirk's assertion that Spock "hates" him, suggest that Spock does possess emo-

tion. Abrams often demonstrates Spock displaying emotional characteristics that belie his Vulcan nature and reveal his half-human side. He may suppress these emotions but they often surface. Whether it be subtly in his connections with his parents, especially his human mother, or in his romantic connection with Uhura, or overtly in his outbursts of rage against Vulcan bullies in his youth and against Kirk after the destruction of Vulcan, Spock is shown to have deep emotions. Likewise, although most Vulcans with Spock's abilities undergo the Vulcan ritual of Kolinahr, which was designed to purge Vulcans of all remaining emotion, the young Spock never completes it.

9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1156b25–29.

10. Aristotle, *The Politics,* trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, Random House, 1943), 1133a22–23.

11. Aristotle, *Politics,* 1133a16.

12. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1097a21.

13. Ibid., 1156b10.

14. Aristotle, *Politics,* 1253a29–31.

15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1167b1–2.

16. Ibid., 1167a26–28.

17. Ibid., 9.6.

18. Ibid., 1167b7–8.

Heroic Love and Its Inversion in the Parent-Child Relationship in Abrams's *Star Trek*

Charles Taliaferro and Emilie Judge-Becker

In philosophy there is a tradition according to which there are three precepts of justice (*preacepta juris*): live in a morally right way, do no harm to others, and render to each what is her or his own.[1] One of the more vexing and interesting questions that remains quite unsettled in twenty-first-century philosophy concerns the duties (if any) that are owed between parents and children. We believe that the 2009 film *Star Trek* (directed by J. J. Abrams and written by Roberta Orci and Alex Kurtzman) speaks to the question of what is owed in a loving, heroic parent-child relationship, and in so doing it speaks to questions about living morally and not harming others. The film does not just speak to the heroic; it can suggest something important to those of us who have more humdrum parent-child relationships, but this will be a matter we will only suggest at the end of our chapter. To get things started, we offer a brief overview of the philosophy of parent-child relationships and then move to *Star Trek*. An important qualification: while we will be using the film to make philosophical observations about the parent-child relationship, we are not claiming that Abrams himself or the writers were intentionally crafting a philosophy. Rather, we are proposing that the film may be used to extract an important lesson about parent-child relations, especially as this bears on heroic, loving sacrifice and its inversion.

Philosophers have taken different positions on the relationship between parents and children. In Greco-Roman times parents (especially the father) had absolute power over children, and abortion and infanticide were not uncommon (approved of by both Plato and Aristotle in cases of severe infant

deformity). But even among the ancients, a parent killing a child was often considered horrific (Hercules's killing of his children and wife made him cursed, Medea's killing of her children was, quite literally, considered tragic), and there is a powerful, intimate tenderness displayed between parents and children in the oldest poem in the west, the *Iliad* (Hector's loving care for his son).[2] As we come to the modern era, many philosophers (most notably John Locke in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) defended the idea that children were not owned by parents and that they were to be treated as proper individuals with rights and duties of their own. But precisely what those rights and duties are has not been fully settled by philosophers as we begin the twenty-first century. This has been especially vexing as philosophers in more recent times have sought to develop a secular account of the parent-child relationship.

There is not total disagreement today on the parent-child relationship. Most philosophers today and in the modern era think that if someone gives birth to a child, then they have some responsibility for the welfare of the child, if only to ensure that the child is raised in a healthy way. Philosophers may diverge on the comparative ethical significance of a genetic connection between parent and child, the importance of gestation (is a "surrogate" mother a true or real mother?), the ethics of adoption, and so on, but what might be called *motherly* or *fatherly love* has a fairly clear meaning when it comes to identifying the responsible care that we (today) expect of parental care for children. But what of children themselves and their duties, if any? Of course, as an infant, a child lacks the kind of self-control that can form the basis for morally responsible action, but once he or she has some powers of agency, is it the duty of a child to love his or her parents? Could love ever be a duty? Love seems to be an emotion, and emotions do not seem to be immediately under our self-control. If we do have a duty to love our parents, what would its basis be? In healthy settings, presumably the child has received a great gift (life itself and a good upbringing), but the child never asked for this gift. If a child ought to love or honor her or his parent, this seems to be something that has been involuntarily thrust on the child, and not something the child must ethically take ownership of. In many, if not most, religious traditions the parent-child relationship is considered a sacred bond to be treated with honor. In a secular context and without such recourse to sacred honor, how is one to articulate the bond and entitlements of these distinguishable individuals, especially from the standpoint of a child on the road to an autonomous, independent life?[3]

Abrams's *Star Trek* offers an illuminating alternative framework to address questions of parent-child duty. Questions of duty are relevant, but at the heart of the film is a portrait of how *loving sacrifice and devotion can summon one into the honor of being an adult*. At times we will refer to this as owning one's adulthood. Here we follow the use of the term "to own" employed by modern philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and others, in which *to own something* is to *accept and acknowledge responsibility for something*. At crucial points in the film, there is a *summoning* for one to take ownership of one's character. Matters of duty come after this summoning.

The Heroic, Self-Sacrificing Parent

The film begins with a father saving the life of his wife and child. The U.S.S. *Kelvin*, a Federation starship, is lured into a trap by Romulans. The Romulan Nero compels the *Kelvin*'s captain onto his ship, the *Narada*, where the captain is summarily killed (after being asked for the whereabouts of Ambassador Spock and the year). This leaves George Kirk in command of the *Kelvin*. George orders the evacuation from the *Kelvin* of all the crew, and we soon learn that the evacuees include his pregnant wife, Winona, who is in labor. George intends to follow his wife and crew, but then he learns that the automatic pilot is off-line and the ship needs to be steered and the weapons fired manually so that the others (which we later learn number eight hundred) can escape. George sees that if he abandons the ship, there would be little chance of escaping the deadly intentions of Nero. Piloting a collision course with the Romulan vessel, George has his last conversation with his wife (now flying away in an escape pod) while their son is born. Together they choose a name for their son, James Tiberius Kirk, after his paternal and maternal grandfathers. The mother and crew escape under direct orders from George.

> George Kirk: Do exactly as I say, shuttle 37.
> Winona: George, it's coming, our baby.
> George: . . . , Captain to shuttle 37, is my wife on board?
> Shuttle 37: Yes sir, she is.
> George: I need you to go now, do you hear me?
> Shuttle 37: We're waiting on you, sir.
> George: No, just go, take off immediately.

WINONA: Sweetheart can you hear me?
GEORGE: I can hear . . .

The escape is under George's command, and the husband and wife have their last words. He: "I love you so much." She: "I love you!"

James T. Kirk, who is born only minutes before his father dies, lives in the shadow of his father's enormous, heroic self-sacrifice. He struggles with adolescence, perhaps due to the ordinariness of life with his rather mirthless and perhaps cruel stepfather or guardian and his absent mother, who is not shown again on-screen. We are not told whether the man who functions as a kind of dysfunctional guardian is actually the boy's stepfather or another relative. In any case, the man seems exactly the opposite of the missing father-hero. When the boy James takes a car for a joyride, the stepfather figure says, "You think you can get away with this just because your mother's off planet. You get your ass back home now! You live in my house, buddy. You live in my house, and that's my car. You get one scratch on that car and I'm gonna whip your ass." Here the stepfather figure is concerned about his own personal ownership, rather than the welfare of the boy or the well-being of the boy's mother. It is his house and car, not his and the boy's mother's ("off planet" might even suggest she has died or at least that she is no longer living with the boy and his so-called guardian). There is an almost absurd contrast between the father, George, who willfully sacrificed a starship to save lives and the stepfather/guardian who threatens physical violence for a mere scratch on *his* vehicle!

James does not at first take ownership of himself or his role as the son of his father. After a rather pointless bar fight, he comes face to face with Captain Christopher Pike. It is clear from the start that Pike is a surrogate father or at least fatherly. Pike's first words to James are, "You all right, son?" And when James asks (incredulously) whether Pike knows who he is, the answer is thoroughly parental.

JAMES: Who am I, Captain Pike?
PIKE: Your father's son.

James is then summoned to take ownership of his life in following the path of his father. To some, George's sacrifice was a complete loss. This is not how Pike sees it.

> PIKE: Something I admired about your dad, he didn't believe in
>   no-win scenarios.
> JAMES: Sure learned his lesson.
> PIKE: Well, that depends on how you define winning. . . . If you're half
>   the man your father was, Jim, Starfleet could use you. You know,
>   your father was captain of a starship for twelve minutes. He saved
>   eight hundred lives, including yours and your mother's. I dare
>   you to do better.

Notice that Pike does not resort here to the language of duty but speaks of *daring*. Pike calls on James to live up to the precepts of justice, but this is a heroic summons or call, not an ordinary one (a subject we will return to).

The heroic father's sacrifice plays a role in James's (supposedly) cheating in his training, in his warning Captain Pike of the imminent danger of falling into the same trap his father and crew fell into aboard the *Kelvin*, and in his rescuing Captain Pike. The latter is a kind of reversal of the loss that we see at the outset of the film. While James cannot rescue his father, he can rescue a man who has been acting as his father. In all this we see James slowly coming to act as his father might, but as his own person and at his own pace. He must live through modest humiliation in romance (Spock, not James, "gets the girl"), he must sneak on board the *Enterprise* through comic subterfuge with the help of Bones (the ship doctor, who must go into space due to financial ruin in a divorce), Scotty, and the older Spock. But in all this movement toward taking ownership of his character, James winds up filling out the meaning of his father's self-sacrifice and perhaps even (in part) the meaning of the love of his parents. If James had turned down Pike's dare and settled for the life epitomized by the stepfather/guardian figure, it would mean that his father had saved the life of someone who was living a petty, loveless life of self-preoccupation and meanness. In this way, there may be some support for the Aristotelian view that part of the value of childhood and growing up lies in the end achieved. This is sometimes called the prospective view of childhood, the idea that the value of childhood rests in how it shapes the adult. Michael Slote offers this lively analogy in describing the prospective view: "Just as dreams are discounted except as they affect (the waking portions of) our lives, what happens in childhood principally affects our view of total lives through the effects that childhood success or failure are supposed to have on mature individuals."[4] We would only add that there is a sense in which George's sacrifice (while good in itself) would be seen in

a somewhat different light if James, his mother, and all eight hundred crew members went on to live horrendous, cruel lives. Fortunately, the father's sacrifice is further vindicated by the son's own heroic deeds and character.

There is an extraordinary inversion in the story of James and the story of the tyrant Nero. We point this out following a focus on Spock and the summons he must heed in owning his character.

Focus on Spock

In contrast to James Kirk, Spock's father is not (at least at first) a paradigm of the loving hero. In the first scene in which Spock appears, he is in school being picked on by other Vulcan children because of his mixed heritage, with a Vulcan father and an earthling mother. In Spock one sees someone who, through much of the film, struggles to be loyal to both parents. Finally the bullies push him too hard, and Spock relinquishes his Vulcan control for human passion as he starts hitting one of the bullies. Later his father, Sarek, lectures him about controlling himself—the father tries to make Spock identify less with his human half. Spock eventually asks Sarek why he married a human, since Vulcans tend to look down on them. Sarek responds in an emotionally detached manner, saying that "marrying [Spock's] mother was logical." Later in the film we meet Spock's mother, Amanda. Unlike Sarek, whom Spock seemed unable to please, Amanda expresses completely unconditional love for her son. She makes it clear that no matter what Spock chooses in his life, she will always be proud of him. It is perhaps partly the love of his mother that finally moves Spock to yield to passion in an altercation on the *Enterprise*, allowing James Kirk to take command. And it is by yielding to his human side that Spock is able to give himself over to a romance with Uhura and, finally, to a friendship with James. Sarek eventually valorizes this love when he withdraws his earlier account of the marriage to Spock's mother: "You asked me once why I married your mother. I married her because I loved her."

Spock has to come to terms with an especially personal form of loving sacrifice in coming to own his character in the context of the parent-child relationship: he must sacrifice the desire for strict self-control and being invulnerable to deep pain and grief. Perhaps it is his mother's love for him, followed by his father's confession of love after her death, that helped Spock to adult ownership. It is the older Spock who knows that the growth from childhood to adulthood has to be a learned process that involves a kind

of interior education and cannot be reduced to following rules or sharing information. This is why the older Spock did not intervene more directly in bringing his younger self into the full picture of the drama that was unfolding.

> Younger Spock: Then why did you send Kirk aboard when you alone could have explained the truth?
> Older Spock: I could not deprive you of the revelation of all that you could accomplish together. Of a friendship that would define you both. In ways you cannot yet realize.

James's response to the death of his father and Spock's to the death of his mother are a complete inversion of Nero's response to the death of his family.

A Family Inversion

While the death of a father and mother play a role in James and Spock becoming heroic adults and lead them to seek to save lives, the death of family has the exact opposite impact on Nero. Late in the film we learn more of what is driving Nero on his mission of mass murder (his destruction of the Vulcan planet alone amounted to killing six billion people). Nero describes himself as a person who, at the outset, chose "a life of honest labor. To provide for myself and the wife who was expecting my child." There is a slight hint at egocentrism in the use of the expression "my child" as opposed to "our child" that he and "the wife" were having, but we can take his word that he was honest and (at least) not criminal at one point. Nero's planet was in trouble and (leaving out the details) the Federation designed a plan to save the planet, which Spock would execute. Through no fault of the Federation or Spock personally, the rescue did not succeed and the planet was lost. By Nero's lights, Spock and the Federation "allowed my people to burn while their planet broke in half." The death of his family and his people set Nero on a path of ruthless killing. Nero states his position in stark terms: "And when I lost her ["the wife"], I promised myself retribution. And for twenty-five years I planned my revenge against the Federation."

Nero (and eventually Spock) time-travel back to before Romulus was destroyed. At the outset of the film, Nero's plan is now to destroy the Federation and all its planets, thus (he believes) saving his planet. But notice that while the stated goal is to save his planet, uppermost in Nero's mind seems to be the infliction of pain. He wants members of the Federation to know

what he felt when he had to come to terms with the death of his family and planet. In this fashion, Nero winds up cementing the pain into his character, even though if he succeeds in rescuing his planet then (paradoxically) there would be no pain for him to feel, because his family and people would live. He also does not give any notice of another possibility: time travel could allow both he and Spock to work with the Federation and those Romulans alive before the destruction to save the planet. Here is an exchange between Nero and Captain Christopher Pike, when Pike is in captivity: "And for twenty-five years I planned my revenge against the Federation. And forgot what it was like to live a normal life. I did not forget the pain. It's a pain that every surviving Vulcan now shares. My purpose, Christopher, is to not simply avoid the destruction of the home that I love . . . but to create a Romulus that exists, free of the Federation. . . . That is why I will destroy all the remaining Federation planets. Starting with yours. Then we have nothing left to discuss." We wonder how much this "love" of his home is truly love when taking into account Nero's death.

When it becomes clear that Nero has failed in his goal of destroying Earth and he is vulnerable to the *Enterprise*'s lethal weapons, Captain James Kirk offers him a chance to surrender. He explains to his crew, "Showing them compassion may be the only way to earn peace with Romulus." If Nero had surrendered, he would still be free to love his lost family and planet, albeit this love would involve great grief. On the other hand, as we just noted, he might also stand a chance of averting the destruction of his planet in the future. But instead of making such choices, he chooses death for himself and his crew. His last words are, "I would rather suffer the end of Romulus a thousand times. I would rather die in agony than accept assistance from you." Really? Even if that assistance could be extended to save his family and planet, not just once but a thousand times?

Nero has let the loss of his family and planet lead him to choose death rather than life. While George gave his life, and might have given his life a thousand times, to save his wife and child, Nero seems to be willing to die a thousand times rather than accept assistance that might save his wife and child, and perhaps his whole planet. There is a sense in which Nero may be operating with the more ancient view of childhood: he, as the father, has power and ownership over his child and thus can elect not to save the child. (Perhaps a hint of Nero adopting this ancient Greco-Roman practice lies in his bearing the name of one of the most notoriously abusive Roman emperors.) While James and George give themselves over to heroic love,

Nero abandons himself to bold, ruthless hatred. George's last words are words of love, and in the final sequence in which we see James, the friendship between him and Spock seems securely launched, and yet in the case of Nero his last words involve hatred and the desire for the annihilation of himself and the crew. James, on the other hand, comes to learn to own his adulthood and its new responsibilities. In the closing scene in the academy, it is James's heroism that enables him to be fully accepted by the upright.

Let's Go Home

So what do children owe parents? Abrams's film leads us to think that this question is dependent upon an antecedent question: How have parents acted toward and with their children? If the parent is like James's stepfather/guardian figure, the answer might well be "not much." But if parents are like James's father and mother, given the father's sacrifice and the testimony of love between them, then the child is naturally summoned to take ownership of his or her life and honor. Similarly, if even one of the parents is like Spock's mother or perhaps, too, like the father who finally confesses his true love, there is a summons to love others in adulthood. It is this satisfying loving cycle that enables James and Spock to achieve the kind of fraternal, respectful, dynamic friendship that is so key to the film and virtually all the variations of the world(s) of *Star Trek*.

What should we do if we are not like the parents of James or Spock? Undoubtedly, at least one reader of this chapter is not the captain of a starship yet still has occasions for heroic self-sacrifice. The film does not give a direct answer to this, but we suspect a good reply to any parent reading this is that you should try to be such parents as the parents of James and the mother of Spock. There is an important point about virtue that is worth noting. Two persons may be equally virtuous, and thus equally praiseworthy and beautiful, and yet only one of the persons is given the opportunity to act and display that virtue in the movie. So you might never be in command of a starship and you may never have the occasion to show the depth of your love for your child, but you can still be the sort of parent who would do this if the occasion arose. And that is (in our view) beautiful and praiseworthy.

No one said that any of this—actual self-sacrifice or being disposed to act in loving heroism—would be easy, and we are reminded of this in one of the last sequences in the film. When Captain Kirk has had his final battle with Nero, he issues this command: "Sulu, let's go home." Sulu replies, "Yes,

sir." But they are not at warp speed; they must escape a massive vacuum that threatens to undo them and their ship. With heroic effort, they escape and make their way home. Perhaps the point is that getting to the right home and the most fulfilling living out of the three precepts of justice requires a great love that summons us not just to "inspirational valor and supreme dedication to your comrades" (in the words of the assembly when awarding Kirk a high commendation) but such valor and dedication to your children and parents.

Notes

1. A good introduction to some basic topics in ethics and political philosophy is John Arthur and Steven Scalet, eds., *Morality and Moral Controversies: Readings in Moral, Social, and Political Philosophy* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2008).

2. See Anne Millard, *Family Life in Ancient Greece* (London: Hodder Wayland, 2001).

3. For an overview of relevant philosophical issues, see the excellent guide *The Philosophy of Childhood*, by Gareth Matthews (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Matthews is the author of the entry "The Philosophy of Childhood" in the free, online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which we highly recommend. See http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/childhood/.

4. Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 14.

You Can't Choose Your Family

Impartial Morality and Personal Obligations in *Alias*

Brendan Shea

J. J. Abrams's *Alias* tells the story of a spy named Sydney Bristow. Like many fictional spies, Sydney is a quick-thinking expert in disguise and physical combat who regularly risks life and limb in order to protect the innocent. Also, unlike some of her more cold-blooded fictional counterparts, Sydney tries to be honest and kindhearted and to treat others as they deserve to be treated. So, whereas a character like James Bond strives to avoid the emotional entanglements that come with close personal relationships, Sydney works hard to maintain close relationships with family and friends. She strives, in other words, to be both a good spy and a good person; her choices and actions model many of those qualities that we think are central to living a *moral* (or *ethical*) life.

While Sydney's relationships are valuable to her, they also complicate her efforts to live the moral life. Friends, relatives, and romantic partners compete with the U.S. government for Sydney's time and energy, and they provide prime targets for enemies to threaten, seduce, or otherwise make use of. When conflicts arise between her personal and professional life, Sydney is forced to balance two seemingly incommensurable demands of morality: the first, that she fulfill her duty (as a spy, superhero, and all-around good person) to do what is best for people *in general;* the second, that she fulfill her duty (as a daughter, friend, or romantic partner) to do what is best for *particular* people.

Sydney's case is complicated by various factors (e.g., by the fact that many of her friends and family are spies), and this problem is a universal one. Her solution should thus be of real interest to us. In this chapter I will examine how Sydney and the other characters in *Alias* fare in their attempts

to meet these two sets of obligations, and I will consider what lessons this might have for the rest of us.

Morality and Impartiality

While it is difficult to say exactly what exactly *morality* is, viewers of *Alias* should have few problems distinguishing characters who (generally) behave morally from those who (generally) do not. So, whereas moral characters like Sydney and Vaughn regularly risk their lives to save others, immoral characters like Sloane and Irina steal, lie, and kill in order to advance their own selfish agendas. Perhaps the most fundamental difference between moral characters and immoral characters concerns the role that *other people* play in their decision making. An immoral character like Sloane treats other people as *tools* that can be used to get what he wants—money, power, immortality, and so on. A moral character like Sydney, on the other hand, recognizes that other people have their own interests and goals (e.g., not being killed) and that it would unfair of her to act as though her well-being is any more important than theirs is.

According to many moral thinkers, it is just this sort of "equal" or "impartial" treatment of others that is at the heart of moral behavior. In order to act *impartially,* one must refrain from showing favoritism (or "partiality") based on morally irrelevant characteristics. So, for example, such views are opposed to *ethical egoism,* which is the theory that every person ought to do whatever is in his or her own best interest.[1]

One famous example of an impartial moral principle is the "Great Commandment" of the Gospels, which commands the reader to "love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:12). Impartial moral principles have also been defended by various philosophers. For example, one version of Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) *categorical imperative* directs the reader to "so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."[2] In order to treat people as *ends* one must, according to Kant, refrain from doing bad things to them merely to advance one's own agenda, however worthwhile that agenda might seem. Kant claims that this requirement means that we cannot kill, lie to, or harm innocent people. The principle is *impartial* insofar as it requires that we consider other people as our *moral equals* and constrain our behavior accordingly.

Also, John Stuart Mill's (1806–1873) *principle of utility* states that a moral

action is one that leads to "not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether."[3] The principle is impartial because everyone's happiness counts for exactly the *same;* one is not allowed to put a higher value on *particular* people's happiness. So, for example, this principle requires that a person be willing to sacrifice his or her *own* life if this is the only way to save *two lives.*

John Rawls (1921–2002) argues that a given principle is *just* if and only if everyone would agree to it under a so-called veil of ignorance. When people are under this veil, they are ignorant of all the things about themselves that might distort their moral judgment: for example, their gender, age, race, religious and political beliefs, place in society, and physical and intellectual abilities. This ensures that impartial principles will be chosen, since all the people who are choosing are ignorant of anything that might make it possible for them to be partial.[4]

If acting morally requires us to act impartially, then it is easy to explain why Sydney is such a morally exemplary person. As a spy, Sydney makes considerable sacrifices in order to ensure the safety and happiness of others. Along with the obvious risks to her life, Sydney is forced to put off school, to break off relationships, and to refrain from doing a great number of things she would probably have enjoyed more than being a spy. This type of selfless behavior shows that that Sydney values the well-being of other people and does not unduly privilege her own wants and desires.

Three Moral Dilemmas

While the above theories do a good job of explaining our duties toward people in general (e.g., don't kill innocent people, give money to charity, etc.), they have little to say about the *special* obligations we have to our friends, family, and coworkers. By *special obligations,* I mean those obligations that we have toward friends and family that are different than (and perhaps stronger than) the duties we have to everyone else. So, for example, we ought (morally) to spend time with these people, to listen to their problems, and to do everything we can to ensure their safety and well-being. Conflicts between impartial moral duties and special obligations to loved ones occur quite frequently in *Alias,* and the way that the characters respond to them can reveal a great deal about who they really are. In this section we will take a brief look at three such dilemmas. In the next section we will consider some possible responses to such dilemmas.

The first type of dilemma occurs when one must choose between saving the life of a loved one and saving the lives of a greater number of innocent strangers. Such scenarios are a regular staple of both moral philosophy and spy shows, and *Alias* is no exception. Sydney encounters such a dilemma, for example, in the final episode of season 1 ("Almost Thirty Years"). She has, after considerable effort, managed to recover a journal page from a long-dead man named Rambaldi. She knows that the page contains directions for using a mysterious device that she suspects (correctly) might be very dangerous if it were to be acquired by the wrong people. In fact, the page turns out to contain directions for how to use a weapon (the "circumference") that can cause people to become violently insane. Sydney's problem is that her close friend Will has been kidnapped and the kidnappers have demanded the journal page as the price for his return. Given Sydney's suspicions about the nature of the device, what should she do? Should she save her friend by handing over the page, or should she protect the public at large by refusing to hand it over? The problem, it seems, is that her impartial moral duty ("don't let bad people get weapons of mass destruction") conflicts with her more specific duty to aid her friend.

For those of us who are not spies, dilemmas of the first type are (thankfully) rare. We are, however, often faced with moral dilemmas of a different type. In these scenarios we are asked to decide how much of our time and energy should be devoted to helping people *in general* and how much should be devoted to helping the *particular people* to whom we are closest. The characters in *Alias,* many of whom work in intelligence, are often faced with this type of dilemma. Jack, for instance, has long been forced to balance being a father to Sydney with his job as a spy, while Sydney is forced to balance her own job as a spy with her personal life. Sydney and Jack are, in a wide variety of ways, constantly being forced to decide between work and family. They must choose between honoring promises to the CIA and honoring promises to friends, between spending time on the job and spending time at home, and between telling the truth about their jobs to those close to them (and perhaps endangering their lives) and lying about what is perhaps the most important part of their lives. The question here is, How much time, money, and energy ought one devote to helping loved ones, and how much should be devoted to helping strangers?

The final dilemma concerns the morality of taking *revenge* against those who have harmed our loved ones. By *revenge,* I mean simply the act of harming someone *because that person harmed someone close to you.* This may involve taking direct action against the person, or it may simply involve

making sure that the person's crimes are exposed to the proper authorities. Taking revenge in this sense does not necessarily require that one do something immoral. Sydney's actions in bringing down SD6, for example, are acts of revenge in the sense that is meant here. The question here is not whether it is morally *okay* for Sydney to try and bring SD6 down (since it clearly is), but whether Danny's death *obligates* Sydney to do so.

Even with this caveat in mind, it may seem odd to characterize the desire to seek revenge as a *moral* motivation. After all, the desire to seek "revenge" against those who have done you wrong is commonly contrasted with the desire to bring those people to "justice." For our purposes here, however, I think that this distinction can be safely ignored. We are concerned only with those cases in which the person being targeted for revenge actually did the crime and where the punishment proposed fits the crime. It seems safe to say that most of us, for instance, can sympathize with Sydney's anger over Sloane's murder of her fiancé or with Jack's anger over Irina's treatment of Sydney. In fact, it seems plausible that many of us would think *less* of Sydney and Jack if they were not the type of people who take such things personally—that is, if they were not the type of people who feel specially obligated to make sure Sloane and Irina do not "get away with their crimes." Approving of this sort of revenge does not, of course, require that one approve of *every* act of revenge. Sloane's murder of Dixon's wife, for instance, might be an act of vengeance, but it is clearly immoral.

What to Do?

The characters of *Alias* respond to the three dilemmas outlined in the previous section in a variety of different ways, and these differences reveal a great deal about their moral decision-making process. In this section I will take a closer look at these responses and consider in more detail what might be the morally *correct* way of responding. I will suggest that there are, in general, three ways that the characters of *Alias* respond to these dilemmas. Two of these ways are "extreme" views, according to which we don't really have the moral obligations we thought we did. I will argue that these views are mistaken and that we ought to instead adopt the "moderate" view exemplified by Sydney's actions.

NO SPECIAL TREATMENT?

The first, and perhaps simplest, way of resolving these moral dilemmas is to simply *ignore* the fact that the situation involves any particular people and

to simply act as if everyone involved were a complete stranger. According to this view, for instance, the fact that Sydney and Jack are father and daughter is *morally* irrelevant to the types of duties they owe to one another. So if Jack would normally choose to sacrifice one innocent agent's life to save the lives of two other innocent agents, he should do so even if the one agent in question is Sydney. This doesn't that mean Jack isn't obligated to try to save Sydney if she is captured, or vice versa; however, it does mean he has no *greater* obligation to save Sidney than he would to save any other of his fellow agents. Similarly, while this view is compatible with various people (e.g., Sydney and Vaughn) being in love, it says that one's *moral* duties to a loved one are just same the same as they are to anyone else.

In *Alias* something like this viewpoint is occasionally put forward by certain "higher-ups" in the CIA (such as Devlin), who seem willing to sacrifice their agents' lives in any case where their analysis suggests this is the least "risky" action for the CIA to take. This is not to say that they throw their agents' lives away needlessly; rather, it is simply that they don't feel any *more* of an obligation to protect their agents than they do to protect other innocent people.

The best example of the first response, however, is probably provided by Jack's treatment of Sydney. Jack was, by his own account, a mediocre father who nearly always chose his work at the CIA over spending time with Sydney. According to the view being considered here, Jack's behavior was perfectly moral. After all, we have every reason to think that Jack was *good* at his job; that is, the information he was able to provide the CIA was instrumental in protecting the lives and interests of U.S. citizens. So, for each family dinner or school function of Sydney's that Jack missed, he was doing work that directly helped save the lives of many others. The problem is that, while all of this may be true, there remains the sense that Jack *did not* fulfill his moral obligations to Sydney.

One (in)famous philosophical defender of this view is William Godwin (1756–1836). He considers the hypothetical choice between saving the life of a (socially insignificant but beloved) parent or sibling and saving the life of an archbishop who is known for doing good works. Godwin argues that in such cases "the life ought to be preserved which will be most conducive to the general good," even if this other life happens to be oneself or one's close relations; so we ought to save the archbishop. This, according to Godwin, is what *justice* (i.e., impartiality) demands; if we fail to save the archbishop, we are being unjust to all of the (many) people who will suffer as the result

of his death. We have unduly privileged the people that *we* love and have thus failed to treat others as their moral equals.[5]

While few contemporary philosophers endorse Godwin's radical conclusion, many have suggested that the moral obligations we have toward far-distant strangers are in fact quite similar to the obligations we have toward those we know and love. Peter Singer, for instance, has argued that morality requires that we give nearly all of our disposable income to poverty relief. This is because we have every reason to expect that the money will do *far more* good when used to purchase food or medicine for the truly needy than when used to purchase luxuries for our loved ones or ourselves. On Singer's view, it is not so much that we overestimate the obligations we have to our family and friends as that we underestimate our obligations to everyone else. So, insofar as we agree it would be morally wrong to let a sibling die of starvation when we could afford to buy him or her food, we ought also to agree that is morally wrong to spend money on luxuries when this money could be used to save strangers from starvation. If Singer is right about this, then it would seem to imply that *any* money spent on luxuries (e.g., buying a diamond engagement right, going out for a fancy dinner, etc.) is immoral.[6]

This view of our moral obligations is, as both Godwin and Singer seem to recognize, radically at odds with the way that most people think about these things. And while a view's unpopularity is hardly evidence that it is false, there do seem to be some legitimate reasons for concern. After all, the decision makers at the CIA who are *too* willing to sacrifice agents' lives might strike one as cold and inhuman; similarly, there seems to be a genuine sense in which Jack's failures as a father *cannot* be excused by noting all of the good things he was able to do while ignoring his young daughter. The question is whether we can find a way to reconcile these concerns with an impartial view of morality.

NO IMPARTIAL MORALITY?

While the first approach counsels that personal relationships have no place in moral thought, the second approach advises that such relationships are in fact the *only* things of moral relevance in the types of dilemmas we are discussing here. This approach holds that we *do* have obligations to our nearest and dearest and that the existence of these obligations means that morality is not really impartial. More specifically, this approach says that we ought to do *everything we possibly can* for our nearest and dearest, regardless of the effect these actions might have on other people. This view says that one should

always choose to save a loved one, regardless of the cost to others; that it is always okay to choose family over work; and that there are no limits to the revenge that might be exacted on behalf of a loved one who has been harmed.

For a simple example of how this approach might work in practice, consider the case of a father trying to determine what help he ought to give to a daughter in need of a heart transplant. The first view would say that the father has no *special* obligation to make sure she gets the medical treatment she needs, though he may have a general moral requirement to care for sick people (especially those he is well placed to help). The second view says, by contrast, that the father can (and perhaps should) do everything in his power to make his sure his daughter gets the treatment she needs. If this means holding the physician at gunpoint or killing innocent people to harvest their hearts, so be it. The only thing of importance, in this view, is the father's obligation to help his daughter.

When Nadia becomes ill in the final season of *Alias,* Sloane finds himself in a situation similar to that of the hypothetical father. His actions in this case, moreover, serve as a good example of what the second approach advises. Representatives of an evil organization (Prophet Five) promise Sloane that they can cure Nadia; however, they tell him that they will do so only if Sloane agrees to serve as a double agent. Sloane (reluctantly) agrees to do so, even though he knows that his actions as a double agent might lead to the deaths of innocent people, including Jack or Sydney. Sloane's reasoning seems to be that his duty to save Nadia outweighs any obligation he may have to other people.

A second example of the second view is provided by Sloane's wife, Emily. During the second season episode "Truth Takes Time," Emily learns that Sloane is still involved with various illegal activities (and is still lying about them to her). Based on this knowledge, she goes to Sydney and tells her that she is willing to help the CIA catch Sloane (though only if the CIA doesn't seek the death penalty). From an impartial point of view, turning in Sloane would obviously be the right thing for Emily to do, even though Sloane swears to her he will give up his life of crime. Emily knows, after all, that Sloane has lied to her in the past and that he has made a habit of killing innocent people. In the end, however, Emily feels guilt over turning in her husband to the CIA and chooses to warn Sloane of the CIA's trap for him. She, like Sloane, seems to feel that her duty to stand by her husband trumps her obligation to protect the people who might be harmed by Sloane's continuing his evil ways.

Few philosophers explicitly endorse the view that one is morally permit-

ted to do whatever one likes for the sake of loved ones. However, some have argued that we ought to reject the ideal of an impartial morality for precisely the sorts of reasons that Sloane and Emily do so—that is, because obeying the demands of such a morality would require that we give up everything that makes life worth living.

Bernard Williams (1929–2003), for instance, has argued that being truly impartial is incompatible with leading a meaningful life. According to Williams, a person's life is meaningful only if he or she has one or more *ground projects* that are "closely related to his [or her] existence and which to a significant degree give meaning to his [or her] life." For Emily, such a project might be her life with Sloane; for Sloane, such projects might involve Nadia's well-being and the pursuit of the Rambaldi artifacts. The problem arises, according to Williams, when one realizes that obeying an impartial morality might require that you give up any hope of completing your ground projects—for example, it might require that you turn your husband in to the police or let your daughter die when you could save her. Williams argues that it is completely unrealistic to expect humans to behave in this way. After all, if people's ground projects are what give their lives substance, then demanding that they give up on these projects is quite similar to demanding that they commit suicide.[7]

Williams concludes from the above considerations that the impartial view of morality is false:

> One reaches the necessity that such things as deep attachments to other persons will express themselves in the world in ways which cannot at the same time embody the impartial view, and that they also run the risk of offending against it. They run that risk if they exist at all; yet unless such things exist there will not be enough substance or conviction in a man's life to compel his allegiance to life itself. . . . Life has to have substance if anything is to have sense, including adherence to the impartial system; but if it has substance, then it cannot grant supreme importance to the impartial system, and that system's hold on it will be, at the limit, insecure.[8]

While Williams's view does not entail that Emily's and Sloane's actions are morally right, it suggests that they are not quite morally wrong either. Instead, it might be thought that such extreme cases inhabit a sort of gray area about which it is impossible for us to pass moral judgment at all.

Insofar as this view allows for a more nuanced judgment of characters like Emily, it clearly gets something right. The problem, if there is one, lies in the fact that it leaves so little room for any moral judgment. There is, after all, a fairly clear sense that Emily and Sloane *know* that they are doing the wrong things but choose to do them anyway. Their choices to act in the way that they do might be understandable, especially given their circumstances; however, this does not mean that what they are doing is morally okay.[9]

SYDNEY'S MODERATE SOLUTION

There are good reasons to be suspicious of both the preceding views. After all, it seems intuitively clear that Jack *ought* to have been a better father to Sydney and that Sloane *ought* to have rejected Prophet Five's deal. These intuitions suggest there is *some* special obligation to take special care of one's "nearest and dearest" but this does not give us license to do just anything on their behalf.

Of all the *Alias* characters, Sydney provides the best example of this moderate view. She neither ignores her special obligations to those close to her nor ignores her obligations to everyone else. So, for example, consider Sydney's actions when Will's kidnappers demand that that she trade a Rambaldi page for his release. Sydney is aware that this page contains the plan for building and using a dangerous device. She is also aware, however, that considerable time and effort will be needed to effectively utilize the device and that it may be possible for her to do other things to prevent the device from being used. It is thus unclear how *much* danger there really is in giving the plan to this organization. In the end, Sydney decides to have Jack trade the page for Will but to simultaneously attempt to destroy the organization's lab (which will prevent or delay their attempts to use the device). Sydney's choice here is notably distinct from what either extreme view would have dictated. The first view would suggest that Sydney refuse to make the trade at all, on the grounds that Will's life could not possibly be worth the risk; the second solution would urge that Sydney make the trade as offered (and not attempt to blow up the lab), on the grounds that doing anything else might put Will in unnecessary danger.

One can easily find other examples of Sydney doing this sort of balancing act. So, for example, Sydney makes regular efforts to spend time with family and friends, even though she could undoubtedly find more "spy work" to do. She has dinner with her father, goes on dates with Vaughn, and spends holidays with her friends. She also regularly disobeys her superiors in order to

save the lives or friends or family and proves willing to seek revenge against those who hurt them. However, she is not willing to do just anything for her loved ones. She is, for example, willing to turn her father in to the FBI when she suspects that he may have once worked for the KGB, and she is willing seek out and fight her mother in order to prevent the destruction of New York and London.

Sydney's "moderate" view is, in many ways, both intuitive and compelling. The philosophical difficulty for this view, however, is to explain *why* we have special obligations to certain people at all, if morality really requires that we be impartial. This difficulty is notably unique to the third view. The first view evades the difficulty by claiming that there are no special obligations, while the second view evades it by claiming that morality does not really require that we be impartial.

One way of explaining why we have special obligations to loved ones is to note the moral importance of acting *quickly* and without hesitation or fear. Impartial morality, after all, requires that we all do our best to help and protect others when we can. The best way of helping and protecting others, however, is surely not to spend all of our time exhaustively cataloging everyone's problems and to act only when we are sure that we have chosen the best possible course of action. If we did this, nothing would ever get done and we would end up helping no one. In the world of *Alias,* for instance, such a strategy would ensure that no bomb would ever be defused and that no bad guy would ever be caught. It is far better to simply *assume* that loved ones who are in danger ought to be rescued, that parents ought to spend time with their children, and that evildoers ought to be brought to justice. This is because such actions are, in the vast majority of cases, to the benefit of everyone involved. This solution, which is defended by Peter Railton, might also explain why it is a morally good thing for us to think of our loved ones as being *special* or *different* from other people. This sort of love can, after all, be a powerful motivator to quick, decisive action in defense of others. According to Railton, the best (most moral) types of people are those, like Sydney, for whom these types of selfless behavior are almost "second nature."[10]

If Railton is correct, then Sydney's choice to trade the Rambaldi page to save Will's life is a moral one even if it (in the end) leads to a larger number of causalities. This holds not because Will's life is more valuable than other people's lives but because of Sydney's *relationship* to Will. Sydney has worked hard to be *the sort of person* whom family and friends can count on

for aid, comfort, and protection. This, according to Railton, is exactly what impartiality requires of her. One cannot be this sort of person, however, and also be the sort of person who is continuously trying to figure out how much the life of a loved one is "worth" when compared to the lives of others. This does not mean, of course, that one should simply ignore the well-being of strangers. Instead, one ought to try (as Sydney does) to help both one's loved ones and everyone else.

A slightly different explanation of the importance of special obligations is suggested by Frank Jackson, who emphasizes the importance of a sort of a moral "division of labor." Jackson begins by noting that it would be horribly inefficient to require that *everyone* simultaneously help and protect *everyone else.* So, for example, it is plausible that we have an impartial moral duty to see to it that the children in our community have food, shelter, and education. However, the fact that we have such an obligation does not mean that each one of us should offer food or housing to every child we happen to meet. Instead, most societies have found that it works better to assign responsibility for individual children to a relatively small number of people (e.g., parents, teachers, social workers, etc.). Ideally, this sort of system will meet the needs of all children, by making sure each child has an appropriate number of caretakers who will look out for his or her interests.[11]

Jackson argues that this sort of "sector system," which assigns specific moral duties to specific people, works best in particular types of situations. In particular, he argues that it works best in scenarios that

- require an in-depth knowledge of the people that one is trying to help,
- need considerable long-term planning,
- depend upon a level of trust between the various people involved,
- are best resolved by a small number of people, and
- can be done most effectively by people who are emotionally invested in the outcome.

The best examples of these situations involve the sorts of moral duties that we owe to our loved ones—for example, to console them when they are sad, to talk through difficult choices with them, to buy them appropriate birthday gifts, and so on. These sorts of duties simply cannot be done by a complete stranger. Raising a child well, for instance, requires the efforts of a person (or people) who knows a lot about that particular child's needs

and abilities and who is willing to invest a good deal of physical and emotional resources. Moreover, there would be no great benefit to the child in having *too* many people take this sort of interest in his or her life; instead, these sorts of duties can best accomplished by a relatively small number of people (parents, relatives, etc.).

In Jackson's view, then, Sydney is doing just as she ought to do in treating her loved ones in a different way (and better) than she treats strangers off the street. Sydney's eventual choice to leave the spy life behind and concentrate on raising her child with Vaughn, for example, does not mean she is "letting the country down" or unjustifiably favoring her child. Sydney, unlike her father, Jack, has simply realized that the she *does* have special obligations to her child and that these obligations cannot *always* be trumped by the need to save the world from the latest impeding disaster.

A Model of Moral Behavior

The moral dilemmas of *Alias* characters are, in certain ways, wildly different from the dilemmas that we encounter in our daily lives. Most of us will never be asked to conceal government secrets from loved ones, to seek revenge against spies who have murdered our fiancé, or be asked to fight our parents to prevent genocide. In other ways, however, the dilemmas faced by these characters should be quite familiar to us. Part of living a moral life involves figuring out how one can simultaneously respect the idea that everyone deserves *equal* treatment and the idea that we have special obligations to the *particular* people with whom we are closest. In this respect, as in so many others, Sydney provides a model of moral behavior.

Notes

1. Most of the historically important philosophical and religious writings on ethics defend impartial moral principles, though Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994) contains suggestions of ethical egoism. The best-known defenses of ethical egoism in popular culture are probably the works of Ayn Rand. See her *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964).

2. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38.

3. John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism," in *On Liberty and Other Essays,* ed. John Gray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 131–204, quote on 142.

4. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

5. William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1798), 127–30.

6. Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43.

7. Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 12.

8. Ibid., 18.

9. See Marilyn Friedman, "The Practice of Partiality," *Ethics* 101 (1991): 818–35; James Rachels, "Morality, Parents, and Children," in *Can Ethics Provide Answers? And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 1997), 213–34. They both provide detailed critiques of the sort of extreme partialism described here.

10. Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984): 134–71.

11. Frank Jackson, "Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection," *Ethics* 101 (1991): 461–82.

Scene 5

METAPHYSICALLY SPEAKING

Is Abrams's *Star Trek* a *Star Trek* Film?

Daniel Whiting

Is J. J. Abrams's reboot *Star Trek* (2009) a *Star Trek* film? To ask this is, in part, to ask what category of film *Star Trek* belongs to. Questions about categories or kinds are as old as philosophy itself. What kinds of things are there? How do these kinds of things relate to one another? What determines what things belong to these categories? These are all questions asked in the branch of Western philosophy known as metaphysics.[1] Whether *Star Trek* is a *Star Trek* film—whether it belongs to that series or category—is not simply a question one can ask *about* the film, or so I shall argue: it is a question that the film itself asks. To this extent, the film appears to engage in metaphysics.

However, as I shall also argue, the film seems to suggest that judgments as to whether something belongs to a series are not wholly descriptive; rather, they are in large part evaluative. Further, making these evaluative judgments might lead one to reevaluate one's conception of the "essence" of that series. Thus, in the end I shall maintain that, according to *Star Trek,* determining whether something belongs to a series such as *Star Trek*—and so what the nature of that series is—is primarily an *aesthetic* matter rather than a metaphysical one.

Of course, there is a certain reflexivity involved when a film that is ostensibly a sequel to other films and that ostensibly belongs to a series based in turn on a television series tackles such issues, since in doing so it is reflecting upon *itself,* on its own status and its relationship to other works. Stephen Mulhall maintains that the various contributions to the *Alien* series (1979–) manifest "a reflective engagement with their own status as sequels, and hence with questions of inheritance and originality" and that in doing so they reflect "upon the conditions of [that series'] possibility."[2] The same, as I shall try to show, can be said of *Star Trek.*

Questions about what it takes to belong to a series can seem abstract and of purely intellectual interest. However, as Kendall Walton stresses, "aesthetic judgement rests on [judgments about a work's category] in an absolutely fundamental way," since "what aesthetic properties a thing seems to have may depend on what categories it is perceived in."[3] More generally, judgments about what category a work belongs to necessarily inform our appreciation, understanding, and evaluation of artworks since the aesthetic, expressive, and representational properties of a work are determined in part by the categories it belongs to, that is, what form of art it is, which historical or stylistic genre it belongs to, which artist or movement it is a product of, and so on. For example, the same array of paint on canvas might be dynamic for a Mondrian but lifeless for a Kandinsky, while what it takes for a work to be bleak differs between film noir and romantic comedies, and so on. Hence, in raising questions about the category to which it belongs, *Star Trek* is raising questions about how it should be appreciated, evaluated, and interpreted.

George Kirk and James T. Kirk

Gene Roddenberry's original *Star Trek* (1966) television series ran for three seasons; it spawned five spinoff television series and (prior to Abrams's *Star Trek*) ten movies, as well as numerous books, comics, and video games. It is perhaps not a great surprise, then, that at some point a putative member of this franchise started to raise questions about the status of this series and the member's place in it. Moreover, Abrams is himself responsible for a number of television series, including *Alias* (2001–2006) and *Lost* (2004–2010), as well as another film that belongs to a series based in turn on a television series, *Mission: Impossible III* (2006). It is no less surprising, then, that a work by Abrams should raise questions concerning what it takes to belong to a series and so about what kind of film *Star Trek* is.[4]

One might think that Abrams's movie is evidently a *Star Trek* film, since it appropriates the original television series's title, includes many characters, locations, artifacts, and events whose names are the same as those in the original and subsequent series, exploits the same musical theme, exhibits some narrative continuities with other accepted members of the series, and involves one of the series's original actors (Leonard Nimoy). Implicit in this assumption is the thought that the above are among the criteria that determine whether a work counts as belonging to the *Star Trek* series. However, while these criteria might be necessary for a *Star*

Trek film, Abrams's *Star Trek* certainly challenges, self-consciously, the idea that they are sufficient.

The first indication of this, before it has even begun, is that the film is simply titled *Star Trek* (as opposed to, say, *Star Trek XI*). This immediately suggests that the film is not taking for granted that it belongs to a series and also introduces the thought that previous *Star Trek* films might not be properly called such. Another early indication of the film's concerns is that it opens neither with the well-known theme from the original series nor with the famous voiceover that begins "Space: the final frontier . . ." These decisions seem to send out the message that there is, or should be, no presumption that the film belongs to the series of the same name.

These concerns are reinforced in *Star Trek*'s dramatic opening sequence. As the film begins, a Romulan ship emerges slowly from a "lightning storm." Soon after, another starship appears that one might easily assume to be the U.S.S. *Enterprise,* given its distinctive shape, multinational crew, and blinking lights; it is, however, the U.S.S. *Kelvin,* as we learn later. The name of this ship recalls the Kelvin temperature scale, which begins at absolute zero, an association that can be taken in two ways: it might be understood to raise again the idea that this film's place in a series, its belonging to the category of *Star Trek* films, is not being assumed; or it might be understood as an assertion that this film is in some way returning to the absolute beginning, that is, to the original *Star Trek* series. I shall return to these themes repeatedly in what follows.

The captain of the *Kelvin,* Rodau, boards the Romulan vessel to negotiate with its captain, Nero. Nero asks Rodau if he knows Spock, to which Rodau replies, "I am unfamiliar with Ambassador Spock." So it appears that, in the universe of Abrams's *Star Trek,* familiarity with Spock, a character so familiar from the *Star Trek* series and its universe, is not taken for granted.

In Rodau's absence an officer named Kirk assumes the role of captain. At this point one might be tempted to think that this is James T. Kirk, captain of the *Enterprise,* one of the central characters in the original television series. However, it is not long before we learn that the acting captain is George Kirk. This trick seems designed precisely to unsettle our assumptions that the world of the film we are watching is the same world familiar to us from the original *Star Trek* series and so in turn to start to unsettle our assumption that we are watching a *Star Trek* film.

Abrams's *Star Trek* has barely started and already it is questioning and leading its viewers to question its relation to the *Star Trek* series, its status as

a *Star Trek* film: several established conventions, such as the use of numerals, voiceover, and music, have been breached; twice over the expectation that we are witnessing people and vehicles from the *Star Trek* universe has been thwarted; and characters in the film appear not to be familiar with central figures from the original series. In these ways we are surely being encouraged to ask, Is Abrams's *Star Trek* a *Star Trek* film?

An Alternate Reality

George sets the *Kelvin* on course to collide with the Romulan ship but its "autopilot" is destroyed, and so George chooses to sacrifice himself by manually directing the ship. There are two things to note here. First, though it is not apparent until later, the result of the sacrifice George makes at the start of the movie—a sacrifice necessitated by Nero's decisions to follow Spock into the wormhole and to attack the first Federation vessel he sees when emerging from it—is that everything that follows takes place in an alternative reality to that in which the original *Star Trek* series—and the movies, television shows, books, and comics that followed it—takes place. Second, in bringing this about George does not, because he cannot, rely on any predetermined procedures or any algorithmic principles of the sort that might be mechanically applied.

These two points are reinforced later in the following exchange:

> SPOCK: We must gather with the rest of Starfleet to balance the terms of the next engagement.
> KIRK: There won't be a next engagement—by the time we've gathered, it'll be too late. But you say he's from the future and knows what's going to happen—then the logical thing is to be unpredictable.
> SPOCK: You are assuming that Nero knows how events are predicted to unfold; on the contrary, Nero's very presence has altered the flow of history . . . thereby creating an entire new chain of incidents that cannot be anticipated by either party.
> UHURA: An alternate reality.
> SPOCK: Precisely. Whatever our lives might have been, if the time continuum was disrupted, our destinies have changed.

First, Uhura's stating of the obvious reminds us that the events of Abrams's *Star Trek* belong to a different chain, or series, than any that are familiar from

other putative members of the *Star Trek* franchise. This film is, or aspires to be, "new," to break radically from its "history." Second, the events of *Star Trek* and the lives they involve are "unpredictable;" they cannot be "anticipated" and are not as they were "destined" to be, according to the original continuum or series.

Evidently these two points are linked. In not relying on established principles or in deviating from the norm, a new universe is created through the destruction of the old. And given that the universe is new, established principles or norms do not apply.

There are two ways to interpret the decision to relocate the film at its outset to an "alternate reality." On the one hand, the opening scenes appear to declare that the film to follow is in no way a straightforward continuation of the *Star Trek* franchise, perhaps that it does not belong to that series at all. At the very least, it invites us to think about whether it counts as a *Star Trek* film. On the other hand, recall the words of George, who is in large part responsible for creating the alternate reality, to his wife, who is escaping the ship while in labor: "I'm not going to be there. This is the only way you'll survive." Directing the *Kelvin* in an unforeseen way and breaking with history allow George to save his wife, and so their son, James T. Kirk, who is born at the moment of sacrifice. This suggests that to cast off the series with which we are familiar, and so to create "lives" not determined by what has been taken to be the governing principles of that series, is precisely the way to preserve the *Star Trek* series. In this respect, *Star Trek* presents itself as a return to and redirection of the *Star Trek* universe and series.

Kirk's Inheritance

Given George's sacrifice, James Kirk loses a parent, and so his life unfolds without the formative influence and guidance of his father.[5] In this respect Kirk's life seems to embody the situation of *Star Trek* itself—both to stand in an uncertain relationship to predecessors of the same name and to unfold in a way that is not predetermined by established precedent.

In view of this, it is interesting to note that, while Zachary Quinto and Karl Urban seem to attempt to mimic Nimoy's Spock and DeForest Kelley's Leonard McCoy, respectively, Chris Pine, who plays the adult Kirk, does not appear to be trying at all to impersonate William Shatner. Though Pine bears some physical resemblance to the young Shatner, he studiously avoids Shatner's characteristic (indeed, infamous) halting speech pattern.[6] Pine's

acting style encourages us to question the assumption that Pine is inheriting Shatner's character, that is, the Kirk from the original *Star Trek* universe, and reinforces the thought that, whatever the status of Pine's Kirk, he will not be played according to predetermined conventions.[7]

According to Nero, in the original *Star Trek* universe (Shatner's) Kirk is "considered to be a great man." Nero's choice of words keeps the attribution of greatness at a distance, as if to suggest that this attribution might not be well founded. In any case, Nero notes, "That was another life, a life I will deprive you of just like I did your father." It is difficult to make sense of these remarks. On the one hand, Nero seems to be talking literally about depriving Kirk of life in the *Star Trek* universe by killing him (as he killed his father). On the other hand, Nero seems to be talking figuratively of depriving Kirk of the life in which he is considered to be a great man (on its most natural reading, the indefinite description "a life" inherits its reference anaphorically from the preceding definite description, "the life"). It is not clear how to reconcile the two readings—if Nero were to kill Kirk, he would not deprive him of the life in which he is considered to be a great man, since by killing Kirk's father, he has already deprived Kirk of that life. Still, the important point for present purposes is that, prior to Nero's intervention, Kirk, and by implication *Star Trek,* possesses a (questionable) reputation for greatness, a reputation that is linked to a certain heritage and that is under threat, in part because that link is under threat.

In the viewer's first real encounter with Kirk, he is as an adolescent recklessly driving a car into a chasm while listening to the Beastie Boys. That the destroyed car is from the period in which the *Star Trek* television series was produced reinforces the suggestion that Abrams's *Star Trek* has wilfully broken with the history to which one might have assumed it belonged. That said, the choice of a song, titled "Sabotage," from the mid-1990s as the accompaniment to Kirk's act of destruction might suggest an implicit criticism of later ostensible members of the *Star Trek* series as responsible for disrupting, and ultimately wrecking, the series that they claim to inherit.[8] What is clear is that this scene serves to establish Kirk as a rebel.

Kirk's rebelliousness points in two directions. First, the presumption appears to be that Kirk's subversive character is a product of the fact that he lacked paternal guidance, that his life is not influenced by his predecessor and namesake. Second, given Kirk's rebelliousness, the events of his life (hence, of the film) cannot be anticipated in advance and will not unfold according to convention (I already noted above the adult Kirk's

urge to be "unpredictable"). This reinforces the thought that Kirk embodies the film's status.

The picture *Star Trek* presents of the relationship of Kirk to his past is, however, not a straightforward one; specifically, his break with the past might not be as total as it might first appear. After all, his rebellious character is presented as resulting from the prior events involving his father and Nero. Moreover, Kirk *is* his father's son and it is inevitable that he would receive some input from his heritage, if only at the biological level. The idea of an individual—or, for that matter, that of an artwork—whose character and actions—or expressive, representational, and aesthetic properties—are in no way influenced by external factors, including historical factors, is, of course, a myth, albeit a romantic one.

In view of this, consider Christopher Pike's seemingly irrational faith in Kirk's aptitude for Starfleet. On the basis of what appears to be no evidence whatsoever, Pike insists that Kirk is his "father's son." It might appear that Pike is taking for granted precisely what is in question, namely, that the Kirk of Abrams's *Star Trek* is the Kirk of *Star Trek* (and so, in effect, that Abrams's *Star Trek* is a *Star Trek* film). However, it should not be overlooked that Pike also dares Kirk to "do better." This hints at a theme not yet discussed. Pike's remark suggests that, to the extent that Kirk has inherited his past, Kirk should draw upon that heritage and its resources in a "better" fashion than has been done to date. So Kirk must not allow all or undesirable aspects of his inheritance to determine and dominate his character and life but must be selective and draw upon only those aspects that are desirable in a superior fashion. This points to a different way in which Kirk, and by implication *Star Trek,* might be "unpredictable"—not (*per impossibile*) through being in no way influenced by what has gone before, but through exploiting what has gone before in an original and innovative way.

In light of this, consider the following case in *Star Trek* of the past appearing to repeat itself. At the start of the film, George Kirk is made captain of the *Kelvin* when his predecessor leaves to negotiate unsuccessfully with Nero. Later, Pike leaves the *Enterprise* to negotiate with Nero. The immediate result is that Spock is made captain of the *Enterprise*. Nonetheless, with the aid of Spock himself, though Nimoy's Spock from the original *Star Trek* universe (and series), Kirk becomes captain and succeeds in saving Pike and defeating Nero. The message here seems to be that there is a standing threat of merely reproducing the past, following the precedent set by predecessors, with disastrous consequences (indeed, disastrous consequences

for the entire *Star Trek* universe). However, the message continues, this is a threat that can be avoided, not by entirely disregarding the past—say, by not listening to the original Spock—but by learning from it in a selective and novel fashion.

Always a Child of Two Worlds

Like Kirk, Spock embodies and dramatizes the concerns of Abrams's *Star Trek*. Before turning to consider the significance of the events involving Spock, it is worth noting that the actor who portrays him, Quinto, was previously best known for playing a character in another well-known television series, namely the serial killer Sylar in *Heroes*. This casting decision is extremely suggestive. Sylar is immortal; he manages to return to life on several occasions after what appears to be his death. Moreover, Sylar is a parasite; he owes almost all his powers to the victims he kills in order to access their brains. One might be tempted to think that we are being invited to see a connection between Sylar and *Star Trek*—a series that seems to be incapable of dying and whose putative members are parasitic upon the abilities of others and so are, to that extent, inauthentic.

This is, admittedly, speculative. Another, more evident, way in which Quinto's previous role as Sylar has resonance with respect to his role in *Star Trek* is that, like Kirk and (as I shall discuss shortly) Spock, Sylar's lineage is a complex matter. Sylar grew up in the absence of his father and later is led on two occasions to believe falsely that a certain individual is his biological father, respectively, Arthur Petrelli and Martin Gray. Eventually Sylar meets his real father—from whom, it appears, Sylar inherited his ability to acquire others' powers and who, it turns out, killed his biological mother—only to leave his father to die from cancer. Similarly, Sylar is led on two occasions to believe falsely that a certain individual is his biological mother, respectively, Virginia Gray—whom Sylar kills—and Angela Petrelli. The identity of his real mother has yet to be revealed. I have abstracted from the labyrinthine details of Sylar's efforts to learn the facts about his parentage. The important point for present purposes is that the near-bewildering array of issues concerning Sylar's lineage and the resultant uncertainty about his relationship to his apparent predecessors surely informed, or at least casts an interesting light on, the decision to cast Quinto as Spock.

As we did with Kirk, we first meet Spock as a child and immediately discover that he faces difficulties as a result of his relationship to his prede-

cessors. Spock is deemed to be "disadvantaged" by his parentage, specifically by the fact that his father, Sarek, married a human, Amanda Grayson. As a result, Sarek is deemed a "traitor" and the young Spock is bullied for being "neither human nor Vulcan"; in his own words, he has "no place in this universe."

There are two strands to tease out here. First, due to Spock's parentage, as Sarek tells him, "You will always be a child of two worlds." Setting the literal reading aside, in one sense this seems a nod to the fact that the character of Spock is to be found both in the original *Star Trek* universe and in the alternate reality of Abrams's *Star Trek.* This in turn puts the relation of Quinto's Spock to Nimoy's original Spock in question, just as the relation of Abrams's *Star Trek* is to the original show and the subsequent works bearing its name.

Second, as with Kirk, Spock's parentage causes problems. The charge seems to be not that Spock is in no way influenced or guided by his past but that (at least according to other Vulcans) the guidance is of the wrong sort. More specifically, Vulcans are not supposed to feel emotion; rather, they are to be entirely "logical" in their decision making. Through years of training from birth, Vulcans are required to develop the mental discipline to repress their very real strong emotions so that they might guide their thought and behavior by "rational" considerations alone. The perceived danger, then, is that Spock's decisions and actions might be governed not purely by impersonal algorithms of the sort, say, that an autopilot could mechanically execute but instead by a certain and distinctively personal sensibility, just as Abrams's *Star Trek* purports not simply to be mechanically following out the paths laid out by the established conventions of *Star Trek* (which is in part the reason why its status as a *Star Trek* film is under consideration). It is no surprise, then, that, like Kirk, Spock is deemed (by a minister) to be a "rebel."

The parallels between Kirk and Spock go further. Just as Pike dares Kirk to do better, Sarek insists, "Spock, you are fully capable of deciding your own destiny. The question you face is: Which path will you choose?" Like Pike, Sarek seems remarkably confident that it is within Spock's power to direct his own life and so, rather than allow his heritage to rule him, to make it his own by drawing upon it in an effective and novel manner (in a similar way to that in which Spock later turns the Romulans' and Vulcans' "common ancestry" to his advantage in accessing the Romulan computer systems).

This leads to the following point. One respect in which the universe of Abrams's *Star Trek* differs from the familiar *Star Trek* universe is that in the former Spock's home planet, Vulcan, is destroyed by a black hole that Nero

places at the center of the planet. In a dramatic rescue, Spock manages to save (most of) the Vulcan High Council, which, we are told, is "tasked with protecting" Vulcan "cultural history." On the one hand, this moment represents another instance in which a link between a character and a certain lineage (or "history") governed by institutions and conventions (or "culture") is threatened and to some extent broken. As Spock memorably puts it, "I am now a member of an endangered species." So, too, the suggestion seems to be, *Star Trek* is a species in danger of extinction, the stream of films and other formats bearing its name notwithstanding.

On the other hand, thanks to Spock's efforts, "The essence of our culture has been saved in the elders who now reside upon the ship." Spock's lineage and the institutions and conventions to which it is subject are preserved or, more precisely, their *essence* has been, those essential features of the "cultural history" or, so it is implied, of the accidental features it accrued over time, stripped. This, of course, holds out hope for the continuation of that particular series, though perhaps in a manner more faithful to it than its more recent instances. It is clear, I think, that in a similar fashion Abrams's *Star Trek* takes itself to offer hope for the continuation of the *Star Trek* series by returning to its roots and distilling its essentials. I shall return to this below, but it is a sign of the film's confidence in this possibility that Spock says to his fellow crew members, "I need everyone to continue performing admirably."

Breaking the Rules

Kirk and Spock first meet when Kirk participates in the Kobayashi Maru test—first presented in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982)—programmed by Spock. Rather than accept that the test presents a "no-win situation," Kirk completes it successfully, though only, as Spock complains, by "changing the conditions of the test" and the "rules" or "principles" behind it.

First, note that Kirk is participating in a "simulation," a simulation that is supposed to conclude in only one way, failure. Given the established concerns of *Star Trek,* outlined above, one can take this as acknowledging the possibility that the film will merely simulate a *Star Trek* film, rather than constitute an authentic or genuine member of that kind; indeed, the suggestion might seem to be that the realization of this possibility is inevitable. Moreover, viewers are (at least intended to be) unaware initially that the Klingon attack, with its familiar setup and appearance, is a simulation. As a result, viewers are duped into taking the scenario at face value, as genuine.

This ploy seems intended in the first instance to acknowledge the temptation to conform to viewers' expectations and to create a film following established conventions before proceeding to thwart those expectations and encourage viewers not to accept uncritically the authenticity of what they experience. (Compare the first appearances of the *Kelvin* and George Kirk, discussed above.)

In turn, an implication of the scene seems to be that one can avoid the fate of merely imitating a *Star Trek* film only by refusing to play by the rules, that is, by not following established convention. And, as it happens, success through cheating is common in Abrams's *Star Trek*.[9] For example, McCoy manages to get Kirk onto the *Enterprise* by breaking the rules, specifically, by injecting him with a vaccine that leads Kirk to simulate(!) the symptoms of an illness, while Uhura boards the *Enterprise* only by exploiting her relationship with Spock. Likewise, Spock provides Scotty with the equation for transporting during warp, which in the original universe Scotty "discovered"—and, as Kirk reminds the original Spock, "Coming back in time, changing history . . . that's cheating."[10] Of course, in each case, cheating leads to positive outcomes. Perhaps the message here, to echo earlier thoughts, is that the principles of the *Star Trek* universe are not mechanical algorithms to be mechanically executed but, at most, rules of thumb to be followed, adapted, or ignored as the situation demands.

As just noted, Kirk meets the Spock from the original *Star Trek* universe; in fact, he meets Nimoy's Spock from the original *Star Trek* television series. His doing so is an incredible coincidence, one that is so utterly unbelievable and so very convenient for the film's storyline that the only charitable interpretation that prevents the meeting from being a serious narrative failing is that it is somehow destined or predetermined. I am not suggesting that the film sustains this interpretation but it is at least consistent with its thematic preoccupations.

Setting this aside, Nimoy's Spock turns out to have a pivotal role in *Star Trek:* he is (at least perceived to be) responsible for the destruction that led to the creation of the alternate reality in which the bulk of the film unfolds, and he is largely responsible for the film's happy ending. I shall take each in turn.

When Spock's ship first appears, Nero says, "Welcome back." Nero has waited, we are told, "for the one who allowed our home to be destroyed." (Spock failed to prevent Romulus from being destroyed by a supernova.) It is hard not to read this as an implicit criticism—one that we have encountered before, although one here kept safely at arm's length by the fact that

the words are spoken by the film's maniacal villain—according to which the participants in the various works bearing the name of "Star Trek" that followed the original series, including its original cast members, played some part in the destruction of the "home," that is, the *Star Trek* universe or parts of it. (Compare Nero's circumspect attribution of greatness to Shatner's Kirk, discussed earlier.)

That said, it is Spock who saves the day by rescuing Kirk on Delta Vega, informing Scotty of the formula for midwarp transportation, and, finally, by telling Kirk how to have Spock (i.e., himself) removed from command. So it is thanks in large part to Nimoy's Spock that the crew at the close of *Star Trek* is the same the crew in the same roles as in the original—I shall return to this shortly—and that this crew is successful in saving Earth from the Romulan attack. In this respect, the past has a positive, if not exclusive, influence on the present.

The original Spock on Delta Vega initially tells Kirk that Spock's counterpart in the alternate reality must not be made aware of his existence. It turns out, however, that the "one rule you cannot break" is broken. When Nimoy's Spock meets Quinto's Spock, the former's closing words are striking: "My customary farewell would seem oddly self-serving." That is, Spock alludes to but does not utter the famous, and now hackneyed, words "Live long and prosper." On the one hand, this might seem to point to the idea that whether the *Star Trek* series and its inhabitants have longevity and, more pertinently, whether it will prosper through the contribution of *Star Trek* has yet to be determined ("I shall simply say, 'Good luck'"). On the other hand, picking up on a suggestion broached earlier, Spock's words betray a sense of confidence and the tone suggests that long life and prosperity are a given. I shall return to this below.

An Aesthetic Matter

In light of the above, what can we conclude about what it takes to be a *Star Trek* film? What are the criteria for belonging to the *Star Trek* series? Part of the answer that Abrams's *Star Trek* appears to give to the questions it raises is that there are no purely formal or descriptive criteria that one could spell out such that, if something meets those criteria, it counts as belonging to the *Star Trek* series. So, for example, to be a bona fide, authentic, genuine, *Star Trek* film it is not sufficient that it include characters called "Spock" or worlds called "Vulcan," has the words "Star Trek" in its title, includes an

actor whose performance mimics that of DeForest Kelley's McCoy, begins with certain theme music, exhibits a certain specifiable narrative structure, and so on. Associated with this is the thought that one could not identify any rules or principles in advance such that by following or abiding by them one is guaranteed to produce a *Star Trek* film. Indeed, Abrams's *Star Trek* seems to suggest, a film might qualify as a *Star Trek* film even though it flouts, bends, and ignores putative rules or criteria.

One might say that, for *Star Trek,* judgments as to whether something belongs to a series are not or should not be wholly descriptive (or, one is tempted to say, "logical"); rather, they are in large part evaluative. Where there are rules, whether a film is a *Star Trek* film is not determined by whether those rules are followed but by how well and in what manner they are applied, and where there aren't any rules, it is determined by how faithful to the spirit—not the letter—of previous films the candidate is.[11] So, according to *Star Trek*'s contribution to the ontology of art, one cannot legislate in advance or judge by the application of some impersonal principles, based perhaps on one's experiences of past instances of the series, whether a given film belongs to a given series or what it takes to belong to a certain category of film; instead, one must make judgments about how faithful a film is to its heritage, to the style and substance of its predecessors, and to what extent it draws upon that heritage in a sensitive and imaginative (i.e., nonmechanical) way in realizing its (perhaps as yet unrealized) potential. Making these judgments in turn might lead one to reevaluate one's conception of the "essence" of that series. All of this is, of course, a reminder that what category or series a work of art belongs to is primarily an *aesthetic* matter—rather than, say, a metaphysical one.[12]

To Boldly Go

In closing, I note that Abrams's *Star Trek* does not simply tell us what would count as an answer to the question, Is Abrams's *Star Trek* a *Star Trek* film? It also offers an answer to that question. Abrams's *Star Trek* seems confident that it has earned its status as belonging to the *Star Trek* series (and implicitly suggests this is not true of many other contenders for that status). As already explained, at the close of Abrams's *Star Trek* all the original crew members of the *Enterprise* are in place and in their original positions, presenting the film as a faithful return to its source. The *Star Trek* universe has, the film seems to declare, restored the *Star Trek* universe. In light of this, recall Pike's

words to Kirk: "Your father would be proud." These appear to confirm that Pike's seemingly irrational faith in Kirk, discussed above, was well placed, since Kirk has lived up to the reputation of his predecessor, which in turn appears to betray an assurance that *Star Trek* has lived up to its name.

Most glaringly, and perhaps audaciously, the film ends with the famous words with which the episodes of the original series begin, "Space: the final frontier . . . ," accompanied by the original theme and a montage of planet flypasts like those in the original credits. In doing so, Abrams's *Star Trek* asserts that, while it could not be assumed to have done so from the start, it has shown itself to have earned its place in that series (by its own lights). This confidence seems to me dangerously close to overconfidence; there is an air of smugness about the film, a certain arrogance in its apparent conviction that it has decisively answered the question it raised at its start. However, I shall leave it to those more familiar with the original *Star Trek* series than I am to decide whether Abrams's confidence, like Pike's, is well placed.

Notes

Thanks to Hayley Whiting for comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

1. Good introductions to metaphysics include Michael Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006); Robin Le Poidevin, Peter Simons, Andrew McGonigal, and Ross Cameron, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 2009). A very useful and accessible resource is Helen Beebee, Nikk Effingham, and Philip Goff, *Metaphysics: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2011).

2. Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (London: Routledge, 2008), 7. In chapter 9 Mulhall reflects on another film by Abrams, *Mission: Impossible III* (2006). Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to compare Mulhall's rich discussion of that film—which he presents as "embodying a critical rethinking of its determining conditions" (231)—with the present discussion of *Star Trek*.

3. Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 337, 354.

4. See Mulhall, *On Film,* chapter 9, for a detailed discussion of the relevance of Abrams's television work to his film work.

5. Nimoy's Spock says to Kirk that in the original timeline, George Kirk "lived to see you become captain of the *Enterprise*" as well as that George Kirk was "your inspiration for joining Starfleet."

6. Discussing the aspects of the original character he chose to keep, Pine says, "The speech pattern? Absolutely not. In that territory it becomes an impersonation." See John Jurgensen, "Boldly Revisiting Roles," *Wall Street Journal,* January 2, 2009. http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123084942774447411.html.

7. That is not to say that Pine's acting style or his on-screen persona is especially striking.

8. Interestingly, "Sabotage" dates from 1994, the same year in which *Star Trek: Generations* (dir. David Carson), the first film bearing the name "Star Trek" but not featuring its original cast, was released.

9. As it is throughout the *Star Trek* universe. Perhaps the most notorious example is the Federation's Prime Directive, which requires Starfleet not to interfere with alien cultures and their development, a rule that is repeatedly broken.

10. This is also a reference to *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), in which Scotty gives the formula for transparent aluminum to the scientist who presumably invented transparent aluminum in the original timeline. Thanks to the volume editors for bringing this to my attention.

11. Cf. "I wanted to take the spirit of what was created 43 years ago and use it to make it relevant for today, but the key was that we wanted to make it ours and not feel constrained by too many rules that were almost half a century old. . . . The spirit of what came before had to fuel the movie and yet the specifics of the film needed to be ours." Abrams claims this in John Hiscock, "*Star Trek:* J. J. Abrams Interview," *Telegraph,* April 30, 2009, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/5249746/Star-Trek-JJ-Abrams-interview.html. In quoting these remarks, I do not intend to suggest that Abrams's stated intentions are a decisive consideration when it comes to interpreting his movie.

12. See Aaron Ridley, "Against Musical Ontology," *Journal of Philosophy* 100 (2003): 203–20. Ridley argues that what it takes to be an instance of a given musical work cannot be specified in advance of evaluative judgments one makes about specific instances of it. The above thoughts, which I have argued can be found in *Star Trek,* present a similar perspective with respect to film. Good introductions to aesthetics and philosophy of art include Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999); Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Determinism, Free Will, and Moral Responsibility in *Alias*

Vishal Garg

The medium of motion picture serves a wide variety of purposes in contemporary society. We might watch a movie as a diversion or turn on the TV to relax at the end of a long day. Nightly news, documentaries, and historical and biographical shows help us gain information about the world around us. Television and movies can be used as a bonding mechanism; one of the things we have in common with people all over the world is that many of us have seen the same TV shows and movies, and we can use such common interests to start conversations. Another purpose of motion picture is to teach us. A quick trip to the video store reveals that we can use our television to learn how to cook better, play the guitar, and improve our homes. We can use our television to learn in other ways, too. Specifically, we can use it to learn about ourselves. It is this purpose of television, as a tool for self-improvement, that is the driving force behind this chapter.[1]

Motion picture is often used as a storytelling medium, and as such, it exposes us to characters and situations we never would have seen otherwise. As Lady Bird Johnson said, "Art is the window to man's soul; without it, he would never be able to see beyond his immediate world." As we get to know the characters in a movie, we start to ask questions about them: we wonder about their motivations, their goals, and their decisions. We might make moral judgments about their personal character and their actions. We may put ourselves into their shoes and ask, What would I have done in the same situation? It is this question (and the answers we give) that helps us to learn about ourselves, and, ideally, enables us to use television as a tool for self-improvement.[2]

Readers who have watched *Alias* (and I expect that most readers have)

might have asked themselves this question several times. The reader may have asked questions like, Would I have had Sydney Bristow's courage to take down SD-6 after they killed my fiancé? Could I resist the kinds of temptation that corrupted the moral compasses of Irina Derevko and Arvin Sloane in their search for power? and Would I have sought vengeance like Jack Bristow if I discovered that somebody had tried to kill my daughter?

It is by our answers to these questions that we learn about ourselves. We hope that we could show Sydney's courage, defy temptation, and resist Jack's bloodlust. But when we ask ourselves these questions honestly, we may discover that we are not as virtuous as we might wish to be. This realization, for some of us, may be a first step toward moral self-improvement. Thus it seems that we can use *Alias* as a tool to learn about ourselves and to improve our own character.

However, there are challenges to our ability to use the show for the purpose of self-improvement. Specifically, our attempt to use it as such assumes that the question What would I have done in the same situation? is one that makes sense. That is, in asking the question we assume that we actually *could* have acted in ways different than the characters acted. The question is only worth asking if the *Alias* universe is not deterministic and if the characters in it have free will.[3]

Rambaldi's Prophecies

Unfortunately, given the role that prophecy plays in the show, it seems that the *Alias* reality *is* deterministic and its inhabitants do not have free will. Specifically, the prophetic fifteenth-century polymath Milo Rambaldi made several prophecies, nearly all of which proved true over the course of the show's five seasons. The problem here is that the accuracy of Rambaldi's prophecies challenges the possibility that the characters could have acted in ways other than the ways they did, because many of their actions brought his prophecies to fruition. If the metaphysics of the *Alias* universe are such that the future had already been completely determined when Rambaldi wrote his prophecies (in which case Rambaldi merely recognized the inevitable future and wrote down what would happen), then the *Alias* universe is deterministic. If the characters could not have acted other than how they did, then perhaps they did not have free will. If this is the case, then we also would not have free will when we put ourselves into the shoes of those characters. We would have had Sydney's courage, succumbed to temptation

like Irina and Sloane, and put Sydney into Project Christmas like Jack. If the characters in the show have no choice in the matter, then the question of whether we would have done the same thing becomes trivial, and we can learn nothing about ourselves from asking it.[4]

In this chapter I save *Alias* from the challenge that Rambaldi poses and argue that the *Alias* universe is, in fact, not deterministic. I examine Rambaldi's prophecies and their outcomes and use tools provided by great philosophical thinkers to argue that the characters have free will, and that they are therefore morally responsible for their actions. If my arguments in this chapter are successful, then we may use *Alias* as a tool to understand and improve ourselves, and it has a value beyond its mere entertainment value.

Determinism

Before I give my argument for why the accuracy of Rambaldi's prophecies does not cause problems for our desire to use *Alias* to understand ourselves, it is important to be clear about exactly what the problem might be. That is, if one is going to argue against a position, it is necessary to first lay out that position. The first point to be made here is that when philosophers talk about *determinism* they usually are talking about what is also called *causal determinism,* and it is this form of determinism that will be the concern here.

Causal determinism can be defined this way: "The world is governed by (or is under the sway of) determinism if and only if, given a specified way things are at a particular time *t,* the way things go thereafter is fixed as a matter of natural law." The main point here is that, if determinism is true, then the way things are at one time combined with the laws of nature is enough to guarantee that the world will be a certain way in the future. Or, to put it another way, past events guarantee future events.[5]

The reader may wonder about the connection between the accuracy of Rambaldi's prophecies and determinism, and how strong the link between the two is. Rambaldi's prophecies do not ensure that the *Alias* universe is deterministic, for it is possible that Rambaldi was incredibly lucky, or that his prophecies were vague enough that they were very easy to fulfill. Because there are possibilities besides determinism to explain the accuracy of Rambaldi's prophecies, it is important to understand the relationship between the prophecies and determinism and to see how strong that relationship is.

What exactly is the argument from the truth of Rambaldi's prophecies to determinism? How does one get from the accuracy of prophecy to deter-

minism? The answer is that one can use abductive reasoning (also known as "explanatory reasoning") to make the inference from "Rambaldi's prophecies were overwhelmingly accurate" to "I have reason to believe that the *Alias* universe is deterministic." A schema for this kind of inference was laid out by C. S. Peirce:

> The surprising fact *C* is observed;
> But if *A* were true, *C* would be a matter of course,
> Hence, there is reason to suspect that *A* is true.[6]

The basic idea behind such a mode of inference is that some hypothesis *A* explains some surprising fact *C* if the truth of *A* would make *C* something that we would expect. *A*'s ability to explain *C* gives us reason to suspect that *A* is true. In the case at hand, the surprising fact is that Rambaldi's prophecies were almost universally true. This is quite a surprising fact, but we would expect it to be true if the *Alias* universe were deterministic. If the state of the world when Rambaldi lived were enough to fix all future events, then Rambaldi may have made observations that, combined with a deep understanding of the laws of nature, would have been enough for him to predict the outcome of future events. Because determinism would nicely explain the accuracy of Rambaldi's prophecies, we have reason to suspect that determinism is true. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I refer to this as the *explanation from determinism*.[7]

I hope the preceding is enough for the reader to understand the argument for determinism; the main thrust is that determinism explains the accuracy of Rambaldi's prophecies, and this gives us reason to suspect that determinism is true of the *Alias* universe. However, this may not be enough on its own; although it may give us reason to suspect that determinism is true, we need to ask whether determinism is the *best* explanation for the accuracy of Rambaldi's prophecies. If there is a better explanation, then we should adopt that instead of the explanation from determinism.

Prophecies and Scope

I contend that there is a better explanation for the accuracy of Rambaldi's prophecies: they were self-fulfilling prophecies. In order to determine which explanation is better, we must determine how good of an explanation determinism is for the facts at hand. One useful criterion in determining

the value of an explanation is *scope.* Specifically, it is useful to see whether a particular explanation explains *all* of the facts that need explanation, or just *some* of those facts.[8]

When considering this with respect to *Alias,* it seems that there are at least some prophecies for which the explanation from determinism fails to account. Specifically, not all of Rambaldi's prophecies came true. Near the end of season 4, there were two prophecies that we learned about that did not come true. These were Il Diluvio, and Rambaldi's prediction of a battle between the Chosen One (Sydney Bristow) and the Passenger (Sydney's half sister Nadia Santos).

Il Diluvio (The Flood) was a prophecy in which Rambaldi "imagined a moment when the world would be cleansed; when everything would begin anew." Rambaldi believed that there would be an apocalypse, and a conversation between Sydney's mother and father (Irina Derevko and Jack Bristow) suggests that Rambaldi gave instructions as to how the flood should occur. At the end of season 4, Elena Derevko (Irina's sister, who is also involved in organized crime) attempted to fulfill the prophecy by building a giant Mueller device in Sovogda and using a Russian satellite to broadcast its frequency worldwide. This broadcast, combined with the intake of tainted water provided by Arvin Sloane's charitable organization Omnifam, would turn everyone who drank the water into rage-filled subhumans who would attack and kill each other and also kill those who were not infected by the tainted water. Additionally, Elena expected the Russian government to bomb Sovogda, dispersing toxins from the Mueller device into the atmosphere, with potentially catastrophic results.[9]

After learning about Elena's plan, a team consisting of APO members Sydney Bristow, Nadia Santos, Jack Bristow, and Michael Vaughn go to Sovogda to stop Elena Derevko. They are later joined by Rambaldi follower Arvin Sloane (whose roles in the show include leader of SD-6, head of Omnifam, and director of black-ops organization APO). With the assistance of tech expert Marshall Flinkman and APO's Eric Weiss, the group is able to disable the Mueller device and thwart Elena's plan, thus foiling Il Diluvio.

The second of Rambaldi's failed prophecies involves the predicted battle between the Chosen One and the Passenger. According to Irina, Rambaldi wrote that "when blood-red horses wander the streets and angels fall from the sky, the Chosen One and the Passenger will clash and only one of them will survive." Irina and Jack see a white horse that looks red due to the reflection of light from the Mueller device. Later, Nadia, who has become sepa-

rated from the rest of the group, sees angel statues that have fallen from their perches atop buildings. Thus the antecedent conditions of the prophecy (red horses and falling angels) are met. However, when an infected Nadia attacks Sydney atop Elena Derevko's hideout, Sydney chooses not to kill Nadia; instead she attempts to subdue Nadia without killing her. Nadia is later shot by Sloane, causing her to fall into a coma. She survives this, however, and is later revived. Sydney, of course, survives the clash as well.[10]

Both of these major events demonstrate that Rambaldi's predictions were not always accurate, and they serve as counterexamples to the explanation from determinism. The explanation from determinism suggests that Rambaldi's prophecies were inerrant due to what seems to be perfect knowledge of the state of the world and the laws of nature. The explanation from determinism resembles a scientific theory, and as such we can use the theory to make predictions and then test those predictions to see if the theory is accurate. The explanation from determinism predicts that Rambaldi's prophecies will be inerrant. However, the fact that his prophecies do contain errors suggests that there is a flaw in the explanation from determinism.

Although Rambaldi's inaccurate prophecies demonstrate a flaw in the explanation from determinism, they are not in themselves sufficient to give us good reason to reject the theory. The reason for this is that the theory may still be the best explanation for the facts at hand, even if it does not perfectly explain all of the facts. In order to reject the theory, then, it is necessary to provide an alternative theory that is better than the explanation from determinism. I contend that an alternative explanation, which I call the *explanation from self-fulfilling prophecy* (or the explanation from SFP), is preferable to the explanation from determinism.[11]

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

A self-fulfilling prophecy is a prophecy that would not be made true if the prophecy had not been made. In other words, it is a "*false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come *true*."[12] Thus self-fulfilling prophecies predict events that would not necessarily occur; however, these events end up occurring because the prophecy itself induces behavior that makes the prophecy come true.

An example of a self-fulfilling prophecy can be seen in another J. J. Abrams work, *Lost.* In *Lost,* John Locke is told by many people on the island that he is special and destined for great things. Locke eventually believes

them, and through this he gains the confidence that the island has a destiny for him. Because of this confidence, he eventually becomes the leader of the Others and many of the occurrences on the island are the direct result of Locke's unwavering belief in his own importance. If these things would not have happened had Locke not been told of his importance, then the predictions people made about Locke are self-fulfilling prophecies.

The explanation from SFP holds that Rambaldi's prophecies came true because people who were aware of those prophecies behaved in ways that would ensure their truth. It grants that Rambaldi had a vast knowledge of the state of the world and of the laws of nature, but it claims that such knowledge is not sufficient to have ensured the validity of his prophecies. Rather, the prophecies needed to be fulfilled by followers of Rambaldi who wished to bring them to fruition.

To put this within the framework of the abductive schema described earlier, the explanation from SFP starts with the same surprising fact (that many of Rambaldi's prophecies came true) but, rather than attributing this to determinism, it attributes this to the choices made by people to make those prophecies come true. That is, it is a surprising fact that Rambaldi's prophecies came true, but, if it were true that followers of Rambaldi made those prophecies come true (the SFP view), then we would expect those prophecies to come true as a matter of course. Hence there is good reason to believe that the explanation from SFP is true.

Like the explanation from determinism, the explanation from SFP makes certain predictions that we can test. Specifically, it predicts two things: (1) there will be several cases in which Rambaldi's prophecies were unlikely to come true but were made true due to the choices made by followers of Rambaldi, and (2) we might find cases where followers of Rambaldi (or others) made choices that falsified his prophecies. We will start by examining some prophecies to see if (1) is the case.

Of Clockmakers and Everlasting Life

Early in season 1, Sydney goes to see a clockmaker who is reputed to be the descendant of Giovano Donato, the only person with whom Rambaldi ever collaborated. Donato's descendant tells Sydney that Rambaldi predicted Donato's death. He also inadvertently reveals that he is not a descendant of Donato but is Donato himself. After Donato repairs the clock that Sydney brought for him, he stands up and tells her, "It is over." When he stands, he

comes between Sydney and the only window into his apartment and is shot and killed by a sniper who was aiming for Sydney.

It seems fairly clear that this is an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rambaldi presumably knew that people would want to determine the purpose for his clock and would need to take it to Donato to fix it. Additionally, Rambaldi likely suspected that those who wanted the clock fixed would have nefarious purposes in doing so. Donato, knowing that he had fulfilled the purpose that Rambaldi had set out for him, intentionally blocked the only viewpoint to Sydney and to the clock itself. The sniper who shot Donato waited until the clock was finished before shooting, presumably because he was aware of the importance of the clock.[13]

Another of Rambaldi's prophecies is one that Sloane referred to during an expedition to find a Rambaldi artifact, which occurred in between seasons 3 and 4. Sloane tells Nadia, "Rambaldi wrote that a man would come and discover the true meaning of his work, and in doing so would change the world. I always wanted to be that man." Sloane does, in fact, become that man, as he eventually becomes the only one to take advantage of Rambaldi's greatest achievement, which was everlasting life. However, he does so largely because of the prophecy. Were Sloane not to have read Rambaldi's prophecies (including the one quoted above), then it is exceedingly unlikely that he ever would have become involved with the followers of Rambaldi and brought Rambaldi's works to fruition. It is because the prophecy modified Sloane's behavior that it came true, and thus it clearly fits the above definition of a self-fulfilling prophecy.[14]

The reader may still be skeptical at this point about the explanation from SFP, so I will consider Rambaldi's most prominent prophecy, found on page 47 of his manuscript. The text of page 47 reads, "This woman here depicted [the Chosen One] will possess unseen marks, signs that she will be the one to bring forth my works: bind them with fury, a burning anger. Unless prevented, at vulgar cost, this woman will render the greatest power unto utter desolation. This woman, without pretense, will have had her effect, never having seen the beauty of my sky behind Mount Subasio." The woman referred to in the prophecy is widely believed to be Sydney Bristow, as she possesses the unseen marks Rambaldi describes in the prophecy.[15]

When Sydney first hears about the prophecy, she attempts to render it false by going to Mount Subasio. However, we discover in the series finale that Sydney misinterpreted the prophecy (or, at least, that Sloane believes she did). Sydney, in an attempt to stop Sloane from completing Rambaldi's

work, tracks him to Mount Subasio. She finds him in a cavern in the mountain, where he reveals that the term "my sky" in the prophecy referred to marks on an ice cavern created when sun shone through an amulet that belonged to Rambaldi. He then tells Sydney that he is sorry and that this isn't his choice, but she "is not allowed to see this." Sloane then shoots the ice beneath Sydney's feet, causing her to fall through it.

Though Sloane claimed that he had no choice in the matter, it seems clear that he did. It is because Sloane knew that the prophecy specifically said that the Chosen One would never have seen Rambaldi's sky behind Mount Subasio that he shot the ground beneath Sydney's feet, preventing her from seeing it. Thus it was the prophecy itself that changed Sloane's behavior in this case, causing him to prevent Sydney from seeing the sky and thus making the prophecy true. Thus the prophecy from page 47 is another example of a self-fulfilling prophecy.[16]

Although I cannot discuss all of Rambaldi's prophecies due to space considerations, I hope that the prophecies I have discussed are sufficient to convince the reader that the explanation from SFP is as plausible an explanation of the accuracy of Rambaldi's prophecies as the explanation from determinism. Since both explanations could plausibly explain the accuracy of Rambaldi's true prophecies, we must look to Rambaldi's false prophecies to determine which of the two theories is to be preferred.

The explanation from determinism fails to explain Rambaldi's false prophecies. However, the explanation from SFP does provide an explanation. Specifically, it gives us the resources to understand what it was that made some of Rambaldi's prophecies false. Il Diluvio became false through the actions of the team from APO that stopped Elena Derevko. It was through their choices that Il Diluvio never took place. In these cases, the behavioral changes caused by Rambaldi's followers' awareness of the prophecies were insufficient to make those prophecies come true, because there was strong opposition on the other side. In the case of Rambaldi's prediction of a clash between Sydney and Nadia, it was Sydney's choice not to kill Nadia that made the prophecy not come true. Again, we see that the key factor in preventing the prophecy from being realized was a character's conscious choice.

The preceding discussion has shown that the accuracy of Rambaldi's predictions is insufficient to establish that the *Alias* universe is deterministic. I have provided an alternative explanation for the accuracy of those predictions (the explanation from SFP) and shown that it can explain more than the explanation from determinism. Thus, one ought to prefer the

explanation from SFP to the explanation from determinism, and therefore Rambaldi's accurate prophecies do not give sufficient reason to accept that determinism is true.

Free Will

Although the reader may think that the preceding discussion has been sufficient to show that it is reasonable to believe that the inhabitants of the *Alias* universe are morally responsible, it has not quite done so. In contemporary philosophical discussion, the notions of free will (which is taken to be a necessary condition for moral responsibility) and determinism come apart. Thus, showing that there is no good reason to believe that the *Alias* universe is deterministic is not sufficient to show that the characters in the show have the kind of free will required for moral responsibility. All that we have shown thus far is that it is an open question whether the *Alias* universe is deterministic.

However, some philosophers hold that, even if determinism is an open question, we do not have the kind of free will required for moral responsibility. Thus, while the preceding discussion of determinism may have been enough to convince those philosophers who adhere to incompatibilism that the characters in *Alias* have free will, convincing others will require a further step. This further step requires establishing the claim that the characters in *Alias* have the kind of free will that is required for moral responsibility. It will help to first clarify exactly what kind of free will is required for moral responsibility.[17]

A standard philosophical definition of the kind of free will required for moral responsibility is that a person has free will in making some decision (say, for example, choosing to watch an episode of *Alias* rather than *Cloverfield*) if she or he could have chosen otherwise. However, such a definition seems unusable for our purposes. It is difficult in the real world to determine whether people could have chosen otherwise (which is why philosophers are still puzzling over the free will question, despite over two thousand years of work on it); it is even more difficult to determine whether the characters in the fictional world of *Alias* could have chosen otherwise, for we do not have the access to their world that would be required for such determinations.

Many of the arguments in favor of free will are arguments that make use of an individual's personal experience. On these arguments, part of

the reason one has for believing that one has free will is that one experiences life as if one has free will. Because neither I nor the reader is part of the *Alias* universe, and because none of the characters who inhabit that world have said that they experience life as if they have free will, it is not possible to use personal experience to determine whether or not the characters are free.[18]

Volitions and Desires

I will instead use an alternative philosophical definition of free will, provided by Harry Frankfurt, which holds that an individual has the kind of will necessary for moral responsibility if that individual has *second-order volitions.* In order to understand second-order volitions, it is first necessary to understand *second-order desires.* Second-order desires are those desires that are about other desires. For example, suppose I have a desire to own a Mueller device. That is what is called a *first-order desire.* It is a desire about some object that I want (the object need not be physical, as in the case of a first-order desire to be loved).[19]

A second-order desire is a desire that has as its object a first-order desire. So, if I think that the Mueller device is a terrible plague on humanity and I have a desire not to desire it, then I would have a second-order desire. Second-order volition is a companion to a second-order desire; the relationship between "volition" and "desire" is that volition involves one's will, whereas desire involves only a mental state. Volition is the process by which one who has desires satisfies them; it is the process that one uses to commit to a particular course of action that satisfies one's desire. A second-order volition, then, involves using one's will to commit to (or to not commit to) satisfying some second-order desire.

Frankfurt argues that second-order volitions are the condition that is necessary for freedom of the will, and that freedom of action (the ability to choose otherwise than one has chosen) is insufficient for moral responsibility. Animals, for example, can choose to run in any direction they want; however, this is insufficient to show that animals have the type of will required for moral responsibility. Freedom of the will thus requires something stronger. Frankfurt argues that this something stronger is the freedom "to will what [one] wants to will, or to have the will he wants." A person exercises his or her free will by conforming his or her will to those second-order volitions.[20]

Sloane's Free Will

At this point a question presents itself: We do not have access to any of the characters' inner workings, so how can we determine whether or not they have second-order desires, second-order volitions, and the ability to align their will with those second-order volitions? We can do so by examining the relationship between Arvin Sloane and his hallucinations of his dead daughter Nadia in season 5. Nadia, being a hallucination of Sloane's, gives us some insight into the inner workings of his mind. Although establishing that Sloane has free will is insufficient to demonstrate that all of the characters in the show have free will, it at least gives a good reason to believe that the remaining inhabitants of the *Alias* universe have the kind of free will required for moral responsibility.

Nadia begins season 5 in a coma. Sloane, by making a deal with a shadowy organization of Rambaldi followers called Prophet Five, secures a substance that, when injected into Nadia, wakes her from her coma. Nadia later goes to Sloane's house for a visit and discovers that Sloane is still obsessed with Rambaldi after seeing that he still has a copy of page 47 from the Rambaldi manuscript. She demands that Sloane choose between her and his obsession with Rambaldi and throws the page into the fire. In Sloane's attempt to recover the page before it burns, he pushes Nadia out of the way and she falls through a glass table. The cuts she sustains from the glass are fatal, and she bleeds to death.[21]

After Nadia's death, Sloane begins to have hallucinations of her. Sloane's hallucination advises Sloane against trying to betray Prophet Five, which is holding Sloane captive and forcing him to decode a Rambaldi manuscript. Sloane here has a first-order desire to betray Prophet Five, but the hallucination of Nadia suggests that he is conflicted about that desire. Additionally, the hallucination of Nadia tells Sloane that the reason he is hallucinating about her is because he wants both to have his daughter alive and to fulfill his obsession with Rambaldi. Nadia is haunting Sloane because he wants her to haunt him.[22]

It is clear from this discussion that Sloane has a first-order desire to be with his daughter. However, the accusatory way in which he asks her why she is there has a subtext: Sloane is not really asking his hallucination why she is there. Rather, he is telling her to go away. This reveals a second-order desire to want to not be haunted by Nadia. This second-order desire is additionally revealed through Sloane's actions with respect to Prophet Five. He

continues his obsession with Rambaldi; it seems that his renewed fervor reveals his desire to choose Rambaldi over Nadia. This desire is closely connected with Sloane's second-order desire that Nadia go away. By choosing a course of action that he believes will fulfill this second-order desire, Sloane reveals a second-order volition. Because Sloane has a second-order volition, he meets Frankfurt's condition for freedom of the will, and therefore Sloane has a free will.

We see Sloane's second-order volition elsewhere as well. Near the end of season 2, Sloane, while discussing Rambaldi with Irina, tells her that he wishes he had "never heard that man's name." Sloane's previous actions have shown an obvious desire to follow Rambaldi's plan by realizing Rambaldi's prophecies. However, here he is showing that he wishes he did not have such a desire. Additionally, his actions in the next episode show that he is willing himself to satisfy his second-order desire. Sloane journeys to the Himalayas, where he meets with the monk who originally sent him on the Rambaldi quest. It is at this point that Sloane makes his will fully conform with his second-order desire to not want to desire to bring Rambaldi's prophecies to fruition. He forsakes his quest to follow Rambaldi, and in doing so reveals his free will.[23]

Thus Sloane has free will. Sloane's free will is the type required for moral responsibility, and thus Sloane is morally responsible for what he does. Although Sloane's moral responsibility does not guarantee that other inhabitants of the *Alias* universe are morally responsible, it suggests that they are, for it would be quite strange if Sloane was the only character inhabiting the *Alias* universe who has free will.

The Implications of Free Will

Now that I have shown that the characters in *Alias* have free will, it may be worthwhile to consider the implications of this. Recall that in the beginning of this chapter I explained that one of the reasons we watch television shows like *Alias* is to learn more about ourselves. We put ourselves in the shoes of the characters and use them as tools to make moral evaluations of ourselves. However, the challenge posed by Rambaldi's accurate prophecies was that such moral evaluation was not possible if the characters themselves were not morally responsible. Having shown that the characters are morally responsible, then, has also shown that it is legitimate for us to use *Alias* for the purpose of evaluating our own moral character. I hope that the reader

will indeed work to intentionally realize this purpose, as the moral conundrums posed by the show are quite fascinating, and I have found it worthwhile at times to evaluate myself by placing myself in the characters' shoes.

Notes

1. See Jamie Carlin Watson and Robert Arp, *What's Good on TV? Understanding Ethics through Television* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2011). I owe a large debt to the anonymous contributors who compiled the information at the *Alias* Wiki, found at http://alias.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page; their wealth of *Alias* information made my research much easier than it otherwise would have been.

2. The quotation in this paragraph can be found many places, including "Lady Bird Johnson Quotes," About.com Women's History, http://womenshistory.about.com/od/quotes/a/ladybirdjohnson.htm.

3. I should note here that we're talking about notions of free will and determinism within the scope of the *Alias* universe, rather than within the scope of the universe of the viewer. The characters in the show do not have free will when considered from this latter universe; their actions, words, and choices are made for them by writers. The show itself is deterministic; because it was scripted, things could not have unfolded otherwise. But within the scope of the *Alias* universe, it is an open question whether the characters have free will and whether the universe is deterministic. I hope the distinction is clear from this brief explanation; if not, it may help the reader to imagine that the events and characters in *Alias* are real and that we have access to their reality through our TV. For philosophical discussions of freedom and determinism, see Laura Waddell Ekstrom, *Agency and Responsibility* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); Gary Watson, *Free Will* (New York: Oxford, 2003); John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, S.J., *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will* (New York: Oxford, 2003); and the chapter on freedom and determinism in Robert Arp and Jamie Carlin Watson, *Philosophy DeMYSTiFieD* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers, 2011).

4. In the season 1, episode "Q&A," CIA agent Steven Haladki claims that the CIA has decoded forty-seven Rambaldi prophecies, all of which came true. We will also see examples of Rambaldi prophecies that came true later in this chapter.

5. The definition of determinism comes from Carl Hoefer, "Causal Determinism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/determinism-causal/. Although philosophical literature abounds with various different definitions of causal determinism, the one given here will suffice for our purposes, as it captures the essence of the other definitions. There are some terms in the definition that may be explained in more detail, and I encourage interested readers to look at the Hoefer article for more explanation.

6. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism," in *Collected Papers,* vol. 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), paragraphs 188–89, http://www.textlog.de/7664–2.html.

7. The explanation from determinism has the added advantage of explaining Rambaldi's ability to design scientific works that were hundreds of years ahead of their time, such as the Mueller device (the device with the floating red ball first seen in season 1, "Truth Be Told") and the music box that encoded a formula for zero-point energy (seen in season 3, "Cipher" and "Dead Drop"). If he had a deep understanding of the laws of nature, then he presumably could have used that understanding to design such devices.

8. Readers who are interested in the kinds of considerations that recommend one explanation over another are encouraged to look at Paul Thagard, "The Best Explanation: Criteria for Theory Choice," *Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 2 (1978): 76–92; as well as Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (New York: Routledge, 1991); and Eric Barnes, "Inference to the Loveliest Explanation," *Synthese* 103, no. 2 (1995): 251–77. The criterion to which we are appealing here is similar to what Thagard calls "consilience" and what Barnes calls "the precision criterion," both of which have to do with the scope of an explanation.

9. The information about Il Diluvio comes from season 4, "Search & Rescue" and "Before the Flood."

10. There is good reason to believe that this prophecy refers to Sydney and Nadia. Sydney matches the anomalies Rambaldi attributed to the Chosen One on page 47 of his manuscript (her DNA sequencing, platelet levels, and the size of her heart were all described by Rambaldi) in season 1's "Page 47." Nadia is capable of doing things that Rambaldi attributed to the Passenger, such as transcribing a message from Rambaldi in season 3, "Blood Ties" and "Resurrection," and being able to retrieve the Sphere of Life in season 4, "The Descent." The quotation in this paragraph is from season 4, "Before the Blood."

11. Though the reader may find it counterintuitive that we should continue to believe a theory that we know is flawed, a brief examination of the history of science shows that this is actually how science frequently functions. For example, Aristotle's dynamics and Ptolemy's geocentric model of the solar system were both widely held beliefs among scholars in the pre-Copernican era, despite known problems. Today, physicists still use the theory of general relativity despite its inability to account for observed phenomena like quantum entanglement. Interested readers are advised to consult Timothy McGrew, Marc Alspector-Kelly, and Fritz Allhoff, *Philosophy of Science: An Historical Anthology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); and Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

12. Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 477.

13. The scene with Sydney and Donato occurs in season 1, "Time Will Tell."

14. Sloane discusses this prophecy in a flashback where he and Nadia search for a

Rambaldi device called the Sphere of Life in season 4, "The Descent." He gains immortality through the works of Rambaldi in season 5, "All the Time in the World."

15. The text of the prophecy is first given in season 1, "The Prophecy," and repeated several times throughout the series.

16. Sydney first goes to Mount Subasio in season 1, "Masquerade." The rest of the references in this paragraph are from season 5, "Reprisal."

17. Incompatibilists are those who hold that free will exists if and only if determinism is false. Two examples of contemporary philosophers who hold the view that free will is an illusion regardless of whether causal determinism is true are Galen Strawson and Derek Pereboom. See Galen Strawson, "The Bounds of Freedom," in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will,* ed. Robert Kane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 441–59; and Derek Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xvii–xix.

18. For an example of a philosopher who uses one's personal experience of apparent freedom to argue for free will, see C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967).

19. Frankfurt's view can be found in his "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5–20.

20. For a more detailed discussion, see Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will."

21. This action all occurs in season 5, "30 seconds."

22. Nadia appears to Sloane in season 5, "I See Dead People" and "No Hard Feelings."

23. Sloane's discussion with Irina takes place in season 2, "Endgame." He sees the monk in season 2, "Countdown."

Finding Directions by Indirection

The Island as a Blank Slate

Elly Vintiadis and Spyros D. Petrounakos

What is striking about *Lost* is the extent to which it challenges what we take for granted. This in itself may be of no philosophical importance. But through its explicit use of philosophers' names and themes of philosophical importance like free will vs. determinism, faith vs. reason, time, causation and so on, *Lost* would make any philosophically inclined viewer try to find philosophical connections. Such was the case with us, as we found ourselves attracted initially to the centrality of the character of John Locke. Having made the connection with the epistemology of the philosopher John Locke, we gradually realized that epistemological questions are raised through both the content and the form of the show, for both the characters and the audience of *Lost.* Further thought on the characters of John Locke and Desmond Hume as the plot unfolded led us to the rationalist-empiricist debate and to the concept of a blank slate. This debate has left an indelible mark in the history of Western philosophy, as any student of epistemology can attest.[1] This chapter presents our thoughts on these issues, in keeping with the title of the present volume, which we understand as gesturing also toward the attitudes, aims, and ambitions of J. J. Abrams and his team as they worked on the project of *Lost.* Of course, we do not think that *Lost,* or any show for that matter, can (or aims to) exhaust these debates. But as philosophers, we will use the show to try to illustrate some of aspects of these debates for the nonspecialist reader. As fans—as Losties ourselves—we will also try to bring forth how groundbreaking we believe the show to be.

The Rationalist-Empiricist Debate

When the philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) wrote his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* one of the main questions that preoccupied thinkers

concerned, on the one hand, the source and the limits of knowledge and, on the other, the role that reason, the senses, and faith play in its acquisition.[2] In part this was a result of the prominence and the promises of the nascent new science, which challenged many people's long-standing and deeply entrenched beliefs. Prior to John Locke, the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) had maintained (as Plato and the Scholastics had done previously) that reason is the source of knowledge, justification, and truth and that at birth the human mind comes equipped with certain innate ideas, such as that of God.[3] Because of the central role allotted to the faculty of reason in the attainment of knowledge, the school of thought that Descartes represents is called rationalism (from *ratio,* the Latin word for reason). In contrast, Locke belongs to the rival school of the British empiricists, who believed that we come into this world without any innate ideas but, instead, our mind is furnished by experience, from which we gradually build the entire edifice of our knowledge. This idea is encapsulated in Locke's view that at birth the human mind is a blank slate, a tabula rasa, on which experience is written. But it is important to note that for Locke experience has a dual aspect: we experience the external world through our sensations and we experience our own minds through reflection. By combining these two natural faculties of sensation and reflection we become aware of the agreement or disagreement between our ideas and acquire knowledge.

If we now turn to *Lost,* we see that from the very beginning we are introduced to a duality through two main characters, Jack Shephard and John Locke. Jack is the doctor, the man of science who strongly believes in the empiricist idea of the importance of the senses in the acquisition of knowledge. Jack quickly assumes, de facto, the role of the leader—a move that reflects the assumed predominance and importance of factual, empirical knowledge within the community of survivors. Yet quickly Jack finds a rival in John Locke, who, despite his name, is the man of faith. In a group that must survive in a foreign and hostile terrain, the leader is called upon to make sense of the new environment and situation. By positioning Locke and Jack in the role of leaders, the show immediately presents a dilemma for both viewers and characters as to whom it would be best to follow. The dilemma is intrinsically connected to the question of what is the right way of acquiring knowledge of the world. This is a theme that recurs in the series, and two prominent examples immediately come to mind. The first example is in the second season episode "Man of Science, Man of Faith," which deals directly with the question of whether it is science or faith that is to be

trusted in decision making. This is reflected in the question raised by Jack's hesitation, in the face of Locke's immediate acceptance, about whether the survivors should continue inputting the numbers in the computer. The second example occurs in the fifth season episode "Dead is Dead," in which Ben, Locke, and Sun set out for the temple to find the smoke monster that must judge Ben. En route Ben asks Locke how he knows where to find the smoke monster, to which Locke, in a turn of phrase that has become something of a character trademark, says, "I just know." But Ben insists, posing the prototypical question of knowledge acquisition: "Did it come upon you gradually, or did you wake up one morning suddenly understanding the mysteries of the universe?"[4]

Indeed, the backbone of the plot revolves on the antithesis of these two leading figures and, in turn, on these two ways of seeing the world and the human mind. When Jack tries to set down the rules that he regards as appropriate for their new environment and the crucial issue of survival, Locke, who represents the rationalist stance on the island, opposes him and follows his gut instinct, an intuition that comes in the form of an unshakeable foundation of a newfound faith. It is through this faith that Locke, who started out from Sydney as a disillusioned cripple, finds meaning on the island. After all, one should not forget that his life on the island begins with what, as far as he is concerned, is a miracle. And it is through this faith that he becomes a catalyst for all that follows. Jack, on the other hand, as someone who bases his decisions on evidence, like any good empiricist would, lacks Locke's unshakeable certainty.

Above, we noted that for Locke the philosopher we come to know the world through ideas in our minds based on our sensory input. This means that ultimately our knowledge cannot extend beyond what is given to us by our senses and our reflection on their input. Note, however, that the question regarding the sources of knowledge is an important one because its answer circumscribes what we can have knowledge of. Since our senses are not only limited but also fallible, if knowledge comes from the senses, all we can be certain of is what we perceive to be the case and not what is the case, independently of perception. What is the case is inaccessible to us because we cannot transcend our senses and compare the world to our experiences. So while empiricism can give us certainty about what our senses tell us, it leaves us in the unfortunate predicament of never being able to reach certainty about the nature of the world—and this skepticism is the price that empiricists have to pay. In line with this, in *Lost* we see that Jack

is tormented by doubt about the correctness of his beliefs but knows full well that his beliefs, especially within the island's environment, are open to falsification at every turn. In contrast to this, Locke exhibits the absolute, but also subjective, certainty of faith.

According to the philosopher Locke, when knowledge of something can be acquired through sense perception and reasoning there is no real question of whether we should turn to faith or intuition for answers. But as we noted, empirically gained knowledge is limited, so faith does have a role to play, according to Locke, when we reach the bounds of reason (and the senses). Thus he writes, "That the dead shall rise, and live again: These and the like, being Beyond the Discovery of Reason, are purely matters of Faith; with which Reason has nothing to do." Yet even in cases where we have to rely on faith, "it still belongs to Reason, to judge of the truth of its being a Revelation, and of the significance of the Words, wherein it is delivered." Locke defines faith in terms of revelation and opposes blind acceptance of anything that is presented as a revelation, insisting instead that we impose the constrains of reason and evidence when it comes to deciding whether something is in fact a genuine revelation or not. Otherwise faith is nothing but an unfounded "enthusiasm," something like the blind faith of a religious fanatic.[5]

Throughout its course, *Lost* adopts a critical stance toward the strict empiricism of science viewed as the only, or the best, path to knowledge. Through the crucial role that faith and intuition play in the show and the tormenting doubt of Jack the empiricist, before his change of heart, the message seems to be that reliance on experience alone makes us miss something essential. From this perspective, faith can be seen as a catalyst, something that sets the wheels of action back in motion: It is Locke's faith that everything happens for a reason that is critical in finding and entering the hatch as well as in stopping the survivors' time travel, whereas his temporary loss of faith causes the first discharge of electromagnetic energy when he stops inputting the numbers into the computer. Again, it is Locke's death that brings them all back to the island, and near the end we find Jack admitting that Locke was right. Recall also that the lamppost to which the Oceanic Six go to find the way back to the island is situated beneath a church, appropriately so since the mystical emerges as the main force on the island and, one is led to assume, in life as well.

But it is not Locke who saves the island and the other survivors. And so it seems that, in the end, there is another sort of faith that is rewarded

in *Lost.* It is Jack who saves the island and the others and who comes by his faith in the way prescribed by Locke the empiricist philosopher: gradually and only when no other rational options are available—that is, after he has left the island, returned to it, seen the mirror in the lighthouse, and talked to Jacob. In the episode "316" Ben tells Jack that what was really great about Thomas the Apostle was his doubt and that he was convinced of the resurrection only when he touched Christ's wounds. Like Thomas, Jack arrives at faith by weighing the evidence. And it is this "nonenthusiastic" form of faith that Jack painstakingly arrives at that transforms him from an arrogant doctor into the man who performs the ultimate act of faith, self-sacrifice, and, in the end, saves the other survivors and the island. Of course, early on John Locke had told Jack that faith had never been easy for him, but we assume that that meant having faith in his previous life—it seems that believing in the island came easy after he was healed. In a sense, then, Jack's empiricism broadens and, without abandoning his beliefs as a man of science, his empiricism proceeds by indirection to arrive at the only epistemological route that can help make sense of the island: a grounded faith.

Overwhelming Reasons to Doubt

This kind of faith is contrasted with Locke's enthusiastic form of blind faith that is close to the kind expounded by the Danish existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). For Kierkegaard having faith (as also being in love) is not something we decide to do by weighing evidence. Faith is not hope that something will turn out to be true. Rather, it is believing in something though one understands at the same time that there are overwhelming reasons to doubt it. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard sees faith as by its nature paradoxical, because the "leap of faith" is conscious resignation to the completely uncertain and unknown. The details are not important in the present context; what is, is the different kinds of faith exhibited by Jack and Locke and the fact that in the end it is not a blind leap of faith that is the way to salvation but a faith reached via an empirical route.[6]

So though it initially looks as if faith is contrasted to science in *Lost,* upon closer scrutiny it is two kinds of faith that are contrasted with each other and empirically informed faith, though paradoxical, is the one that comes through as being more substantial. In "The Last Recruit" the Man in Black expresses this view when he tells Jack that he took over the body of the dead Locke because he was not a believer but a sucker who was stupid

enough to believe and die for the idea that on the island everything happens for a reason. The creators of *Lost* seem to be telling us here that, as Ben tells Jack, "Sooner or later everyone is convinced." The residual question then concerns the kind of faith that will lead us to the truth. *Lost* here echoes Bertrand Russell when he wrote, "It is not what the man of science believes that distinguishes him but how and why he believes it."[7]

Beyond the philosophical concept as we find it in Locke's epistemology there is another way that the notion of a blank slate is used in everyday contexts, and that is to signify a new beginning. This is the theme of the third episode of the first season, "Tabula Rasa," but it also underlies the entire series. Of course, the plane crash functions as a moment of rebirth, a new beginning in a new land among strangers where the past, in some respects, does not exist. For some, like Kate, Sawyer, and Charlie, this is a chance to reinvent their lives, unshackled from mistakes of the past. For others, like Locke, this is a new life as a physically able man.

But the media phenomenon that is *Lost* does not exhaust itself in its characters and plot. *Lost* breaks new ground in media history also because of its influence on reshaping audiences' perception of television. The metaphor of a blank slate as a new beginning serves us well in this context. So in what follows our focus is not the characters confronted by the island but the audience confronted with *Lost*.

The Audience: From Passive to Active Viewing

Beginning in the 1920s with the Frankfurt school, the dominant framework for understanding the relation of the audience to the medium of television was, for a number of decades, the behaviorist "effects" or "hypodermic" model. This stresses the effect that the medium has on the shaping of the audience's reception of the content of this medium and, in consequence, its thought and behavior. As the term "hypodermic" (which literally means "under the skin") implies, according to this view the audience approaches the media text as a blank slate and is a passive receptor that unquestioningly accepts whatever message the medium supplies. This model, prominent when the medium of television was fairly new, was subsequently challenged by a series of different theories. By the 1980s the general consensus was that the audience is active in its reception of the media text. According to the "active models," viewers filter, process, and interpret the input they get from the media given their backgrounds, history, gender, class, and so on and may

be users of the TV medium instead of being used by it. Though there are, of course, differing views concerning the level and the form of audience activity, the general idea is that the audience is now seen not as a passive but as an active decoder of the medium's message. It is a given, therefore, today, after at least three generations have grown up with television as an overarching and penetrative mass medium in their daily lives, that the audience for a TV show is not a blank slate awaiting the content of the TV medium. Rather, the audience comes to the show already equipped with a broad range of prior ideas about the medium and the message and thus with the decoding tools and expectations that such prior knowledge implies.[8]

Applying the metaphor of the blank slate, we can say that though the audience is not a blank slate in Locke's sense, it is in the metaphorical sense that *Lost* pushes the audience into a position in which preconceived ideas and expectations cease to apply. In doing this it compromises our (the viewers') ability to use our decoding tools to reason about the show, forcing us to adopt a more holistic attitude in our approach. It thus makes us revise and conceive anew our ideas about what it is to watch a show. Though we are definitely not the passive viewers of the effects model, we are no longer the confident navigators of the medium either. As Christian Shephard tells Jack at the very end, we have to "let go" in order to move on.

By now television has become a well-known medium, arguably the most resonant of all, and viewers are immersed in the television codes and conventions that are used to convey meaning. However, as *Lost* unfolds, and in so doing breaks with convention, we find ourselves repeatedly amending our tools for understanding the television text. Conventions are genre-specific, well-established narrative and audiovisual features of the television text that stories within a genre share, which help viewers navigate the story by indirectly telling them what to expect and what to look for. Typically, no matter how groundbreaking a TV show is, the narrative and visual conventions are laid down at its beginning in order to orient the viewer. Though the generic conventions of a series need not be exhaustively laid out, there are general patterns that one expects to find depending on the kind or genre of show. For instance, we expect menacing music in thrillers, technology that is not currently available (or not even plausibly possible) in science fiction shows, and, in a romantic comedy, that when boy meets girl, they will most probably not like each other but in the end will walk hand in hand into the sunset. Yet these conventions rely on prior experience that enables the viewer to learn to recognize

them. Breaking these conventions undercuts our ability to make inductive generalizations that help us understand the show and allow us to take part in the gradual build-up from the ground up until we reach the show's denouement. In what follows we will attempt to identify some of the conventions that are broken by *Lost*.

Characters

Lost has an unconventionally large number of main characters. Their identities and prominence change throughout the series: some main characters, like Walt and Michael (and, why not, Vincent), fade into the background and secondary characters like Miles, Richard, and Juliet become main characters, while new characters are introduced throughout the show—the tail-section survivors, the Others, the Dharma initiative, the freighter crew, the Temple residents. To make matters even more complicated, within this group and its shifting membership, the opposition of good-bad characters collapses along with our sense of the moral standing of each character—think of Ben, Locke, Sayid, and Whidmore. The overall effect is one of doubt as to whether such boundaries can be clearly drawn in the first place. Hence the development of sympathy for the protagonist—a standard element of popular culture, according to Noël Carroll—is also challenged by *Lost.* We are not even allowed the security of assuming that main characters such Libby, Boone, Charlie, Daniel Faraday, Eko, and Locke (all of whom die) are invulnerable.[9]

Still, the greatest innovation in this respect is the introduction of the island as a character in its own right from the very first season. It quickly becomes clear that the island is not just a backdrop for the action but is, in itself, an active narrative agent that affects the plot. Characters in the show repeatedly personify the island by referring to it as an agent: Locke tells Jack that the island brought them there; Eloise, who seems to have privileged access to information about the island, tells Desmond that the island has work for him to do; and in season 6 Ben tells Lapides, "The island still got you in the end." We are also given reasons to believe that the island has sympathies and antipathies, the most straightforward ones being that the island has healing properties but seems to be selective as to whom it will cure—it kills pregnant women and it did not cure Ben's spinal tumor nor Jack's appendicitis, but it cured Locke and Rose.

Genre

The genre that *Lost* belongs to is immediately identifiable, and this leaves us in a boat very much like Charlie's when he asks at the end of season 1, "Guys, where are we?" Though we anticipate a drama, as the show progresses elements of an adventure genre become increasingly frequent, until the show begins to transform itself into almost a science fiction series. There are elements of other genres too: Kate and Sawyer's relationship typifies the romance motif, as does Sawyer's character, who also brings to mind characters in historical dramas and period pieces, like Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and Charlie Allnut in *The African Queen.* Also, the number of characters, some of the characters' demises, and even more so their returns are classic conventions in soap operas but rarely found in other genres, though *Lost* successfully incorporates them within its intricate narrative.

Of course, there is a trend in television productions and films to play with genre boundaries. Genre-defining characteristics are not as hard and fast as they used to be, and more and more often we see new hybrid genres appearing, like dramedies (e.g., *Ally McBeal, Desperate Housewives, Ugly Betty*). In this sense viewers of *Lost* are perhaps much less in the dark than we make them out to be. It is true that by now genre transgression is indeed mainstream. Yet it becomes clear that the genre that *Lost* belongs to is neither classic nor hybrid. Rather, its genre identity shifts from season to season and sometimes from episode to episode. And in this *Lost* takes this trend of cross-genre experimentation to an entirely new level that is novel to the medium and not anticipated by the audience.

Narrative Technique

Lost is very complex and intentionally disorienting. It is not presented to the viewer as a story that progresses in a predictable manner through a beginning, a middle, and an end but begins as a puzzle that offers us hints in a non-linear fashion throughout the show from the plot's different time sequences. This changing narrative structure adds to the stratified and complex plot, making *Lost* an unconventional candidate for mainstream culture. Though accessibility and facility in understanding are not necessary requirements for acceptance by mainstream culture, they usually are present. *Lost,* through its huge cultural impact, plays a central role in transforming the core of our expectations and standards regarding popular culture.[10]

For the first two seasons—and for all of season 3 except the last episode—flashbacks that give us biographical information or snippets about the characters that we expect to be relevant to the plotline are interposed in scenes. Though analepsis and prolepsis (flashbacks and flash-forwards) are by no means uncommon as narrative techniques, the disorienting use they are put to in *Lost* is an innovation in itself: in their more common use, these narrative techniques have a clear function to which we are quickly introduced. A flashback is usually an interjected scene that gives us information about the background of a character or a story line that is essential to our understanding of the development of the character and the plot. Yet in *Lost* flashbacks often take up as much time as the story itself and, more often than not, they complicate the narrative further instead of providing answers to existing puzzles.

This use of narrative techniques to purposely perplex and intrigue the audience moves up a level with the introduction of flash-forwards in the season finale of season 3. There we are faced with no other option but to shift from our comfortable, by that point, handle on flashbacks to an understanding that what we are viewing is, first, scenes of things that have not yet, but will, occur and, second, an attempt to incorporate these in the plot itself. But we are not given any clue as to how either is to be done. Indeed, in the first flash-forward we see a bearded Jack in a state we have never seen him in before: drinking heavily, making heavy use of oxycodone pills that he has stolen from the hospital, living in a messy apartment, not allowed to operate—that is, we see him in a state of despair and personal disrepair, very much the opposite of the leader or composed doctor figure we were used to in the season 1 flashbacks. When he is thus introduced, though, we are not aware of the change in the format of the episode and, as a result, it is only at the very end that we realize that this is a peek into the future instead of the past. With the introduction of flash-sideways in season 6 it becomes clear that we are being intentionally befogged. We don't know what is happening and so we don't know how to amass information to make sense of it all. What is the timeline of the flash-sideways? Is it a parallel universe? Another possible world in which the plane did not crash? The flash-sideways leaves us once again in a blank-slate state in which we must gather clues anew, as the building-block process of evidence gathering collapses and we are forced once again to explore.

Furthermore, by making the island, that is to say the setting itself, a character in the show (as is the case in films such as *The Shining* and *Picnic*

at Hanging Rock), *Lost* introduces an innovation by including cinematic devices in television. This incorporation of cinematic aspects is also evident in the way that the show imposes itself on the viewers. Through its ever-shifting form, with its constant changes in narrative technique, in character focus, and in generic direction, the attempt to decipher the show's puzzles intensifies, and one is left wondering whether the way the show is presented is itself a aspect of the entire narrative.

Cross-media Scope

In line with the idea of finding directions by indirection, the cross-media references mentioned above are activated as soon as the show's narrative scope increases to include media other than television, giving the audience an even broader playing field in which to gather clues about the episodes. Alternative reality games that include Driveshaft's real website, which includes references to the untimely death of the young star, the Hanso Foundation (mentioned in the closing credits of *Mission: Impossible III*) site, and, of course, the book *Bad Twin* that Hurley is seen reading in "The Long Con" (available on Amazon and written by Gary Troup, who was lost in the plane crash) reflect aspects of the massive presence of *Lost* in other media. These are not merely extranarrative additions but are intended to increase our immersion into the narrative itself: we are given information on people and events in the show that the show itself has not revealed to us. Through these, we obtain further clues as to what we should be watching for in the show itself. This makes the experience of watching *Lost* at the time it was aired very different from the experience of watching it on DVD later.

But it also makes us reconceive the whole concept of a TV series. Even though it is true that with the Internet today no show is left unturned, the volume of *Lost*'s Internet presence has brought this element to a new dimension. Fan-related literature of the extent one sees with *Lost* was once exclusive to soap operas (and *Star Trek*). But even today, with a very strong Internet presence for shows like *Gossip Girl, Lost* stands apart in that its very complex narrative has made its fans use this extra content not just for entertainment or to communicate with other fans but to develop a clearer understanding of the plot. *Lost* demands from its viewers immersion into the plot, alertness, and extensive use of all available puzzle-solving tools. In this respect, in trying to find their way around the show, the viewers resemble the characters in the series itself. It often seems to require faith from us, faith that

this is leading somewhere and that at some point the entire picture will fall into place. We are also forced to tap into all sorts of auxiliary knowledge to unravel the meaning of the various clues: numbers, philosophers, literary and cultural references, anagrams. These often very obscure allusions, this inherent complication in *Lost,* the nonlinear plotline, and the involvement it requires from its audience were a departure from tradition in at least two ways. On the one hand, viewers are called upon to actively participate and to gather clues from content, presentation, and other media, a process that gives new meaning to the activity with which a viewer engages with a show. On the other hand, the knowledge and conventions viewers have to fall back on are of little use in that new horizon. So epistemologically we find ourselves facing a metaphorical blank slate and an expanded horizon of possibilities from which to begin building our knowledge again. Above we mentioned some of the ways in which *Lost* challenges our assumptions. It challenges our assumptions about the show, television, and mainstream culture through a narrative that tackles one of the most profound questions: What should I believe?[11]

Notes

1. Epistemology (Greek episteme, "knowledge" + Greek logos, "rational account") is the branch of Western philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge, justification for knowledge, forms of evidence, varieties of truth, and how we come to know and believe things about ourselves and reality as we perceive it, among other topics. Good introductions to epistemology include Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Matthias Steup, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995). A good introduction to the rationalist-empiricist debate in the history of Western philosophy is Anthony Kenny, *Rationalism, Empiricism and Idealism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). Also see the relevant papers and commentary in Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, eds., *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1998); Garrett Thomson, *Bacon to Kant: An Introduction to Modern Philosophy* (New York: Waveland Press, 2001).

2. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* ed. Pauline Phemister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

3. See René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy,* ed. David Weissman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

4. Some more examples: in "316" Locke says that it was fate that brought him to Jack and Jack retorts that is was mere probability, in "The Substitute" Ben refers to Locke as

"the man of faith," in "Orientation" Locke tells Jack that the reason they do not see eye to eye is that he is a man of faith whereas Jack is a man of science, and in "There's No Place Like Home, Part 2" Jack explicitly rejects the possibility of miracles when Locke claims that miracles take place on the island.

5. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* 4.18.8; also 4.19.

6. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

7. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 527.

8. David Morley, *Television Audiences and Culture Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992); Sonia Livingstone, "Audience Research at the Crossroads: The Implied Audience in Media and Cultural Theory," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (1998): 193–217.

9. Noël Carroll, "On the Ties That Bind: Characters, the Emotions and Popular Fictions," in *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture,* ed. William Irwin and Jorge Garcia (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

10. William Irwin, "Philosophy as/and/of Popular Culture," in Irwin and Garcia, *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture,* 41–64.

11. We are happy to acknowledge that we owe our understanding of media theories to Jo Frangou and Katerina Kaklamani.

Scene 6

YOUR LOGIC IS FLAWLESS

You Can't Change the Past

The Philosophy of Time Travel in *Star Trek* and *Lost*

Andrew Fyfe

The stories of J. J. Abrams's *Lost* (2004–2010) and *Star Trek* (2009) take us back in time. What makes these time-travel narratives stand out is how they abide by the logical prohibition against changing the past and display an understanding of the logical problems involved in doing so. However, *Lost* and *Star Trek* differ in how they handle this prohibition. While the characters of *Lost* travel into their own past but are unable to change anything, the characters of *Star Trek* are able to change things but do not travel into their own past. In neither case do the characters travel back into their own past and make changes.

But why can't the past be changed? Why would logic prohibit changing the past, but not time travel, parallel universes, or alternate timelines? After all, none of these ideas seems more plausible than any other. Furthermore, how could it be logically possible to travel back into one's own past if it wasn't possible to change it? These are the questions that form the basis of this chapter, and they are also the kinds of questions that one would encounter while investigating the philosophy of time.[1] To better understand the unique logical problems involved with changing one's own past, I will begin by explaining the philosophy behind the prohibition before moving on to describe how this shapes the narratives of both Abrams's *Lost* and his *Star Trek*.

Physical and Logical Possibility

It isn't possible to travel through space faster than the speed of light. To the best of our present knowledge, physical law prohibits doing so. However, there is another sense in which faster-than-light travel is possible. Things could have been different, or, more specifically, physical law could have been

different such that our universe placed no upper bound on speed. This is why it is something of a mystery as to why our universe has the particular physical laws it does rather than some other set; that is, given that our physical laws could have been different, why are they the way they are?

What this illustrates is that there are different kinds of possibility and impossibility. Since the physical laws investigated by science prohibit faster-than-light travel, it can be said to be *physically impossible* to do so; that is, impossible given the physical laws that *actually* govern our universe. However, there does not appear to be anything in logic that rules out the possibility that the universe could have been governed by a different set of physical laws. Given this, faster-than-light travel can still be said to be *logically possible;* that is, possible given the laws of logic.

It also isn't possible to draw a figure that is both a square and a circle. However, there is nothing in physical law that prevents me from doing so. Instead, it is the laws of logic that make this impossible. Which is to say, it is not logically possible to draw a figure that is at once both four-sided and yet also only one-sided. Furthermore, unlike the physical law, the laws of logic could not have been different than they actually are.[2] In fact, this might be the distinctive feature of a law of logic that distinguishes it from a physical law. Consequently, there is no way things could have been different so that I could draw a circle-square.[3]

Where this is all relevant to our examination of time travel is concerning whether we are trying to answer the question "Is time travel physically possible?" or whether we are trying to answer the question "Is time travel logically possible?" If time travel isn't logically possible, then it isn't physically possible either. However, time travel could be logically possible and yet physically impossible. Which is to say, time travel might be allowed by the laws of logic but prohibited by the physical laws that actually govern our universe—as faster-than-light travel happens to be.

As an answer to the question "Is time travel physically possible?" the physical laws that govern our universe seem to be surprisingly amenable to time travel. This could turn out to be mistaken, but for now it is an open question among scientists whether anything in physical law rules out time travel, and so far, nothing appears to. But physical possibility is the domain of science and the scientist. Since this is a work concerning philosophy and its place in the work of Abrams, I will be concerned only with what philosophers have to say about the logical possibility of time travel and changing the past. Furthermore, when people express a skepticism about the possibility

of time travel they usually do so because they think of it as logically impossible. The question, then, that will set my agenda in this work will be "Is time travel logically possible?" rather than "Is time travel physically possible?"[4]

The Grandfather Paradox

A paradox is a set of propositions that independently appear to be true but that together appear to give rise to a contradiction. Which is to say, while they each seem to be true by themselves, it seems that they cannot all be true together. There are two ways of resolving a paradox. Either we can reject one of the propositions that give rise to the contradiction, or we can show how (despite appearances) no contradiction arises even if all the propositions were true.

   The most famous reason for thinking time travel might not be logically possible comes in the form of a paradox. The so-called grandfather paradox can be thought of as the collection of the following independently plausible propositions (assuming time travel is possible), which together give rise to a contradiction:

   (P1) It is possible for me to go back in time.
   (P2) If it is possible for me to go back in time, then it isn't possible
        that I never came to exist.
   (P3) If it is possible for me to go back in time, then it is possible that I
        never came to exist.

The first proposition encapsulates what we are taking for granted, that time travel is possible. The second proposition points out the apparently incontrovertible fact that for me to be capable of going back in time, then I must have come to exist at some point in time if I am to do so. And the third proposition encapsulates the fact that if I could go back in time, then I would seem to be capable of doing things like killing my paternal grandfather before my father was born (i.e., things that would ensure that I never came to exist). Given that all three of these propositions cannot be true together, we are faced with a paradox. To resolve the paradox we must either reject one of the propositions as false or we must (cleverly) find a way in which they could all be true without giving rise to a contradiction. Since there doesn't seem to be any way around the contradiction these propositions give rise to and given that we are trying to investigate the possibility of time travel, we should see

if we can reject either proposition P2 or P3 first and abandon proposition P1 only if it is our last resort for resolving the logical paradox. If there is no other way to resolve the grandfather paradox than to reject P1, then we will know that it is not logically possible to go back in time.

Proposition P2 seems the hardest to justify rejecting. How could I go back in time if I never came to exist in the first place? We might try making sense of the idea by saying something like, "I came to exist in the past before I went back in time and changed the past," but this notion doesn't stand up to close scrutiny. Notice how such a response relies on the notion of "before." However, what is it for me to have come to exist before I go back in time and change the past other than that I came to exist in the past? If I were to change the past so that I will no longer come to exist at any point in the past leading up to when I travel back in time, then there will be no time in which I came to exist before I traveled back in time. It does make sense to say that I could travel back into or create an alternate timeline where I kill my own grandfather and thereby never come to exist, but then my original past would still exist as it was and in that sense I will not have actually changed my own past.[5]

Holding onto proposition P1 until our only option is to abandon it, we might try rejecting proposition P3 to resolve the grandfather paradox. That is, we might reject the idea that if I could go back in time, I would then be able to change the past in ways that would ensure I never came to exist. However, if it is possible for me to go back in time, then what would prevent me from doing things like killing my paternal grandfather before my father was born? We might try to say that logic would prevent me, but this runs contrary to the way the laws of logic work. For example, suppose that I build a time machine and with that time machine I were to go back in time with an arsenal of weapons and the goal of killing my grandfather. Will the laws of logic make my weapons misfire? Make me slip on a banana peel? Make my bullets bounce off of my grandfather as if he were Superman? The problem is that the laws of logic do not work like physical laws. Logic doesn't prevent me from drawing a figure that is both a square and a circle by repeatedly breaking my pencil or causing the paper I am trying to draw the figure on to burst into flames. Rather, what the laws of logic show is that there is just no such figure for me to draw. Logic is not some force in the universe guiding banana peels beneath time travelers' feet in order to avoid contradictions, and so if logic supposedly prevents me from killing my grandfather then there would need to be some less "active" way for it to do so.

The result is that while logic doesn't appear to give us grounds for rejecting either proposition P2 or proposition P3, logic does demand that we reject one of the three propositions that give rise to the contradiction and so we appear to be forced into rejecting proposition P1. That is, forced to say that it is not logically possible for me to go back in time. Or at least this is how things appeared until some recent work in philosophy breathed new life into the idea that instead of rejecting proposition P1, the correct resolution of the grandfather paradox is the rejection of proposition P3.

Resolving the Paradox without Rejecting Time Travel

The problem with rejecting proposition P3, that is, allowing time travel but disallowing time travelers from doing the sorts of things that would generate a contradiction, is that logic isn't in the business of causing guns to jam, banana peels to appear, or bullets to bounce off flesh. What is needed in order to reject proposition P3 is some way in which the laws of logic entail that one of these coincidences will occur without having to say the laws of logic are acting like a physical force pushing objects around in space to actively cause these coincidences.

Philosophers began to realize how logic might entail these coincidences with the publication of David Lewis's article "The Paradoxes of Time Travel" in 1976. Since then, Lewis's ideas in that paper have been further developed and defended by philosophers like Nicholas J. J. Smith and Theodore Sider and a consensus has been rapidly forming among philosophers that the correct resolution of the grandfather paradox involves rejecting proposition P3 rather than proposition P1.[6] In the following passage, Sider offers a helpful way of understanding the line of thinking that changed philosophers' minds about time travel by drawing our attention to a more mundane example of how logic might entail a coincidence:

> Suppose I tried to throw a heavy stone at a fragile window. Since I have good aim and a strong arm, the window would break. I *might*, I suppose, slip on a banana peel, or hit a bird passing by with the rock, or have my throw deflected by a great gust of wind, or have a sudden failure of aim despite many years of training in stone-throwing. But at the very least, it surely is not the case that one of these strange coincidences *would* happen. The [proposition:] If I were to try to

> throw the stone at the window, I would slip on a banana peel or hit
> a passing bird or . . . is false.[7]

That is to say, it *might* occur that some coincidence will prevent me from
breaking the window, but it would be false that to say that such coincidences
would occur. This is also the problem we faced in trying to reject proposition
P3 to resolve the grandfather paradox. It *might* occur that some coincidence
would prevent a time traveler from killing his or her paternal grandfather
before his or her father is born, but there does not seem to be any reason we
can say such coincidences *would* occur—at least without mistakenly think-
ing of the laws of logic as a force in the world ensuring that they would.
But then Sider considers a different proposition: "If I were to try to throw
the stone at the window but the window did not subsequently break, then
I would slip on a banana peel or hit a passing bird or . . ." Unlike the first
proposition, this one is true. Sider explains that the difference lies in the fact
that this second proposition's antecedent (i.e., what appears after the "if"
but before the "then") already contains circumstances that could only come
about through an unlikely coincidence: "Here I have built my failure into the
antecedent; the [proposition] concerns what would happen had I tried and
failed. Here, I think, our sense is that the [proposition] is now true. Given
the background facts, the only way for me to fail to hit the window would be
for some strange coincidence to occur."[8] Which is to say, it is only because
we already know that the window will not break, that we can know that a
coincidence not only *might* prevent me from breaking it but that a coinci-
dence *would* prevent me from breaking it. Furthermore, if we already know
that the window doesn't break, then we need not think of logic as actively
causing a coincidence to prevent me from breaking it. Given the unlikely
setup and result contained in the antecedent, logic entails that an unlikely
coincidence will occur but without having to cause that coincidence. And,
in fact, the same thing can be said about time travelers attempting to kill
their paternal grandfather before their father is born.

Suppose I travel back to a time before my father was born and attempt
to kill my grandfather. Supposing that I have good aim, a reliable weapon,
and so on, some unlikely coincidence would have to occur for me to fail at
my task. Yet we already know that I do fail. Since I exist, we already know
that my grandfather does live long enough to conceive my father and, conse-
quently, we also already know that I fail in my attempt to murder him. Which
is to say, we know that the following proposition is true: "If a time traveler

were to try to kill his paternal grandfather before his father was conceived, he would slip on a banana peel or have a sudden change of heart or . . ." Such coincidences might seem so unlikely that we cannot say for certain that they *would* happen without having to also say that logic would actively cause them to occur, but in fact we can know that they would occur without seeing logic as playing such an active role since we also already know that an unlikely result occurs (that my grandfather survives) given the setup (my capability and motivation to kill him). It is only if we ignore the fact that we know that my paternal grandfather survives at least long enough for my father to be conceived, that it would be mysterious how we could know a coincidence would occur to prevent me from killing him. However, given that we do know that my paternal grandfather survives at least until my father is conceived, our knowledge that a coincidence would occur to prevent me from killing him before that time is an unremarkable logical entailment.

Of course, this line of reasoning rules out more than time travelers simply killing their own grandfathers, it also rules out their changing the past in any way. Suppose that instead of setting out to kill my grandfather, I were to travel back in time with the aim of assassinating Adolf Hitler in 1930. Given that we already know that Hitler lived until 1945, we also already know that I will fail at assassinating him in 1930. Or, to put it another way, we know that I have already failed to kill him. While if I had access to a time machine and were myself a skilled assassin it might require some unlikely coincidence to prevent me from killing Hitler in 1930, given that we already know that Hitler lived until 1945 we also already know that some coincidence prevented me from assassinating him in 1930. If I had been successful in assassinating Hitler in 1930 our past wouldn't change, it would have always been different. There is only one past and it cannot be changed. Either Hitler died at the hands of a time traveler in 1930 or he lived until 1945. If a time traveler wanted to go back and kill Hitler in 1930, then his only hope is the fact that recorded history might be wrong about the date of Hitler's death. If recorded history is correct, then the time traveler already knows that some coincidence prevented him from being successful once he arrived in his past.

The result is that while it is logically possible to travel back in time and affect the past, it isn't possible to change it. If I were to travel back in time and contribute to the events of the past, then it will have always been the case that I affected the past in the way I did. Which is not to say I cannot travel to some parallel universe or alternate timeline that exactly resembles a point in my own past and cause the past of that universe or timeline to

unfold differently than my own. However, then I would not be changing my own past but merely contributing to the past of another universe or timeline. If I travel back to my own past, then logic entails that what I will do is already contained in that past.[9]

Time Travel in the TV Series

If the philosophy of time travel allows that we can travel to our own past and affect it but not change it, then storytellers have three formats they may follow in telling a time-travel narrative:

> (F1) allow backwards time travel and allow characters to change the past in violation of logical constraints,
>
> (F2) allow backwards time travel but disallow characters from changing the past, or
>
> (F3) allow so-called backwards time travel to a parallel universe or alternate timeline that is similar to the characters' own past and allow those characters to affect the past of that universe such that it comes to differ from the past of their own universe or timeline.

Usually time-travel stories are instances of format F1. Famous examples include the *Terminator* and *Back to the Future* series of films. One thing that is noteworthy about both Abrams's *Lost* and his *Star Trek* is that while they do not follow the same time-travel-story format, both avoid the philosophically problematic format F1. While this fact alone would be enough to show some appreciation of the complexities of time travel, *Lost* goes beyond merely avoiding format F1 in making the question of which format *Lost* follows a major plot point of the show's last two seasons and—in a remarkable way—the cliffhanger ending of *Lost*'s fifth season.

To illustrate how the philosophy of time travel becomes such an important question in *Lost,* let's consider a few examples of how the characters of *Lost* raise the question. Here is Daniel Faraday in the first episode of the fifth season ("Because You Left"), explaining that while it is possible to travel back into one's own past it still isn't possible to change it—suggesting that *Lost* is an instance format F2: "Time—it's like a street, all right? We can move forward on that street, we can move in reverse, but we cannot ever create a new street. If we try to do anything different, we will fail every time. Whatever happened, happened." Then, in the eleventh episode of the

fifth season ("Whatever Happened, Happened"), Miles attempts to explain to Hurley, Kate, and Jack why he knows Sayid's attempt to kill young Ben in the past will fail:

Hugo "Hurley" Reyes: [Hurley looks at his own hand mystified]

Miles Straume: What the hell are you doing, tubby?

Hurley: Checking to see if I'm disappearing.

Miles: What?

Hurley: Back to the future, man. We came back in time to the island and changed stuff. So if little Ben dies, he'll never grow up to be big Ben who's the one that made us come back here in the first place. It means we can't be here and therefore, dude—we don't exist.

Miles: You're an idiot.

Hurley: Am I?

Miles: Yeah, it doesn't work like that. You can't change anything. Your maniac Iraqi buddy shot [Ben] Linus, that's what always happened. It's just we never experienced how it all turns out.

Hurley: That's really confusing.

Miles: Yeah, well, get used to it. But the good news is that Linus didn't die, so that means the kid can't either. He'll be fine.

Kate Austen: Didn't look like he's gonna be fine. What if you're wrong?

Miles: Well, if I'm wrong then I guess we all stop existing and—none of it matters anyway then does it?

Hurley: Let me get this straight. All this already happened.

Miles: Yes.

Hurley: So—this conversation we're having right now, we've already had it.

Miles: Yes!

Hurley: Then what am I gonna say next?

Miles: I don't know.

Hurley: Ha! Then your theory is wrong.

Miles: For the thousandth time, you dingbat. The conversation already happened, but not for you and me. For you and me it's happening right now.

Hurley: Okay, answer me this. If all of this already happened to me, then why don't I remember any of it?

Miles: Because once Ben turned that wheel, time isn't a straight line for us anymore. Our experiences in the past and in the future occurred before these experiences right now.

Hurley: Say that again.

Miles: [Miles tries to hand Hurley his gun] Shoot me. Please, please.

Hurley: Ah ha! I can't shoot you, because if you die in 1977, then you'll never come back to the island on the freighter 30 years from now.

Miles: I can die! Because I've already come to the island on the freighter. Any of us can die! Because this is our present.

Hurley: You said that Ben couldn't die because he has to grow and become the leader of the Others.

Miles: Because this is his past.

Hurley: But when we had captured Ben and Sayid, like, tortured him then why wouldn't he remember getting shot by that same guy when he was a kid?

Miles: Huh. I hadn't thought of that.

While for most of the fifth season the audience is given explanations for why the past cannot change like the two above from Faraday and Miles, the season is also littered with hints that this might be mistaken. For example, at the end of the above dialogue between Miles and Hurley, Hurley points out that if the past cannot change then older Ben should have remembered time-traveling Sayid shooting him as a child. This suggests that Miles might be wrong about the inability to change the past. Even Faraday comes to later question whether he is right about the prohibition on changing the past when, in the fourteenth episode of the fifth season ("The Variable"), Faraday postulates a (logically absurd) exception to the prohibition:

Daniel Faraday: But—we can change that. I studied relativistic physics my entire life. One thing emerged over and over—can't change the past. Can't do it. Whatever happened, happened. All right? But then I finally realized—I had been spending so much time focused on the constants, I forgot about the variables. Do you know what the variables in these equations are, Jack?

Jack Shephard: No.

Faraday: Us. We're the variables. People. We think. We reason. We make choices. We have free will. We can change our destiny.

The problem with Faraday's reasoning here is that the logical prohibition on changing the past isn't a constraint on free will. The past cannot be changed, but if a time traveler has gone back and affected it, then the past happened the way it did partly because of that time traveler's own free choices. The past already includes whatever free choices the time traveler makes, but they are still his free choices.

While this argument of Faraday's is a philosophically interesting bit to include in the show itself, what is perhaps more impressive is what Faraday's second-guessing of the logical prohibition on changing the past contributes to the story. While the audience has been told time and again by characters like Faraday that the past cannot change, there are also hints likes these that the characters might be wrong about this. What this sets up is the season finale of the fifth season ("The Incident"), in which the characters attempt to detonate a nuclear bomb in hopes of changing their past. The episode ends with a cliffhanger question: "Did the bomb go off? Can you—and did they—change the past?"

Season 6 of *Lost* begins without clear answers. There now appear to be two universes or timelines, one where the bomb has gone off and one where it hasn't. The characters in the apparent universe or timeline where the bomb hasn't detonated are left thinking that you can't change the past after all, while the characters in the other apparent universe or timeline have never time traveled in the first place. The impression the story leaves on its audience is that *Lost* has unexpectedly turned out to combine formats F2 and F3 in an interesting and original way. While the characters had traveled back into their own past and were unable to change anything, because they tried to detonate the nuclear bomb in their past, when a parallel universe or alternate timeline branches off from that point it is a universe/timeline where the bomb has successfully gone off. What is interesting about this move is that while the inhabitants of the parallel universe or alternate timeline never travel back in time and detonate a bomb in their past, their universe/timeline shares a past with the original universe/timeline that includes time travelers from the future of the original universe/timeline detonating a nuclear bomb in their shared past. The characters of the original universe/timeline remain stuck with the hellish past they've been trying to change, but in attempting to change it they have unknowingly created a better parallel universe or alternate timeline for their counterparts to live in.

As season 6 progresses, one of the characters in *Lost,* Desmond Hume, comes to believe that this better parallel universe or alternate timeline exists

and that it is possible for the inhabitants of the original universe/timeline to escape over to it. The audience is led to believe Desmond is correct about the idea of traveling to the parallel universe or alternate timeline due to the flashbacks the characters in the better parallel universe or alternate timeline begin to have of the original universe/timeline. This plot culminates in the series finale ("The End"), leading up to which Jack and Desmond argue over whether the better parallel universe or alternate timeline exists and whether they might be able to escape to it:

> Desmond Hume: This doesn't matter you know.
>
> Jack Shepard: Excuse me.
>
> Desmond: Him destroying the island, you destroying him. It doesn't matter. You're going to lower me into that light and I'm going to go somewhere else. A place where we could be with the ones that we love. And we'll never have to think of this damn island again. And you know the best part Jack?
>
> Jack: What?
>
> Desmond: You're in this place. You know we sat next to each other on Oceanic 815. It never crashed. We spoke to each other. You seemed happy. You know maybe I can find a way to bring you there too.
>
> Jack: Desmond, I tried that once. There are no short cuts, no do-overs. What happened, happened. Trust me, I know. All of this matters.

While at this point, the audience has been led to believe Desmond is right, Jack is proven correct in the end. What the other, seemingly better parallel universe or alternate timeline turns out to be is the afterlife. *Lost* reveals in its final episode that it has always been an instance of time-travel story format F2, that even while you can travel back into your own past, you won't be able to change it. Although Jack does find a positive interpretation to give this logical prohibition in the end. In his exchange with Desmond, Jack argues that if the past could be changed then what we do in the present wouldn't matter. Unless your past remains the same, then your actions will end up being erased by later changes in the timeline and in this sense it won't matter what you do. Jack has given up on trying to change his unfortunate past, but he has now come to think that in having an unchangeable past his actions have value in a way they wouldn't if the past could change.

The question Jack now leaves the audience to wrestle with is not the logical possibility of changing the past, but how a changeable past would affect the value of our actions.

Time Travel in the Movie

In an important way, the question of value Jack wrestles with in the finale of *Lost* is also one that plays a role in the way time travel is treated in *Star Trek*. If Abrams's film about the young crew of the *Enterprise* had followed the lead of *Lost* and treated the past as unchangeable, then the writers of the new series of films would be committed to ensuring that their film is consistent with the many *Star Trek* shows and films that are set later in the franchise. This would mean, for instance, that the audience would know from the start that none of the central crew will die since they already know that they survive to be consistent with the shows and films in the franchise where their older selves appear. However, if Abrams's *Star Trek* took format F1 and allowed the past to be changed, then it would wipe out the future of every other show and film in the franchise. Despite being fictional, for the events portrayed in those shows and films to be fictionally eliminated from the timeline would rob them of their value. Watching the new films inaugurated with Abrams's *Star Trek,* we would be engaged in a story that results in every other *Star Trek* show and film no longer mattering because they will no longer have occurred.

The result is that Abrams's *Star Trek* adopts format F3. Specifically, it is set in a parallel universe at a point similar to the past of the *Star Trek* universe we are already familiar with from other shows and films. In order to connect the story of this universe with the stories of the other *Star Trek* shows and films and in order to allow it to still vary from the universe of those shows and films, Abrams has several characters from that universe "time-travel" to his parallel universe and affect it in such a way that its past will now unfold differently than the past of their original universe.[10]

As we can see, time travel plays a different role in the story of *Star Trek* than *Lost*. In *Lost* questions over whether or not you can change the past, free will, and fate are central to the story. In *Star Trek* time travel serves as a practical storytelling tool, allowing Abrams to tell an origin story of the crew of the *Enterprise* that allows the future to unfold differently than the rest of the *Star Trek* franchise but without undermining the value of those shows and films by telling a story in which they are made to no longer exist.[11]

Still, there is a storytelling problem that time-travel narratives following format F3 risk falling into. Specifically, when characters don't travel back into their own past and change things there, the question arises why they would care to change how the past unfolds in a parallel universe or alternate timeline? *Star Trek* avoids this problem by having its character Nero travel to the parallel universe in pursuit of the Spock of the original universe. Nero isn't just out to kill Spock in as many parallel universes he can. Rather, the story's antagonist is motivated by seeking revenge on the original Spock who he believes to have wronged him. That might still leave open the question why Nero takes his revenge on Spock by destroying the counterpart to Vulcan in this parallel universe, but we might allow for the purposes of the story that the original Spock is himself concerned with the welfare of his counterparts, even in other universes. It isn't original Spock's actual home world being destroyed, but it is the one inhabited by his species and family in this universe. Furthermore, madmen bent on the destruction of whole planets should not really be expected to be consistent in the motivation and thinking behind their acts.

In the end it is not a mark against a work of fiction if it does not abide by the constraints of logic. Both the *Terminator* and *Back to the Future* series of films do so with great success. However, a time-travel narrative that does follow one of the logically consistent formats is rare and therefore offers a writer the opportunity of a more original story. While *Star Trek* follows the more well-known logically consistent format for time-travel narratives, the film is noteworthy in that it consciously adopts the only format that both avoids devaluing the rest of the *Star Trek* franchise and frees the story it tells from being constrained by the future portrayed by the rest of the *Star Trek* franchise. *Lost* stands out not only because it adopts the most uncommon time-travel narrative format, but also because it finds a way to make the philosophical questions surrounding time travel and changing the past central components of the story it tells.[12]

Notes

    1. See, for example, Robin Le Poidevin and Murray MacBeth, eds., *The Philosophy of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Kip Thorne, *Black Holes and Time*

Warps: Einstein's Outrageous Legacy (London: W. W. Norton, 1994); John Earman, *Bangs, Crunches, Whimpers, and Shrieks: Singularities and Acausalities in Relativistic Spacetimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

2. Which is not the same thing as saying that we couldn't be wrong about the laws of logic. In this sense, it is possible that I could draw a circle-square. This wouldn't mean that it is possible for the laws of logic to be different from what they in fact are, but rather that it is possible for the laws of logic to be different from what I believe them to be. Philosophers mark this distinction by saying that while it is *epistemically possible* for the laws of logic to be different (i.e., they might differ from what I believe them to be), it is not *metaphysically possible* for the laws of logic to be different (i.e., differ from what they in fact are).

3. Now, certainly, the words "circle" and "square" could have had different meanings than they do. We might be able to refer to those properties with different words or refer to different properties with those same words so that I would be capable of drawing a figure that we would call both a square and a circle, but what would remain logically impossible is for one figure to at the same time have the properties of both of the figures that using current English we refer to with the words "circle" and "square." Which is just to say, the claim that drawing a circle-square is logically impossible is not merely a linguistic claim about the words "circle" and "square" but rather a claim about the properties we refer to with those words.

4. Philosophers also deal with another kind of possibility called *metaphysical possibility,* which is different than the sort of metaphysical possibility that I contrasted earlier with epistemic possibility. This second sort of metaphysical possibility concerns what would be possible given the correct metaphysical theory. For example, given a metaphysical theory of time called *presentism,* the past no longer exists, and if this metaphysical theory were correct then it would be hard to see how it could be metaphysically possible to travel back into the past. However, presentism is a minority view among philosophers because of worries about how any propositions concerning the past could be true on this view. If the past no longer exists, then it does not appear that statements like "I existed five minutes ago" could be true given that absolutely nothing existed five minutes ago. Certainly everyone would agree that the past does not presently exist, but presentism is the rather extreme metaphysical position that the past does not even exist in the past. It might also be worth pointing out that there are also many more mundane forms of possibility that philosophers as a profession are not concerned with. For example, what is and isn't *financially possible* for me. Given my current income, it might be financially impossible for me to afford my own private jet but still financially possible for me to afford a trip on a commercial airline. However, what I will be concerned with in this work is logical possibility.

5. The idea is essentially that time might have two or more dimensions (rather than the one we normally suppose it to have) and that while I would not be able to travel back to the exact time on the two-dimensional temporal plane and kill my own grandfather

then, I would still be able to travel back to an adjacent time and kill my grandfather. In the following passage, philosopher David Lewis explains why this would still not constitute traveling back into one's own past and killing one's own grandfather: "On closer inspection, however, this account seems not to give us time travel as we know it from the stories. When the traveler revisits the days of his childhood, will his playmates be there to meet him? No; he has not reached the part of the plane of time where they are. He is no longer separated from them along one of the two dimensions of time, but he is still separated from them along the other." Which is to say, the playmates the time traveler visits will not be the ones from his own past but rather their counterparts in a past existing adjacent to his own. A similar problem frustrates the attempt to kill one's own grandfather rather than his counterpart in a timeline running parallel to one's own. David Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (1976): 145–52.

6. Lewis, "Paradoxes of Time Travel," 145–52; Nicholas Smith, "Bananas Enough for Time Travel?" *British Journal of Philosophy of Science* 48 (1997): 363–89; Nicholas Smith, "The Problems of Backward Time Travel," *Endeavour* 22, no. 4 (1998): 156–58; Theodore Sider, "Time Travel, Coincidences and Counterfactuals," *Philosophical Studies* 110 (2002): 115–38.

7. Sider, "Time Travel, Coincidences and Counterfactuals," 122.

8. Ibid.

9. Perhaps a better way of making this point is stating that while it is logically possible to go back and change the past, logic entails that as a matter of fact no one will. Which is to say, there is a logically possible way the world could have been where a time traveler would successfully kill Hitler in 1930, but since our past does not contain a time traveler assassinating Hitler in 1930 we know that the actual world won't ever include any time travelers who go back in time and successfully kill Hitler in 1930. In this sense it can be said that it's logically possible for me to go back in time and kill Hitler in 1930, only we already know that any attempt on my part happens to fail.

10. In Abrams's *Star Trek* film time is not taken to be multidimensional with many timelines running parallel to our own, but rather the film assumes the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, where parallel universes branch off from our own during certain quantum events. In the film itself this is hinted at when young Spock is asked the question, "What is the central assumption of Quantum Cosmology?" and he answers, "Everything that can happen does happen in equal and parallel universes." One of the most peculiar consequences of quantum mechanics is that it appears to say that things can enter a state of simultaneously possessing two conflicting properties. This consequence of quantum mechanics has entered popular culture through the example of Schrodinger's cat being simultaneously both alive and dead. The interpretation of quantum mechanics that says there exist many other universes parallel to our own is an attempt to do away with this strange result by instead postulating that the cat is alive in one universe while dead in another.

11. One might be concerned, however, that by following format F3 for the *Star Trek* film there is a conflict with the many other franchise shows and films that follow format F1. However, while format F1 and format F2 could clearly not coexist, there is nothing preventing a story from involving both format F3 and either format F1 or F2. Which is to say that, while the first two formats deal with traveling back into one's own past, the third concerns traveling to a past-like parallel universe or alternate timeline and there is no reason to suppose that you couldn't sometimes have a story that travels back into the character's own past and follows format F1 while sometimes having a story that travels to a parallel universe or alternate timeline and follows format F3.

12. For more on why the worlds described by make-believe stories are capable of containing logical contradictions even while actual and possible worlds cannot, see Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

Rabbit's Feet, Hatches, and Monsters

Mysteries vs. Questions in J. J. Abrams's Stories

Paul DiRado

Mission: Impossible III begins, strangely enough, at what seems to be the end. Ethan Hunt is tied up and held captive by an unnamed bad guy. This bad guy tells Ethan that unless he gives up the location of the mysterious-sounding Rabbit's Foot, a tied-up and gagged woman (with whom the audience is led to believe Ethan has a romantic relationship) will be killed. When Ethan either can't or won't reveal this information to the bad guy, the woman is shot, and the film cuts back several weeks earlier, to a party being held by Ethan and the murdered woman. The remainder of the film is haunted by this first scene, and we (the audience) spend most of this time trying to figure out how the ordinary and everyday circumstances in which the characters originally find themselves will lead them to the tragic moment with which the film begins. In that respect, *Mission: Impossible III* is structured as a mystery. We know *that* Ethan will wind up captured by the bad guy, but we don't know *how*—given his retirement to civilian life—his capture will occur. And much of the fun of *Mission: Impossible III* comes from trying to figure out this mystery.

Looking at the projects on which J. J. Abrams has worked, it seems clear that he is quite intrigued by mysteries of all kinds. In many of his movies, including *Mission: Impossible III* and *Cloverfield,* and especially in his TV work—*Alias, Lost,* and *Fringe*—resolving a mystery is an important task both for his characters and for the audience. What is that thing terrorizing New York? What are the true motives of Sydney Bristow's secretive agency? Why is there a polar bear on the island? For the characters, resolving these mysteries is often a matter of life and death. For the audience, the overwhelm-

ing desire to figure things out keeps our attention glued to the screen and makes us come back week after week to discover another clue.

Because of their centrality to his works, studying the mysteries in J. J. Abrams's TV shows and movies offers us a good opportunity to philosophically understand precisely what a mystery is and what will count as a satisfactory resolution to a mystery. This question is of no small importance to our ordinary lives. Though the mysteries we encounter in everyday life are a bit more mundane than the ones facing Jack and the castaways in *Lost,* we are confronted with mysteries both big and small all the time. We may feel suddenly sick and wonder what precisely is ailing us and what we should do to feel better. Or perhaps a friend has suddenly started acting coldly to me—why? Was it something I did?

Our task in this chapter will be to figure out precisely what a mystery is and what sorts of resolutions to mysteries one could reasonably expect to find. This also has been a task of a great many scientists, philosophers, and other thinkers throughout history, from both the East and West.[1] First, we will distinguish *mysteries* from *questions.* This distinction is necessary because an unanswered question will initially appear to be the cause of something appearing mysterious. We will show that a mystery is not reducible to an unanswered question, or even a set of unanswered questions. This result is quite important, as it will reveal that you cannot expect a mystery about some topic to necessarily be resolved by merely answering previously unanswered questions about that topic. People who complained that shows like *Lost* or *Fringe* never answered any questions are not entirely correct—those shows actually answered a great many questions, but they did so *without ever resolving the mystery underlying those questions.* With this revelation established, we will turn toward the question of what precisely does make something mysterious, if not an unanswered question, and how the resolution of a mystery will look different than the answering of a question.

Are Mysteries and Questions the Same Thing?

The first thing we need to determine is precisely what we mean by a mystery and how a mystery differs from a question, if at all.

Let us start with questions. *Mission: Impossible III* begins, as we have discussed, with the big bad guy named Davian asking Ethan Hunt about the location of the Rabbit's Foot. Clearly he is asking Ethan a question. We should take some time to pinpoint certain aspects of precisely what Davian is doing

when he asks this question. Davian wants to know some piece of information that he doesn't already know. We will call what he desires a *proposition*—a simple declarative statement that reveals some property about some subject being discussed.[2] In this particular case, the subject is the Rabbit's Foot, and the property Davian wants to know about the Rabbit's Foot is its location. The question that Davian asks Ethan Hunt is a request for Ethan to share this proposition, to tell Davian the location of the Rabbit's Foot. Since Davian asks Ethan in particular this question, it must be the case that he believes that Ethan is in possession of this proposition (i.e., the answer to his question). He doesn't ask the gagged woman sitting near Ethan where the Rabbit's Foot is located, nor does he ask any of his evil henchmen. Each person either knows or does not know the proposition that Davian desires. We can tell that he believes that Ethan does know the proposition detailing the location of the Rabbit's Foot from the fact that he asks Ethan about its location.

Questions of this kind admit of relatively straightforward answers. "Where did I leave my car keys?" asked by itself, is a question and can be answered satisfactorily by "I left my car keys on the counter." "How does a person kill bacteria?" can be answered satisfactorily with the proposition "Bacteria can be killed with antibiotics." And so on. A person has answered a particular question about some topic only if the proposition that they give is *true.* Simply stated, a proposition is true if the subject of the proposition actually in fact possesses the property assigned to it in the proposition. "The car keys are on the counter" is a true proposition if and only if the car keys really are on the counter.[3] If the car keys are actually inside of a drawer, then the proposition "The car keys are on the counter" is false. Similarly, if antibiotics didn't in fact kill bacteria, the proposition "Bacteria are killed by antibiotics" would be false. A true proposition that reveals the asked-about property of a subject is a satisfactory answer to a question. If Ethan had tried lying about the location of the Rabbit's Foot, his lie would not be a satisfactory answer to the question, regardless of whether or not Davian believed it.

The answer to a question is usually quite simple and definite. That is not to say that it is easy to answer every question—it may have taken scientists a long time and much effort to discover that antibiotics kill bacteria, and we might search for hours for missing car keys. Rather, the answer *itself* is simple—it always takes the form of a true proposition, or perhaps in certain more complicated cases several true propositions. The answer to "How do I get to your house?" might require several propositions: "First, turn left on Church Street. Then turn right on 2nd Avenue . . ." But this extra layer of

complication does not make the answer any less definitive once it is discovered. Once one discovers the true proposition or propositions that answer the question, the question is pretty much exhausted and is no longer of any importance. There is no further reason for us to continue searching for an answer to a question once we have discovered the answer, because the question came about because we lacked a proposition. Once that proposition was discovered, the question is no longer relevant. Once we find the car keys, we no longer need to wonder about their location. And we certainly don't need to keep looking further for them! Any other question that we may go on to ask about car keys after they have been found—such as "Why did I leave the car keys in the drawer?"—is asking about something completely different and unrelated to the location of the car keys and demands a different and largely unrelated proposition as an answer. After answering a particular question, we can move on to the next concern in our day. That one particular question goes away.

What Is Inside the Hatch?

Now that we have briefly discussed some of the key features of questions—mainly, that each question has at least one true proposition that answers the question and that exhausts our concern with the question—we need to determine whether or not a mystery is the same thing as a question. At first blush, the two seem identical. After all, every mystery can be expressed as a question. As an example of a mysterious happening, let's consider the discovery of the Hatch in season 1 of *Lost.* Throughout most of that season, many people (both in the audience and in the cast) expressed this mystery in the form of a question, "What is inside the Hatch?" And fans spent many hours hypothesizing potential answers to this question, all of which are propositions. Maybe the sickness is contained within the Hatch. Or maybe some evil entity is trapped inside of it. Or perhaps a Scotsman is down there pushing a button every one hundred and eight minutes to save the world. Superficially, mysteries and questions seem to basically be the same thing.

However, this superficial first impression is misleading. Does the question "What is inside the Hatch?" adequately and exhaustively capture the mysteriousness of the original discovery of the Hatch in season 1? Remember that the sense of resolution that accompanies the answer to a question is the defining characteristic of questions—that once a question has been adequately resolved and satisfactorily answered, the question is no longer

relevant and it makes no sense to keep looking for the answer any further. If this question about the Hatch is the same thing as the mysteriousness of the Hatch, if questions and mysteries are exactly the same thing and the only reason the Hatch appears mysterious is because we lack possession of certain true propositions about it, then once the audience discovers the answer to the question "What is inside the Hatch?" the mysteriousness of the Hatch should go away. In the beginning of season 2, once the audience did in fact learn the answer to "What is inside the Hatch?"—once the audience learned a whole, complete series of true propositions addressing what was inside the Hatch, such as, "A Scotsman pushing a button every one hundred and eight minutes is inside the Hatch," "A bunch of food is inside the Hatch," "An electromagnetic anomaly is inside the Hatch," and so on—did the mysteriousness of the Hatch simultaneously go away along with these answers? Not at all. These answers in no way made the Hatch appear less mysterious—indeed, many of the answers made the Hatch seem even more mysterious! And the audience expressed this continued sense of mystery with new questions: "How does pushing a button save the world?" "Where do those large pallets of food come from?" and "What is that weird electromagnetic anomaly?" Far from exhausting the mystery, answering the question that the audience originally used to express the mystery only seemed to make the Hatch more mysterious.

We have seen that, although a sense of mystery about something can be expressed as a question, this question does not satisfactorily exhaust that sense of mystery and that a mystery seems deeper and more enduring than the questions we use to express it. Let us dig deeper and try to figure out more precisely how questions and mysteries relate to one another. One of the characters in the episode "Across the Sea" claims, "Every question I answer will simply lead to another question." We have seen that this claim was quite true about the mystery of the Hatch. Answering the first question that we used to express this mystery certainly led to a whole series of other questions, all efforts at expressing the mysteriousness associated with the Hatch. It is important to note that these new questions aren't just reformulations of the original question and to see that the original question, "What is inside the Hatch?" was perfectly and satisfactorily answered. That question was asking for a list of things inside the Hatch, a list that we have acquired. "How does pushing the button save the world?" is in no way asking the same thing as "What is inside the Hatch?" and cannot be answered by simply giving either a list of more things inside the Hatch or a more precise account

of the things already listed. With that in mind, we should ask precisely how these new questions relate to the original question that the audience used to express their sense of mystery about the Hatch. Answering this question might help clear up the mystery about mysteries.

One possible resolution of this difficulty could be that a mystery is not necessarily identical with just one question and with one set of missing propositions about some topic, but with a whole cluster of questions and missing propositions. If this theory is correct, answering one question about a mysterious topic would not necessarily eradicate the sense of mystery about that topic, because a series of other questions could still remain unanswered. In terms of our example of *Lost*'s mysterious Hatch, this explanation would say that the mystery of the Hatch does not stem from just the initial question about it that the audience used to express the mystery but rather from a whole series or cluster of related questions about the Hatch, not all of which had been answered once the audience discovered what was inside. At a given time, one of these questions, say "What is inside the Hatch?" appears to be more important or relevant than the rest, and for this reason the audience expresses the mystery using this question. But there are other propositions about the Hatch that the audience still lacks, such as who built the Hatch or why the numbers are written on it, and so the Hatch remains mysterious even after what is inside the Hatch is discovered.

This theory is certainly an improvement over our initial hypothesis, that a mystery and a question are the same thing. It quite correctly recognizes that often a mystery can be expressed with multiple different questions, all of which are related to each other in some way. However, it still falls short of being an adequate account of mysteries, for two different reasons. We will see that it cannot account for why, in the course of exploring a mystery, new questions that were completely unknown at the beginning of the exploration frequently emerge. This first flaw will highlight a larger difficulty. The mysteries as a cluster of questions theory cannot account for the relation between the disparate and self-contained questions and missing propositions associated with the mystery, even among the ones that are known from the beginning of the investigation.

Strange Buttons, Food Pallets, and Electromagnetic Anomalies

Initially we noted that the answer to the question "What is inside the Hatch?" gave rise to a whole series of other questions, questions like "How does push-

ing a button save the world?" "Where do those large pallets of food come from?" and "What is that weird electromagnetic anomaly?" Now, it cannot be the case that all of these questions, all of these missing propositions, were originally present, along with "What is inside the Hatch?" and "Why are the numbers written on the Hatch?" when the Hatch first appeared mysterious to the audience. The audience didn't know that there were strange buttons, food pallets, or electromagnetic anomalies within the Hatch, after all, and you can't formulate questions about things that you don't know that you don't know. Certainly, the audience did in fact lack the answers to all of these questions, but this lack did not contribute to the original sense of mystery about the Hatch. If that is so, why then do these new questions get wrapped up in that original sense of mystery once the audience discovers them?

A quite plausible answer is that the sense of mystery surrounding a particular topic is tied intimately to missing propositions about that topic. The original set of questions about the Hatch, for instance, concerned the initial set of unknown propositions about the Hatch. But through exploring the mystery, new missing propositions about a given topic are revealed. These new missing propositions therefore join the overall cluster of missing propositions and give rise to new questions about the topic. Thus, once the audience discovered that an electromagnetic anomaly was within the Hatch, what this anomaly is joins all of the other still-unanswered questions in making the Hatch seem mysterious.

What this account cannot explain, however, is why some of the unanswered questions about the Hatch add to the sense of mystery surrounding the Hatch and some do not. At any given moment, there are countless numbers of propositions that a person lacks. For instance, the audience does not know the ingredient list for the Dharma Initiative brand ranch dressing. They don't know precisely all the parts that make up the Dharma computer, and most of the audience probably do not know the mechanics by which that computer is able to turn on. The audience doesn't know any of these propositions and uncountable more propositions besides them. Why does the absence of these propositions seem entirely nonmysterious, and why do these propositions do nothing to enhance the sense of mystery surrounding the Hatch? More importantly, why do some of the missing propositions, such as how pushing the button saves the world, add to the sense of mystery surrounding the Hatch while the overwhelmingly uncountable mass of missing propositions barely even seems worthy of asking a question about?

Indeed, we can even ask this same question about the initial sense of

mystery that surrounded the Hatch at the point of its initial discovery. Why is it that not knowing what's inside the Hatch makes it seem mysterious, while not knowing the chemical compounds that make up the Hatch door does not? Why is not knowing why the numbers are written on the outside of the Hatch mysterious, but not knowing why the numbers were imprinted in the particular typeface that they were not mysterious at all? All of these propositions about the Hatch are unknown, but only a relatively tiny number of these missing propositions make the Hatch seem mysterious. Given the current theory we have been considering about the relation between mysteries and questions—that something seems mysterious insofar as there remains an unknown proposition about it—any missing set of propositions about a topic should make that topic seem mysterious. But if that were strictly true, then everything in the world would appear mysterious, because no one could ever be in possession of all of the true propositions about anything. Only certain missing propositions make a topic appear mysterious. But our current theory cannot account for what distinguishes some propositions from others in this way.

Nor can we save this theory by adding the proviso that only *relevant* or *important* propositions make something seem mysterious when they are unknown. One very important and relevant missing proposition about the Hatch is how the castaways can use it to aid them in their fight against the Others. This question is particularly important and relevant at the end of season 1, when the Others are supposedly about to raid the castaways' camp, and Jack wants to know if the Hatch could be used as a place where the castaways could hide. But Jack doesn't find the Hatch at all mysterious, even though he lacks this relevant piece of information about it. His concern is purely practical. This point is demonstrated clearly by the fact that when Jack answers this question—people cannot hide within the Hatch, and so it cannot be used by the castaways in their fight with Others (at least at that time)—Jack loses all interest in the Hatch. He doesn't then wonder what is inside the Hatch, or who built it, or anything of the other mysterious unknowns surrounding it, all of which seem *unimportant and irrelevant* to him in the face of the danger posed by the Others. Just because some important question about a topic is unknown does not make it seem mysterious, and many mysteries concern questions that do not seem immediately practically relevant.

For lack of a better way of putting it, some things just seem weird and some do not. It's weird or strange or unusual that an unopenable Hatch is

in the middle of the jungle. It's weird that there is a strange electromagnetic anomaly within that Hatch, and it is quite odd that pushing a button every one hundred and eight minutes saves the world. It is this weirdness that seems to make certain questions about particular topics appear mysterious and the usualness of other questions that does not make them appear very mysterious. Not knowing the precise ingredient lists for packaged food items is not unusual, but finding a whole bunch of packaged food on a deserted island is quite unusual and invites questions about where it came from and why it is there. Going forward, our task will be to determine more technically and precisely what we mean by "weirdness" and "unusualness" and to determine how these factors relate to both questions and mysteries.

What Makes Something Strange?

The Abrams-produced *Cloverfield* begins with scenes of ordinary life. One of the movie's protagonists, Rob, has won a job in Japan, and his friends are holding a going-away party for him. Nothing in these scenes is particularly weird or unusual, and the only thing even remotely mysterious in them is why there is tension between Rob and one of his (seemingly) platonic female friends. And this tension seems mysterious only because of the disconnect between these scenes and earlier footage of the happy pair engaged in an erotic relationship in the past, one that none of Rob's friends seems to know about. The movie doesn't take on a stronger aura of mystery until later, when a supposed earthquake and power outage are followed by the head of the Statue of Liberty bouncing into downtown New York City.

The difference between the early and later parts of the movie is striking. In the earlier, everyday scenes, both the characters and the audience quite comfortably know how to navigate the world. Every object that is encountered is fulfilling its expected role, and every person is acting as would be expected. Even the somewhat mysterious lovers' quarrel isn't that odd, as romantic pairs break up and experience tension fairly frequently. The only thing that makes it seem at all mysterious and odd is that usually the couple's friends would know about such couplings. This comfort with the scenario and the world that starts the movie is of course radically upset by the eventual arrival of the monster. Suddenly, both the characters and the audience are confronted with creatures whose behavior no one can anticipate or predict. A striking consequence of this interjection of the uncanny is that the monster, and the little monsters that fall off of it, suddenly make everything

else in the movie, things and people that were previously familiar and ful-filling expected roles, suddenly become unpredictable and, in some cases, frightening. What was at first a world that everyone knew how to navigate suddenly has become upset, and neither the audience nor the characters can rely on the world obeying its ordinary rules.

Ordinarily speaking, our world appears to us coherently. It is always the case that we possess uncountable propositions about the world. However, we don't just possess this assortment of facts as a disconnected list of true things, with every fact standing alone by itself unrelated to all the others.[4] A person knows where her keys are located; let us say that they are inside the drawer of her desk. But the proposition "The keys are located in the drawer of her desk" only actually tells this woman where the keys are in a practical way because she knows a series of other related propositions, such as "The desk is located in the corner of my apartment." But knowing the location of her desk in this way requires knowing where the desk is in rela-tion to everything else in the apartment, knowing that the bookshelf is to its left, a dresser is to its right, and so on. She must also know what the desk looks like, which means distinguishing its features from the features of both other desks and everything else in the apartment. She must also know how to open up desk drawers, a skill that, at first blush, cannot even be reduced to a proposition. Without being in possession of this whole interconnected web of skills and propositions, the woman cannot be said to know where her keys are. Practically speaking, just knowing that keys are located in a desk drawer does not help you acquire those keys unless you also know where that desk drawer is and how to access it.

Now, we must not assume that a person is consciously aware of all these propositions all the time. Indeed, part of what it means for something to be familiar to us is that, in the course of actually doing things in our everyday life, we do not have to consciously think about the familiar thing or how it relates to the other familiar things around us, or even how to use it. When a woman needs her keys, she simply walks to her desk and opens a drawer. She doesn't need to think about how to do either of those things or about where the drawer is located, what it looks like, and so on. However, if the same woman is asked to grab someone else's keys out of the drawer of a desk in an apartment that she is not familiar with, then she will have to be much more consciously aware of what she is doing. She may even need to ask her friend where the desk is, or what it looks like, or whether or not there are any tricks to opening it.

Questions, we have seen, always come about in response to a missing proposition. The woman who is asked by a friend to grab his keys out of the desk drawer is not lacking the proposition that says where the keys are located; she already knows that the keys are located in the desk drawer. She does, however, lack a whole series of related propositions that would be necessary for her to successfully acquire the keys, practically speaking— mainly, she doesn't know where the desk drawer is located. For this reason, she will need to ask where the drawer is located before she will be able to acquire the keys. She does, however, know what a desk drawer looks like, and she probably is familiar with how to open a desk drawer. So she will not need to ask about either what the desk drawer looks like or how to open it. She does not need to ask about either of these topics because our ordinary world, the web of our propositions and skills, is *coherent*. She may not know exactly what her friend's desk looks like, but in the course of her life she has encountered other desks and can reliably trust that all desks look somewhat similar and share certain distinctive features. We ordinarily ask questions about a missing proposition only when the absence of that proposition stops us from practically being able to do something. Let us call this the proposition becoming *conspicuous*. The woman in our example cannot grab the keys because she doesn't know where the desk is, so she is forced to ask about it. She also doesn't know exactly what the desk looks like, but since the absence of this proposition will most likely not prohibit her from finding the keys, she doesn't need to ask about it. However, if in the course of looking for the keys knowing what the desk looks like does become conspicuous—if perhaps the desk is of an extremely unusual design or looks more like a table than a desk—the woman may ultimately come to need to ask about it.

In the example as we have considered it thus far, the woman may ask her friend several different questions without anything about the keys or the desk seeming particularly mysterious. Nothing is weird about not knowing where desks or keys are located or with trying to find them. It fits quite nicely into our coherent understanding of the world that people might on occasion lose keys and need help finding things. But what if the woman, in the course of searching for the keys, encountered something that did not fit into her coherent understanding of the world? Let us assume that, once she finally finds the desk, it is hanging sideways on the wall instead of being on the floor. We could quite plausibly expect such a desk to suddenly appear quite mysterious. For our story, we shall assume that the woman

will choose to express this mystery with the question "Why is there a desk hanging on the wall?"

The first thing to note is that the manner in which the desk becomes mysterious is different from the manner in which the initial question about it was first prompted. The question "Where is the desk?" arose because, in the course of trying to accomplish the practical task of getting the keys out of a drawer within the desk, the woman became conspicuously aware that she did not know the answer to this question, an answer that she needs if she is to accomplish her task. As an analogy, consider trying to put a puzzle together, but one of the pieces is missing from the box. Think of the picture that you are trying to make in the puzzle as analogous to the task that the woman is trying to accomplish. You become aware of the absence of this last piece only when, in the end, the absence keeps you from completing the picture. Asking a question is analogous to searching for that last missing piece. It is triggered by the absence of a proposition.

But consider the mysteriously hanging desk. The circumstances in which the woman discovers the desk would appear mysterious regardless of whether or not the desk's unusual location made it harder to accomplish her task. Indeed, the question by which she expresses the mysteriousness of the desk, "Why is the desk hanging on the wall?" is not itself a practical question, not one that will help her get the keys from the desk if it were successfully answered. The desk does not appear mysterious because of the absence of a proposition. It instead appears mysterious because of the presence of a proposition that doesn't fit in with the coherent web of propositions on the basis of which the woman has thus far navigated the world. To return to our analogy of the puzzle, suppose that you find a puzzle piece that simply doesn't fit together with any of the other pieces. Desks don't hang off of walls, they rest on the floor. Unopenable Hatches don't appear in the middle of the jungle. The head of the Statue of Liberty is attached to the body of the Statue of Liberty; it doesn't roll through the center of New York. The discovery that any of these propositions is true cannot be readily made to cohere with the remainder of the web of propositions surrounding tables or Hatches or downtown New York. This is even true of mundane and nonsupernatural mysteries, like those found in crime procedurals. The crime scene where all of the facts fit together perfectly with one another, where it is fairly obvious why and how the crime was committed and the only thing left to figure out is the identity of the killer, is not terribly mysterious. But when the facts of the case don't obviously fit together—where

someone was killed but the doors and windows are all found locked from the inside—then the case suddenly becomes quite the compelling mystery. *It is the incoherence of the known propositions about a situation that is responsible for anything appearing mysterious.*

How Do You Resolve a Mystery?

We must test this hypothesis against two more difficulties. First, if mysteries do not emerge because of absent propositions, but rather emerge from the discovery of incoherent propositions, why do people express the mysteriousness of something in terms of a question, or indeed many questions? Second, in what manner does a mystery ever get resolved, if at least in principle every question about a mystery that gets answered could lead to another question?

Human beings are quite stubbornly attached to the familiar coherency of their world, to their web of propositions. We genuinely believe that our understanding of how things work is, if not perfect, close enough to the truth—that just one fact, or object, that doesn't fit in with all the rest is not enough to make us start over again from scratch. Thus, when we discover a proposition that does not cohere with all the others, our first impulse is not to scrap the prior coherency of the whole but rather to assume that the particular incoherent proposition is in some way flawed because it will not cohere with everything else. There must be some unknown reason why the proposition *appears* to not cohere with the rest of the world. Discovering this reason will reveal that the proposition really did cohere with all the others all along but only appeared not to because we lacked all the relevant information. There must be a reason why the desk is hanging from the wall, and if the woman could figure out what it is, her discovery of the hanging desk would make perfect sense. And there must be a reason why the head of the Statue of Liberty is in the middle of downtown New York. Of course, in the case of *Cloverfield,* the answer that the audience discovers to this first question, that a monster knocked it off, is just as, if not more, incoherent with our expectations about the makeup of the world than the original inexplicable proposition. Since coherence has not been restored, the mystery has not been resolved, and so the audience must try to formulate new questions in an effort to rediscover the coherence of the whole web of propositions.

No answer to any question, then, can ever be said to "answer" a mystery. A mystery doesn't need an answer, but to be resolved it needs all of the vari-

ous propositions discovered in a situation to make sense with one another and to cohere with previous experiences and expectations about the world. However, this coherence is not itself one of the propositions about a situation, just like the picture that is made from all the pieces of a puzzle is not itself one of the pieces but rather something formed when all of the pieces are arranged in the correct way. Answering questions about a mysterious topic, like *Lost*'s Hatch, might help provide bits and pieces of the puzzle, pieces without which no coherent understanding of the Hatch is possible.

It was not answers to the mysteries of *Lost* or *Cloverfield,* or even the mysterious Rabbit's Foot in *Mission: Impossible III,* that the audience wanted, but rather for all of the facts revealed in those movies to form a coherent and understandable whole that made the sense of mystery surrounding those topics get entirely resolved. Unfortunately for those desires, another aspect of Abrams's works—besides featuring mysterious circumstances—is that he is far more interested creatively in preserving this sense of mystery than in clearly resolving it for his audience.

Notes

1. For example, see Bertrand Russell, "The Value of Philosophy," in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 153–61.

2. For more about propositions, questions, mysteries, and the appropriate way to think about these things, see, for example, Patrick Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2008).

3. Epistemology is the sub-branch of Western philosophy that deals with knowledge, justification for our beliefs, and truth (among other topics). In epistemological circles, this position is known as the correspondence theory of truth; see the papers in, for example, Helen Beebee and Julian Dodd, eds., *Truthmakers: The Contemporary Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

4. This hints at the position known in epistemological circles as the coherence theory of truth; see, for example, Paul Thagard, "Coherence, Truth and the Development of Scientific Knowledge," *Philosophy of Science* 74 (2007): 26–47.

Scene 7

CONSIDERING *CLOVERFIELD*

Monsters of the World, Unite!

Cloverfield, Capital, and Ecological Crisis

Jeff Ewing

In the last decade the "monster movie" has been revived as an important subgenre of science fiction and horror films. Part of this rebirth has been J. J. Abrams's *Cloverfield. Cloverfield* and its viral backstory tell the story of a creature awakened by accident by Japanese industry in its pursuit of a profitable "secret ingredient." Indeed, the careless operations of business, oriented toward profit in the process of "innovation," had extremely negative consequences due to the impact on the environment. Karl Marx, in his extensive critique of capitalism, articulates a number of features of capitalism, class society, and the relation between modes of production and ecology that serve to show (among other things) how capitalist production neglects the costs to humanity and the ecosystem in favor of profit, and as a consequence it produces a number of negative ecological effects. In this chapter I will use Marx's critique of capitalism, including capitalism's one-sided domination by the pursuit of capital accumulation and its ecological impact, to show how Clover was awakened and what Clover's rampage can represent with regard to capital's unforeseen ecological consequences.

Revival of the Monster Movie

The monster movie genre was nearly deceased before it emerged as a giant from the science fiction and horror waters and rampaged through our cinemas in the last decade. Between South Korea's critically well-received *The Host* (2006), Stephen King's *The Mist* (2007), Abrams's *Cloverfield* (2008), the gene-splicing cautionary tale *Splice* (2009), Norway's *Troll Hunter* (2010), the Finnish *Rare Exports* (2010), and the British *Monsters* (2010), the monster movie is back in a big way. *Cloverfield* was well received and very influential

both in the reestablishment of monster films and in breaking new ground in found footage horror.

Monster movies (and specific subgenres such as zombie, vampire, and alien-centric films) have historically often contained explicit or implicit political elements and deep political or cultural messages. The politics of horror is well recognized, for example, by notable Mexican director and producer Guillermo del Toro: "Much like fairy tales, there are two facets of horror. One is pro-institution, which is the most reprehensible type of fairy tale: Don't wander into the woods, and always obey your parents. The other type of fairy tale is completely anarchic and antiestablishment."[1] Discomfort with technology and its implications as well as recognition of the nearly infinite possibilities of deep space, the depths of the ocean, and the horrors of the unknown fed science fiction and horror in the whole of their history. For example, science fiction in film has been used to explore the dangers of nuclear power, providing a general allegory for the dangers of nuclear technology (as in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951]) and exploiting fears of the effects of radiation creating "nuclear monsters" (as in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* [1953], *Them!* [1954], the original *Godzilla* [1954], or *X: The Unknown* [1956]; also see the more recent *The Children* [1980]).[2] Indeed, "for American movie audiences, the catharsis [stimulated by such horror] serves to vent emotion which, in turn, represses nuclear guilt. Gojira, Mothra, Ghidrah, Ebirah, the giant ants in *Them,* the octopus in *It Came from Beneath the Sea,* the jet-propelled prehistoric turtle Gamera, mutant birds, tarantulas, sea serpents, and dinosaurs all serve as metaphors for nuclear power and armaments."[3] Such films have also expressed discomfort over the potential devastation of nuclear war (as in *Five* [1951] or *On the Beach* [1959]), and fears regarding radiation have continued until recently (as in 2012's *The Chernobyl Diaries*).

Science fiction in print or film has often used outer space and extraterrestrials to explore political themes as well. Alien invasions in films, novels, or television often involve themes regarding alien races threatening the subjection of Earth to invasion (*War of the Worlds* [novel 1898, film 1953]), extraction of resources (L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth* [novel 1982, film 2000]), genocide/extermination (*Independence Day* [1996]), colonization (the television show *V*), enslavement, abduction (frequently seen in *The X Files*), consumption of humans as a food source (the *Twilight Zone* episode "To Serve Man" [1962]), war (the novel *Ender's Game* [1985] or *Starship Troopers* [serial begun 1959, film 1997]), or destruction (Charles Pellegrino

and George Zebrowski's novel *The Killing Star* [1995]), and often multiple elements are found in a single work. Frequently these elements echo and implicitly critique periods of world history and actions of nations against each other (and sometimes perform such a critique through making the alien race[s] sympathetic subjects of human aggression, as in James Cameron's *Avatar* [2009]). Aliens in horror often reflect similar concerns, with elements that implicitly or explicitly express political themes. The background of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) is a future world in which corporations have attained unprecedented power. As Jim Naureckas notes, *Alien* "offered a strong critique of corporate domination and women's submissive roles. . . . For Scott the Company's corruption stands as a critique of capitalism."[4] Films about human interactions with extraterrestrials in both horror and science fiction often express and/or amplify our deepest concerns and fears about the present and the future, and often these fears have political implications.

Science fiction and horror have been venues for expression of dystopian and often horrific potential futures. A number of very influential dystopian novels have emerged to critique potential futures, including a future of state censorship (Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* [1953]), a totalitarian surveillance state (George Orwell's *1984* [1949]), a world in which totalitarian control is maintained through the mandating of superficial pleasures (Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* [1931]), and a world in which unchecked population growth and environmental ruin destroy civilization (Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!* [1966]). Popular futuristic films with dystopian themes, sometimes emerging from novels or short stories and sometimes standing alone, have critiqued possible effects of the technological creation of artificial human beings (such as the effects of using them for slave labor, as in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* [1982] or as highlighted in TV's *Battlestar Galactica* [original 1978, remake 2004–2009]); have projected the negative effects of further development of trends under capitalism (such as further proletarianization, in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* [1927] or, more recently, *In Time* [2011]); varied negative futures marked by further corporate domination over society (*Blade Runner, RoboCop* [1987], or Mike Judge's *Idiocracy* [2006]); or have considered potential consequences of the world descending into either totalitarianism (Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* [1985], George Lucas's *THX 1138* [1971]) or anarchy (*Mad Max* [1979]).

Horror, further, is often embedded with cultural critique as either an explicit or an implicit element of the plot. George A. Romero's genre-defining *Dead* series uses a zombie apocalypse over a series of films to critique the

military, the media (*Diary of the Dead* [2008]), government (*Day of the Dead* [1985]), American consumerism (*Dawn of the Dead* [1985]), and capitalism and its economic effects between the haves and the have-nots (*Land of the Dead* [2005]). In the original *Night of the Living Dead,* the portrayal of the main character, Ben, is far from typical of African Americans in cinema at the time: "Slapping the frantic Barbra to calm her down, shooting the crazed father of a sanctimonious white family determined to hide in the fruit cellar, and existing as the only survivor of the ordeal, only to be shot down by a white-trash militia there to save the day, Ben single-handedly revolutionizes the presence of African Americans in cinema."[5] Even though the racial politics of the original *Dead* film are clear to some, the level of ambiguity of the message is reduced with all subsequent films.[6] Horror films have also been used to critique biological weapons and other government experiments (frequently found with a critique of the government, as in *The Crazies* [1973] or *28 Days Later* [2002]), media propaganda (*They Live!* [1988]), the negative effects of advertising and the food industry (*The Stuff* [1985]), the effects of racism (*White Dog* [1982]), anti-immigrant fervor and the laws that result from it (if you count the severity of violence in certain scenes in *Machete* [2010]—not quite horror, but hey, I really like it), and even the devolution of the nuclear family (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974]). Mike Nichols's *Wolf* (1994) critiques the predatory effects of capitalism, while Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) can be read as a critique of workplace sexism, *Wolfen* (1981) serves as a critique of what would happen if classes develop into castes, and *Se7en* plays off our fears of our greatest vices. Indeed, horror works through the utilization of our deepest fears . . . and so many of our fears regard the potentialities of the future and the ills of the present, providing a firm venue to use political and social allegory in the construction of tales of horror.

Treatments of monsters in horror and science fiction literature and film share the capability to serve as venues for political and social allegory. Indeed, the "gist of horror is facing evils in everyday life. This is to say that the genius of horror is subtext: symbolism that creeps beneath surface meanings to assault our dreams and awaken our minds. Subtext is implicit text underneath the explicit, literal text, that is, the message in the communication medium."[7]

Monster films can serve to tell both of the kinds of horror tales that Guillermo del Toro identifies—both the anarchic and antiestablishment, critical variety and the proinstitution, fear-and-order variety. The horror

movie problematizes the "social construction of 'evil'" that demonizes "the Other," that is, "that which is deemed by dominant culture antithetical to the Self, which in this civilization embodies the interests of white bourgeois patriarchy and capital."[8] Indeed, the horror genre, "from its inception in the German Expressionist cinema and the Universal horror films of the 1930s . . . seemed to understand the Other as a scapegoat and to refuse to see the monster as an aberration to be put down to secure bourgeois normality." As the genre developed, progressive trends advanced: "The horror films of the 1960s and 1970s became steadily more progressive, constantly challenging the legitimacy of capitalist, patriarchal rule, with the monster no longer metaphysical or the product of a lab experiment gone awry. Instead, the monster became an emblem of the upheaval in bourgeois civilization itself, a 'perfectly ordinary bourgeoise,' thus dissolving further the Self/Other dichotomy."[9] Moreover, as Sharrett argues, neoconservative elements begin to bleed further into the horror genre in general following the Reagan era, adding to the complexity of the neoconservative messages. The monster, the eternal Other, and its treatment and origin are important elements in the monster movie genre.

Often monsters have directly represented that which was feared in the society they came from. The racial politics embedded in *King Kong* (1931) are often critiqued for representing racist stereotypes and fears of black men: "Racist conceptions of blacks often depict them as subhuman, ape or monkey-like. And consider the plot of the film: Kong is forcibly taken from his jungle home, brought in chains to the United States, where he is put on stage as a freak entertainment attraction. He breaks his chains and goes on a rampage in the metropolis, until finally he is felled by the forces of law and order."[10]

Another classic movie monster, Godzilla, originated in the original 1954 Toho classic as a four-hundred-foot-tall prehistoric monster emerging due to a hydrogen-bomb test. Indeed, "Godzilla was, even in its bowdlerized 'King of the Monsters' incarnation, an obvious gigantic, unsubtle, grimly purposeful metaphor for the atomic bomb."[11] Regarding the ever-popular undead monsters—namely, vampires and zombies—it has been argued that "more vampire movies come out when Democrats are elected to the US Presidency, and more zombie movies come out when the Republicans are in office."[12] One possible explanation is that "Democrats, who want to redistribute wealth to 'Main Street,' fear the Wall Street vampires who bleed the nation dry," Annalee Newitz, editor of io9.com, has argued, noting that

Dracula and his ilk arose from the aristocracy. "Republicans fear a revolt of the poor and disenfranchised, dressed in rags and coming to the White House to eat their brains."[13] Monsters are clearly often used as embodiments of symbolic political meanings.

Looking at the origin stories of the monsters in the rebirth of monster movies is just as instructive. *The Host* begins with an American military pathologist dumping a couple hundred bottles of formaldehyde into the sewer system; in a few years a bizarre-looking amphibious monster emerges from the Han River. The movie follows a family's efforts to rescue a girl taken by the monster, as well as the response of the government. The movie was explicitly inspired by a real-life incident in the year 2000 in which a Korean mortician working for the U.S. military in Seoul dumped a large quantity of formaldehyde down the drain and later a deformed fish was found. The South Korean government is portrayed as bureaucratic and inept, while the United States is portrayed as not caring about the effects of its actions in Korea, and the film is a thinly veiled critique of the effects of the United States in Korea. Similarly, *The Mist,* based on the Stephen King novella of the same name, tells the story of a man trapped in a supermarket (with his son and a number of others in his town) by a thick mist, within which lie terrifying creatures. The mist results from a military experiment gone wrong, thus revealing a critique of the U.S. military. Simultaneously, right-wing religion divides the townspeople within the supermarket, and over time the right-wing religious are shown to be as frightening as the monsters outside (or more so).

Splice tells the story of genetic engineers who break the rules in corporate-funded research by including human genes in a secret splicing project, and negative consequences emerge. The film simultaneously critiques the potential negative consequences of emerging technologies and, particularly towards the end, corporations for playing irresponsible games with dangerous technologies for profit. *Troll Hunter* involves the discovery by a group of students of the existence of trolls, while the government both attempts to keep the trolls from preying on the human population and to keep their existence a secret. *Rare Exports* involves the discovery of the creature behind the myths of Santa Claus, who punished naughty children instead of rewarding the good. The movie finds an American businessman leading a corporation attempting to unearth the Santa Clause creature (entombed beneath a mountain) and concludes with the production of a curious "rare export"; thus both beginning and end of the movie provide the elements of a critique of corporate

responsibility. Finally, *Monsters* begins in a world where a NASA deep-space probe has crashed, spreading extraterrestrial matter along the U.S.-Mexico border and producing a large number of extraterrestrial monsters throughout that zone, while the protagonists attempt to safely escape the zone from Mexico by crossing over the border. Thus, in the words of an NPR review, "All of this . . . is in the service of an obvious social metaphor. . . . Here, the U.S. military has erected a huge border wall along the Rio Grande to keep aliens from, um, entering the U.S. illegally."[14] In other words, *Monsters* can be interpreted as a critique of U.S. immigration policy. Many of these films, in short, extend a critical eye to either the government and military (*The Host, The Mist, Monsters,* or *Troll Hunter*) or corporations (*Splice, Rare Exports*). These critical trends and the longer and more extensive history of embedding horror, science fiction, and monster movies with political, economic, and cultural criticisms are by no means absent from *Cloverfield*.

Abrams and the Environment

Abrams's *Cloverfield* follows a group of New Yorkers as they attempt to survive a monster attack on the city. The film itself is notable for the lack of a direct backstory regarding the monster. So since, as I have shown, the origin of the monster is often a central part of the film's explicit or implicit critique, how do we excavate the social and political critique embedded in the film? The lack of direct backstory was part of Abrams's conception from the get-go: "[Drew] Goddard pointed out the lack of explanation in the film of the creature's origin was deliberate so as to make the film more realistic, as civilians would not know where it would come from."[15] So what can we know about the creature?

    Cloverfield was preceded by a viral marketing campaign, spread in pieces through numerous websites, which gives us insight into the monster. According to the film's backstory, Tagruato is a Japanese mining company with oil rigs throughout the world, which uses "groundbreaking deep-sea drilling technology" to go to places that no one has gone to before.[16] Tagruato owns subsidiaries that specialize in "deep sea bioprospecting . . . [and implement] Tagruato's advanced exploration technology to study extremophiles found only in the deepest parts of our oceans" (Yoshida Medical Research), engage "in the conception, design, manufacture and integration of advanced technology products" (Bold Futura), and create paraffin wax by-products from their petroleum reservoir (ParafFun! Wax Distributors), as well as a

cold-beverage company called Slusho![17] Tagruato was founded in 1945 as a mining company, declined over time, and was reborn in 1989 when an engineer, Ganu Yoshida, reoriented the company toward oil. "Over the next 15 years, twelve more drilling stations were built all over the globe, each more efficient and productive than the last. Yoshida became C.E.O., and soon left the tainted name behind to rename the company Tagruato, after its dream-filled founder. Following the model of diversification, Yoshida expanded into subsidiaries including Bold Futura, Yoshida Medical Research, Slusho! brand happy drink, and ParafFun! Wax Distributors."[18] Ganu is the son of Noriko Yoshida, who wanted to create "the best drink ever" and disappeared while searching for the "greatest, most tastiest ingredient." Ganu took over her quest.

One day the Tagruato company (under Ganu's leadership) discovered "Seabed's Nectar." Ganu had a dream telling him to drink the ingredient, and Ganu himself realized he had found the ingredient his mother had been looking for. Seabed's Nectar, discovered in the cold of the bottom of the ocean, was used in Slusho! drinks, sold nearly frozen to preserve the ingredient. The massive size of the Cloverfield monster is largely due to its resting at the bottom of the ocean and consuming large amounts of Seabed's Nectar, which has steroid-like properties and promotes cell division and growth. It had rested on the ocean floor for thousands of years, gaining size in the deep of the Atlantic Ocean. Clover was discovered by Tagruato's Chuai Station, which was destroyed in 2008, prior to the monster's emergence in New York.[19]

The released, angry monster rampages through New York, which is where *Cloverfield* picks up. *Cloverfield* tells the story of the rampage by following six New Yorkers attending a going-away party for Rob Hawkins, prior to his moving to Japan to become vice president of marketing for Slusho! Ironic, huh? The film follows Rob; his brother Jason; his longtime friend and love interest, Beth; his best friend, Hud; Marlena, a girl who spends most of the party trying to avoid Hud; and Lily, a friend of Beth and Marlena. The six of them attempt to escape New York before the military initiates HAMMERDOWN protocol and bombs New York and the monster. But is this a simple monster film, merely about a rampaging "thing" and a destroyed city? (Is there even such a thing as a *simple* monster film?)

At first glance, yes, *Cloverfield* is about a monster that rampages through a city. As we have seen, however, a monster's backstory and context are dramatically important for unearthing the social or political subtext of a film. The first thing to note is that *neither* the military/government *nor*

corporations were the origin of Clover, its physical attributes, or its size. It is established through the film's viral backstory that the monster grew to its size by consuming a large amount of Seabed's Nectar (yep . . . the main ingredient of Slusho!). Sometime after, Clover hibernated for thousands of years. This origin story doesn't thus implicate *anything* about corporations or governments, but one can easily infer certain themes about nature from it. Nature is a force subject to human actions but ultimately beyond human control, suggested both by the complete disconnection of Clover's origin from human actions and by people's continuing inability to escape its rampage or (likely) destroy it. (While we never see what actually happens to Rob and Beth, nor the results of the HAMMERDOWN bombing, after the end credits you can hear "help us" inside the static, and if you play this part of the video backward you hear something like "it's still alive." So in other words, the audience doesn't know either.) Nature is also largely unpredictable. (*Cloverfield*'s director, Matt Reeves, noted that "the key to it is that the monster was a baby. The monster was suffering from separation anxiety and was absolutely disoriented and pissed, 'where's mommy?' and terrified. That was the most important aspect of the creature.")[20] The monster was *designed* to be unpredictable, and that unpredictability was used to make Clover all the more frightening.

A further point, both connected to nature yet moving beyond it, is that two general trends guide many of the plot elements of the film: (1) material needs (most obviously survival, though it should not be forgotten that the creature grew to its enormous size because of what it *ate,* survived in a long sleep, was awoken because of unintended consequences of a soft drink company's actions, and rampaged because it was scared and increasingly in pain); and (2) (human) social activity that obviously *requires* and *presupposes* yet *transcends* mere material need, as a significant portion of the film and its drama rests on Rob's decision to *not* run to safety and instead attempt to save Beth *and* on his friends' choices to stay with him in the effort to save Beth (rather than run themselves).

An analysis of the political and social subtext of *Cloverfield* also can't omit its sometimes subtle (sometimes not so subtle) relation to the events of 9/11. Even in the early promotional stage, before people knew what the monster or threat was about, posters related that "Some Thing Has Found Us" and showed a headless Statue of Liberty. As Stephanie Zacharek of Salon.com critically notes, "*Cloverfield* harnesses the horror of 9/11— specifically as it was felt in New York—and repackages it as an amusement-

park ride. We see familiar buildings exploding and crumpling before our eyes, and plumes of smoke rolling up the narrow corridors formed by lower-Manhattan streets, images that were once the province of news footage and have now been reduced to special effects."[21] In a *Time* interview, Abrams indirectly alludes to a connection between the monster and the events of September 11. He explains, "With *Cloverfield* we were trying to create a film that would be entertaining and, as a by-product of the subject matter, perhaps be a catharsis. We wanted to let people live through their wildest fears but be in a safe place where the enemy is the size of a skyscraper instead of some stateless, unseen cowardly terrorist."[22] *Cloverfield* does show clear inspiration from the events of 9/11, and the monster's rampage can be seen as an allegory in some respects for that event. But other than a fairly face-value connection between particular historical events and the content of the movie alongside some very abstract connections to the environment, is there another level of meaning?

While the actions of the company Tagruato did not create the monster or its size, it did release the creature. How did this happen? Clover was supposedly awakened by submarines at Chuai Station, that is, as an unintentional consequence of corporate actions related to the environment.[23] The proximity of Chuai Station to Clover is suggested to have something to do with Tagruato's discovery of Clover.[24] In the associated (but widely considered noncanonical) *Cloverfield/Kishin* manga, Clover is under study by Tagruato.[25] Clover, the object of study or the accidental discovery of a corporation as it plunged into Seabed's Nectar, Clover's food source, is woken in the course of that profit-driven activity and proceeds to rampage through New York City after destroying the rig. As a dangerous element of nature unleashed by careless corporate activity within the depths of the environment (for the purpose of profit), Clover is at the very least a possible symbol of the negative consequences to human beings of damages to the environment brought about by corporate activity in the pursuit of profit, so characteristic of capitalism. But to analyze this further, is the environment *necessarily* harmed by the ordinary profit-seeking tendencies of capitalism? Karl Marx, the philosopher and radical economist, would answer with an unequivocal yes.

A Specter Is Haunting Hollywood

Karl Marx, nineteenth-century philosopher, economist, and critic of capitalism, argued that capitalism inherently involves a number of negative

consequences for humanity and nature and that its everyday operations contribute to these harmful ends. The background of Marx's critique of capitalism is found in a theory originated by Marx and Friedrich Engels, commonly referred to as "historical materialism." Marx summarizes this most succinctly in what is commonly referred to as his 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

> In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.[26]

To round out certain aspects of this precise (but too swift) summary of historical materialism, we should add certain elements of other formulations before proceeding.

In Marx and Engels's earlier work *The German Ideology,* they summarize "premises" of history that precede all other human history. The "first premise of all human history" is "of course, the existence of living human individuals," and therefore "the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature." Otherwise stated, the first premise "of all human existence and, therefore, of all human history . . . [is] that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history.' . . . But life

involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, cloth-
ing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production
of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself,"
which "today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled
merely in order to sustain human life."[27] The importance of the "mode of
production" in this instance stems from the fact that the distinguishing
feature of the human species, for Marx, is that humans "begin to distin-
guish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their
means of subsistence" and "the way in which men produce their means
of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of
subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce."[28] Moreover, the
"second" moment of human history is "that the satisfaction of the first
need . . . leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first
historical act."[29] The conditions of continued production and interaction
with nature need to be continually reproduced. Finally, the third premise
of human history is "that men, who daily remake their own life, begin
to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man
and woman, parent and children, the *family*."[30] Perhaps these moments
of history might be summarized as (1) production, (2) reproduction of
the conditions of production, and (3) reproduction of the human spe-
cies, the first two contained in the concept of the "mode of production,"
the economic system, and the third generally contained in the notion of
the "mode of reproduction," that is, the family.

The importance of production and reproduction of the human species,
then, underlies historical materialism, though the latter is often ignored.
Surely that nuance is not exhibited in the shorter 1859 preface, largely due
to the separation of production *from* reproduction under capitalism (and
thus the subordination of the latter), but it is picked up again by Engels in
The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State. Engels notes:

> According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in
> history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction
> of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one
> side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing,
> and shelter and the tools necessary for that production: on the other
> side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation
> of the species. The social organization under which the people of
> a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is deter-

mined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labor on the one hand, and of the family on the other.[31]

Thus the *ultimate* preconditions of human history are the success of human production (which requires the meeting of human needs and keeps human beings alive) and reproduction (which requires just that, successful reproductive activity simultaneous with material conditions that allow continuing generations to survive well enough to continue the species). Both production and reproduction, however, require continuing mediation with nonhuman nature in order to be successful, and thus, ultimately, humanity's interaction with nature as individuals and as a species significantly characterizes and affects successful production and reproduction, and therefore, human history.

This importance of nature in Marx's theory, though often lost in earlier interpretations of Marx's historical materialist conception of human history, is expressed in John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology.* Foster writes that "Marx tended to see his materialist conception of history as rooted in a materialist conception of nature, which together constituted the realm of natural history." The strength of Marx's analysis and incorporation of nature "lay in its emphasis on the quality of the interaction between humanity and nature, or what he was eventually to call the 'metabolism' of humanity with nature through production."[32] Marx wrote, specifically, that labor in the abstract refers to "the entire productive activity of man, through which his metabolic interchange with nature is mediated."[33] What Marx and Engels advocated regarding human interaction with nature, which was necessary for the survival of the species, was not the absolute absence of human impact on nature but instead "that of encouraging a sustainable relation between human beings and nature through the organization of production in ways that took into account the metabolic relation between human beings and the earth."[34]

Marx's development of the concept of metabolism to describe this interaction between humanity and nonhuman nature was developed in Marx's mature work in *Das Kapital.* Marx argues that "the labour-process," the core of human production and interchange with nature, "is human action with a view to the production of use values, appropriation of natural substances to human requirements; it is the necessary condition for effective exchange of matter between man and Nature; it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence, and therefore is independent of every social

phase of that existence, or rather, is common to every such phase."[35] Labor incorporates the materials of nonhuman nature to allow human survival, and nature (and such metabolism) is the background condition to all human activity. Marx clearly critiques the Gotha Program, the party platform of the German Social Democratic Party, for its denial of nature's importance. Whereas the platform states that "labour is the source of all wealth and all culture," Marx contends in "Critique of the Gotha Programme" that "labour is *not the source* of all wealth. *Nature* is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labour, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power."[36] Here, in a very mature work, Marx not only makes it evident that he views nature as at least coequal to human labor with regard to the "creation of use values," that is, the rendering of the products of nature and human labor into useful and usable goods, but indeed proceeds to subordinate human labor analytically to and within nature, insofar as humanity is part of nature, not beyond it. But where does this leave us with *capitalism* and nature?

Marx argues that under capitalism, as a distinct mode of production with a class division between the *bourgeoisie,* who privately own the means of production (the goods that human labor interacts with to meet human ends in the process of achieving the human metabolism with nature), and the *proletariat,* who largely do not, goods are produced for the sake of *capital accumulation,* the profitable expansion of capitalist industry. In other words, capitalists own the resources and tools required for noncapitalists to achieve their *metabolism* with nature, and those individuals need to then orient their human interaction to be profitable for capitalists; thus the human metabolism with nature and the impact of human labor on nature are both subordinated to profitability. Profitability becomes the standard of the human interaction with nature; it determines how nature is valued, what kinds of impacts thus tend to occur, and thus what might happen to nature because of human action. With profitability as the standard, human interaction with nature is not limited by successful meeting of human needs, sustainability, ecological balance, or anything of that kind but is instead oriented toward the singular goal of profit at all costs, restricted primarily by limited considerations of sustainable resource use (which in many cases is not a factor in short-term business accountancy). More importantly, human interaction with nature is restricted by the effects of class struggle on limiting the capacity of the bourgeoisie to subordinate all things to the singular standard of profitability.

In short, Marx's notion of historical materialism highlights (among other things) that (1) the background condition to human activity is nonhuman nature; (2) humanity needs consistent interaction with nature through labor; and (3) humanity is itself a part of and neither above nor separate from nonhuman nature. People are of nature and ultimately subordinate to it, and while their actions can affect and change it they cannot subject it to their will in an absolute sense. Additionally, the (4) subordination of human activity to capitalism subordinates nature and humanity's impact on it to that which is profitable. This often causes, in Marx's terminology (following a discussion of the work of the chemist Justus von Liebig on the impact of capitalism on the soil through the application of large-scale agriculture), "an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism" and thus squanders "the vitality of the soil." More generally, capitalism introduces "metabolic rifts" in nature's natural processes, which ultimately undermine their vitality, break apart elements of the ecosystem, and have disastrous effects on nature. In short, capitalism produces disastrous consequences to nature through its one-sided focus on profitability as the criterion of its interactions with nature, and thus interactions end up badly for both nature and humanity.

The Chuai Station Ideology

As we've seen, horror and science fiction have often incorporated political and social critique, sometimes explicit but often implicit. *Cloverfield* proves no different, and it connects to Marxian political ecology on a number of levels. First, *Cloverfield* certainly contains an element that shows obvious inspiration from and to some degree represents the events of 9/11. This has been alluded to in interviews and noted in several reviews and academic articles. From a broadly Marxian standpoint, one could analyze terrorism and/or the events of 9/11 in a number of ways, foremost among them likely those accounts that center around (1) a critique of imperialism and the reactions of subordinated populations to it, connecting the state to capitalism in the modern period, and perhaps also (2) a focus on the use of (specifically fundamentalist) religion as a tool of control that fuels terrorist activity. The latter point, for example, notes that "the real innovation" in terrorism in "the late twentieth century is the appearance of radical religious (or quasireligious) nationalist groups adopting terrorism as their main form of struggle, sometimes within the framework of established religion (mainly Islam, but

also Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism), and sometimes in the form of millenarian sects."[37]

This new terrorism aims "not clearly at defined political demands but at the destruction of society and the elimination of large sections of the population. . . . In its most extreme form, this new terrorism intends to liquidate all satanic forces, which may include the majority of a country or of mankind" that is, the achievement of "purity" by destruction of the impure.[38] In this instance, perhaps, analytical connections could be made between (1) the use of religion as a superstructural "weapon" of a subordinated group or region against Western/American political/economic dominance, (2) the background of religion itself, grounded in material socioeconomic context, and (3) the background of the global reach of the American and Western states in the context of the spread of monopoly capital and uneven development.

Perhaps the "terrorist" link of the *Cloverfield* monster attack is not the strongest *analytical* connection, although it might be perhaps the most obvious inspiration. *Clover* is a scared, large baby. It arrives in the city without *intending* to arrive in the city, becomes scared and enraged while in pain, eats people because of hunger, and so on. This motivation is far more characteristic of an animal's instinct than a human being's motivational choices. Marx writes in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,* "The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity.* Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species-being."[39] Clover's motivations are *deeply* and *purely* material; Clover *is* its life activity, and its actions are not "the object of his will and his consciousness." The causes of Clover's rampage are far more characteristic of an animal ruled by intent than of human beings' more complex, freely conscious choices. Regardless of whatever association might be made with terrorism and inhumanity, or terrorists with monsters, terrorism is a complex and multifaceted human activity, embedded in a wide religious and sociopolitical/economic context, and terrorists, *whatever else they are,* are still human beings making human choices, dramatically *unlike* the sources and the origins *of Clover's rampage.* Clover is a walking, breathing, destroying material force whose actions admit no *superstructural influence or determination,* and *Clover's actions,* the actions of an animal, are instinctual. In short, while connecting the *Cloverfield* events and the events of 9/11 can

present the film as a sort of crude analogy of a terrorist event and the chaos and destruction that accompany it, it is at best a *crude,* face-value connection. Considering the monster for what it explicitly is analytically cuts off the potential of Clover to serve as a deep political allegory about terrorism or terrorists. What might be a deeper connection than the events of 9/11?

The sheer *materiality* of *Clover*'s actions, then, speak far more to natural force than human motivation. This, combined with the canonical explanation of the monster's origin in its long consumption of Seabed's Nectar (a wholly natural, albeit strange, substance), firmly ground Clover as a representative of nature. Nature, as represented by Clover, shares tenets with the approach to nature of Marxian political ecology—nature can be affected by human beings, but it is ultimately outside human control. Human beings can be responsible for negative impacts on nature (generating ecological crises, awaking and enraging Clover), but there are limits to our control and impact. To be successful within the constraints of nature, our actions must be consistent in the long run with the material constraints of nature (avoid imposing metabolic rifts, avoid waking Clover, etc.), and to fail to avoid these pitfalls is to risk destruction. Clover perhaps best represents not nature in general in its normal operations, that is, an ecosystem's normally uninterrupted metabolic process (which the hibernating Clover, who over presumably thousands of years peacefully consumed Seabed's Nectar and slept, might be said to represent at that pre-human-interaction stage), but *ecological crisis,* wherein formerly harmless (but always potentially destructive) nature becomes massively destructive with ultimately little warning.

Of the major sources of ecological crisis, then, human action (the interjection of metabolic rifts into natural processes), the destruction of ordinary natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, etc.) and exoplanetary threats (comets, etc.), Clover seems to be specifically most representative of ecological crises due to human-created *metabolic rifts,* as Clover was awakened as a consequence not of natural processes or exoplanetary threats but as an unintentional result of a company's actions in pursuit of profit. Moreover, the monster became progressively enraged through its engagement with the destructive capabilities of the American military and state. If the profit-centered activities of a corporation, following the logic of the capitalist mode of production, altered nonhuman nature in such a way as to produce disastrous effects (created a metabolic rift?), perhaps the underlying message, however intentional or unintentional, is to highlight both that corpo-

rate activities in production affect nature and that their effects can produce metabolic rifts, or large-scale ecological crises.

To examine this possibility, let's do a brief review. Marx's exposition of historical materialism highlights that (1) a necessary precondition to human activity is nonhuman nature (which humanity can affect but not ultimately control), (2) humanity (alongside all species) needs constant interaction with nature through labor, and (3) humanity is itself a part of and neither above nor separate from nature. Beyond this, (4) the subordination of human activity to capitalism subordinates nature and humanity's impact on it to that which is profitable (i.e., profitability rather than anything else becomes the standard by which corporations affect nature) and (5) this often produces metabolic rifts—effectively cleavages in the processes of the ecosystem such that ecological crises are produced. These (6) often have destructive results.

In *Cloverfield,* Clover can best be understood as the predominant materiality of nature—Clover is a large animal whose driving forces are hunger, fear, pain. Moreover, it was Clover's metabolism with nature through Seabed's Nectar that produced its size and, presumably, its long life, rather than human intervention. Clover was awakened as a consequence of corporate activity in the pursuit of profit and had grown increasingly angered because of the activities of the American state—that is, human beings had the capacity to negatively affect Clover but had nothing to do with its origin. In this, Clover moved from harmless, long-dormant natural force to devastating and uncontrollable force of nature—that is, Clover became a representation of *ecological crisis* caused by irresponsible corporate activity. It was Tagruato's intervention in the otherwise continually undisturbed metabolic process of Clover that interrupted its long, peaceful slumber (and continuous diet of Seabed's Nectar . . . yum!). In other words, in the pursuit of profit Tagruato in effect produced an ecological crisis by creating a metabolic rift, whose consequences were the destruction of much of New York City. *Cloverfield,* as it turns out, is far more than a fairly face-value articulation of post-9/11 fears of terrorism—it serves as an illustration of ecological crisis.

The monster subgenres of horror and science fiction, alongside science fiction and horror more generally, have long been used to display and explore our social and political fears, or the unintended consequences of human action against particular social and political backdrops. Often the origin and background of the creature that causes the crisis tell us as much as its actions and the actions of the characters around it. Clover can be considered as a

destructive natural force, an ecological crisis caused by the introduction of a metabolic rift in nature due to corporations' profit-seeking behavior. *Cloverfield,* then, illustrates key elements of Marx's theory of historical materialism and Marxian political ecology and serves to show how, in the pursuit of profit, capitalism produces actions that neglect their potential costs on humanity and the ecosystem. Consequentially, the ecological impact of capitalism is often destructive (and can be ultimately uncontrollable). Clover's awakening and rampage can perhaps be viewed as more than a good-time scarefest. Instead, perhaps *Cloverfield* can engage us in thoughtful critique about the negative ecological consequences of the capitalist mode of production.

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CLOVERFIELD, SUPER 8, AND THE MORALITY OF TERRORISM

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The trope of invasion by otherworldly or mutated others has often been used in the science fiction film genre as a metaphor for terrorism and conquest. From the Communist-threat, mind-control original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *War of the Worlds* (1953), to nuclear-bomb-test fears in *Godzilla* (1954/56 U.S. release) and *Them* (1954), to the nuclear war instigated by cybernetic beings in the *Terminator* films and television series (1984–2009), these sorts of monster movies have played on our fears of losing control of our minds, bodies, and cities. In the post-9/11 era the fear of "the other" invading us, intent on both physical and psychological terror and conquest, has been given new impetus. In two J. J. Abrams films, *Cloverfield* (producer, 2008) and *Super 8* (writer and director, 2010), we see this concept play out in different ways. A fuller definition of terrorism and the question of whether it is ever morally justified will help us see how these two films may be understood as a reflection of their times.

What Is Terrorism?

Deriving from the Latin *terrere* (meaning "to frighten"), terrorism is a concept that has been defined in multiple ways, and like many politically charged concepts there is no universal definition upon which all can agree. Yet in *Inside Terrorism,* Bruce Hoffman notes features that we can point to as indicative of terrorism.[1] Paraphrasing Hoffman, terrorism is an act that is:

(1) Violent, namely, causing physical harm or death. This violence is directed toward some intended target that the perpetrator believes deserves physical harm or death but usually entails harm or death

for innocent persons who act as collateral damage. Thus, beyond the obvious harm done to the intended target, the suffering and death of innocents seem to be a key feature of a terrorist act.

(2) Perpetuated in such a way as to cause psychological trauma to those who survive or witness the violence firsthand or are privy to the effects of the violence through experiencing the aftermath of the violence, through word-of-mouth, or through media sources. In other words, a terrorist act is orchestrated so as to have a threatening and frightening psychological effect beyond the immediate victim or target. This causes the specter of a "we don't know when it's coming, but it's coming" kind of terror. So it's not just the terror associated with the violent action being carried out right before someone's eyes, so to speak, but also the terror that is burned into people's memory banks, as well as the terror that haunts the various scenarios that people can imagine taking place at some future time.

(3) Intended to bring public, media attention to some smaller group, cause, ideology, or individual that usually perceives itself as being treated unjustly or inappropriately by the larger group, cause, ideology, or other individuals that make up the social world of both groups.

The above characterization of terrorism comports well with the description in a United Nations Secretary General report from 2004 of terrorism as any act "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act."[2] And this certainly was the intent of Sergey Nechayev, who was one of the first persons in Western history (documented, that we know of) to use the word *terrorist* to describe himself and the activities of his Russian faction, People's Retribution, back in 1869.[3] Examples of terrorist acts include assassinations, bombings, sabotage on a grand scale, kidnapping, and hijacking of airplanes or facilities.

Justifications for Terrorism

Most people think that a terrorist act is wrong and immoral and that there are no situations whatsoever in which a terrorist act is, or could be, justi-

fied. However, there are those who would maintain just the opposite. What might the justification(s) for terrorism be? One commonly held justification for terrorism goes something like this:

> If a person or minority group is being treated unjustly in a social situation (for example, through genocide, systematic torture or rape, general lack of basic rights and privileges, etc.), and there is no way to address or redress the injustice through the social situation's own legislative, judicial, and/or administrative system(s), then the person or minority group is justified in utilizing terrorist actions to address and/or redress the injustice.

One example comes to mind where terrorist acts seem justified, and it has to do with the fascist totalitarianism of Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler's regime (1933–1945). There exist volumes and volumes of historical accounts, as well as firsthand accounts, of the utter horror experienced by minorities (including, but not limited to, Romany gypsies, Jews, the disabled, and homosexuals) living in this regime in which historically unprecedented forms of suffering, genocide, and general injustices took place. The minority peoples in this regime—pretty much anyone not considered to be an Aryan German—were treated in grossly inhumane ways.[4]

In fact, terrorist actions against Nazi Germany have been documented. For example, the film *Valkyrie* (2008), starring Tom Cruise, was based on what has come to be called the 20 July Plot of 1944, which was a failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler orchestrated primarily by Claus von Stauffenberg. Von Stauffenberg and many other German nationalists had become convinced by 1944 not only that their country was losing World War II but also that a government agreeable to the Allies needed to be put into place so that Germany could survive. Further than this, the Nazi atrocities committed against Jews and other minority groups were unacceptable. Thus, according to von Stauffenberg and his conspirators, Hitler and other high-ranking Nazis needed to be assassinated and a new governing body put in place. The 20 July Plot of 1944 bombing assassination attempt failed to kill Hitler—the bomb went off underneath a sturdy table Hitler was seated at during a meeting, and it is believed that the table shielded him from the full force of the blow—however, few would dispute that this example of terrorism was a good thing and that a better thing would have been for Hitler to have been killed in the attack.[5]

But what about innocents who suffer and die as a result of terrorist acts? In fact, in the 20 July Plot of 1944, although two Nazi generals and one Nazi colonel died, both of whom it could be argued deserved it, an innocent German stenographer also died. Surely the stenographer did not deserve this, and in fact, causing him harm is considered immoral, correct?

There are two responses we can note here. The first is that any terrorist act—almost by definition, as we saw above—will include harm done to innocents, and this harm is justified on the grounds of collateral damage. In any kind of war or fight, there may be innocents who suffer, and that's just par for the course in these situations. There is an obligation to avoid such collateral damage, or at least minimize it as much as possible; no one should intentionally harm innocents just for the sake of harming them. Thus, when the terrorist is carrying out a plan, the most moral thing to do would be to target only those who are directly responsible for the injustices. So, for example, von Stauffenberg in the 20 July Plot of 1944 seemed to have the right idea in trying to blow up only Hitler and members of his cabinet.

Another response regarding the immorality associated with innocent victims of terrorist acts is that there really are *no* innocent persons in these social settings where a minority group is being treated unjustly. By virtue of living in the social setting perpetuating the injustice, all those benefiting from the privileges of that social setting are complicit, all are responsible, and hence all are guilty. There may be something to this concerning Nazi Germany, where it seems as if the majority of the population—judges, legislators, doctors, scientists, businesspersons—knew about the Holocaust (or at least knew about the straightforward scapegoating and prejudice against Jews and other non-Aryan types) and either did nothing to prevent it or assisted in some way.[6]

However, there are those who would argue that citizens are not directly responsible for the policies and procedures put into place by their government—especially in totalitarian regimes like Hitler's Germany, Joseph Stalin's U.S.S.R., or Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China—and so they are not guilty and should not be targeted by terrorist acts. In more democratic regimes it may be the case that innocent citizens are not so innocent, but we all know that even in the most democratic of regimes, the "common person" often does not have the power to influence public policy. Hence a strong case can be made that the "all are complicit, all are guilty" argument does not work, and terrorism is not justified. Further, it's even harder to justify that young children, the mentally handicapped, and the mentally ill in the

offending social setting—even the most evil and vile of social settings—are complicit and responsible in the same way that, say, the governors of that society, or rational adults, are.

The Immorality of Terrorism, the Harming of Innocents, and Kant and Mill

In talking about the suffering of innocents, we hinted above at one important reason why the terrorist act is considered immoral. Many would argue that the harming of innocents, even for the "necessary evil" of collateral damage, is wrong. There are at least two positions in the history of Western philosophy that can be appealed to as justification for the immorality of harming innocents.

One contemporary philosophical argument that harming innocents is wrong can be traced back to the work of the famous German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant observes that persons are unique in that they are conscious, rational beings, capable of making their own free and informed decisions. From the fact that humans are unique in this way, Kant tells us that we should "act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end." Kant is not ruling out the moral possibility of treating people as means. After all, we have to use people to acquire goods, services, information, and such things in order to live our daily lives. What he is ruling out is treating a person as *nothing but a means* for such ends. In other words, a person must always be treated as an end in him- or herself, even while also being used as a means to some other end. Because we are conscious, rational beings, persons have a "sanctified" and *intrinsic* value (as ends) and not just an *instrumental* value (as a means to an end), like some object, tool, thing, or instrument of terrorist objectives.

From this perspective, then, morally right decisions are those decisions that treat a person as an end, and morally wrong decisions are those that treat a person as a mere instrument or means to an end, specifically the end of some terrorist's master plan.[7] Also, Kant makes it clear that any kind of murder is considered immoral since the one murdered is being used by the murderer for the sake of the murderer's satisfaction, malice, or other selfish reason. Interestingly enough, the same goes for the avenger, where a person is used for the sake of vengeance.[8]

So from this Kantian perspective, persons, by virtue of their conscious

rational capacities, are free and autonomous beings having inalienable worth or dignity. Because of this intrinsic worth, a person should *never* be treated as collateral damage resulting from terrorist activities, whether that person is a prince or pauper, saint or sinner. It's primarily from this Kantian perspective that we are disgusted by the terrorist's actions in harming or killing innocent persons.

Another philosophical reason that terrorism is immoral can be traced back to the ideas of the famous British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Mill argued that an action is morally good insofar as its consequences promote the most benefit or biggest payoff, or pleasure for the most persons affected by the decision. This view has been termed *utilitarian* because of the apparent usefulness (utility) to be found in generating the most satisfaction for the group of persons. The foundation of morality, as far as utilitarians are concerned, is simply happiness—actions are good insofar as they increase the pleasures or decrease the pains of people, in general.[9] "What is most beneficial for the most" is the utilitarian's slogan.

Now, the utilitarian position justifies treating persons as means to the greater good of achieving benefit for the majority. For example, if the greater consequence of saving the group from some evildoer requires killing one, two, or even a hundred people in the process, then, on utilitarian grounds, this may be deemed morally correct. Think of the assassination attempt on Hitler cited earlier.

Or, if you're with a group of people on a lifeboat trapped at sea, you might be justified in taking the rations from the guy who is near death or beyond help; you could even be justified in killing one person and surviving on that person's flesh until you're saved by a passing ocean liner! It's the whole "killing one to save many" kind of thinking. Back in 1972 a Uruguayan rugby team crashed in the Andes Mountains and survivors actually had to eat the dead.[10] Mr. Spock said it best in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), and he even walked the talk by sacrificing his own life: "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few . . . or the one."

The utilitarian position can be used to argue that terrorist acts are wrong, given that the majority in a social setting are terrorized and suffer pain. If pain on a grand scale is the result, then the action should not be performed—period. The suffering of innocents adds an extra bit of pain that the utilitarian could argue makes the terrorist act all the more immoral.

Using the Kantian perspective and Mill's utilitarian position to examine the actions of the invaders in both *Cloverfield* and *Super 8* will allow us

to determine whether or not their actions may be defined as terrorism and whether they may be seen as morally justified. In addition, this should allow us to make comparisons as to how each film, made in a post-9/11 world, deals with the question of how to depict terrorism relative to the events of that day.

Like Godzilla

The narrative begins with the first frames, indicating that this film was recovered from the rubble of "Incident Site U.S. 447, formerly known as Central Park, New York City." One is immediately caught off guard and intrigued because of one's own direct visual experience of the destruction of parts of that American city in the 2001 terrorist attacks. Even if one was nowhere near any of the sites that were attacked that day in Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, and New York, every media outlet was focused on the unfolding events. Images of paper from the offices above fluttering down like giant snowflakes, the wave of ash and smoke barreling over and then enveloping those standing or fleeing in the streets as the towers collapsed, the shocked faces of people watching from inside the relative safety of storefronts or taking shelter behind cars—these are all set in the national memory of that day. Opening this film with reference to the destruction of a major landmark in that same city sets an expectation of disaster.

The conceit that this is, in effect, a home movie, is indicated by the filmmaker's deliberate imitation of an amateur handheld style (many of the sequences were in fact shot by the actor playing Hudson "Hud" Platt [T. J. Miller] or camera persons wearing the same pants and shoes), reminiscent of the at times nausea-inducing *Blair Witch Project* (1999). The opening sequence, dated "APR 27" continues with a domestic "morning after" scene where two main characters, Rob Hawkins (Michael Stahl-David) and Beth McIntyre (Odette Yustman Annable) are introduced. Rob films their outing to Coney Island, and snippets of the scenes on this section of the tape reappear at irregular intervals through the rest of the film and finally bookend the piece to form a frame. Because they have been accidentally taped over they are apparently "bleeding through." The banal, everyday romance they show is contrasted with documentation of the terrifying alien attack that forms the main action of the film.

The scene then switches to a loft-style apartment in lower Manhattan on May 23, where there's a bon-voyage party for Rob, who has taken a new job and is moving to the Godzilla-referent Japan.[11] This realistic portrayal

of an ordinary activity is needed contrast for the extraordinary events that will soon unfold. In "Picturing Paranoia: Interpreting *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,*" Steven M. Sanders states that this sort of establishing of realism may be seen to symbolize "that everyday life, even the most ordinary, is essentially unstable and potentially verging into darkness and disorder."[12] The ante is upped when Beth arrives with a date—the budding romance glimpsed in the first scenes has apparently ended—and Rob causes a scene trying to talk to her alone. The domestic drama soon takes a backseat to an incredibly loud noise and short blackout as the scarier part of the film begins. A local newscast describes the sinking of a large ship in New York harbor, near Liberty Island, and a possible earthquake in the city. They wonder aloud if it is another terrorist attack even while going to the roof to get a better view.

As Hud, Rob, his brother Jason (Mike Vogel), Jason's girlfriend, Lily Ford (Jessica Lucas), and a girl from the party who Hud was trying to chat up, Marlena Diamond (Lizzy Caplan), make their way downstairs to the street, we have the scenes most directly visually quoted from 9/11. A large projectile crashes into a skyscraper and then ricochets down, destroying cars and streetlights, coming to rest in the middle of the street. As it stops we realize that the object is the decapitated head of the Statue of Liberty. The improbability of this—we question what sort of force could do such a thing—sets the tone for the horrors to come. In the distance something thirty stories tall and apparently alive passes between skyscrapers. Then the iconic Empire State Building collapses in the same manner as the Twin Towers, and a huge cloud of smoke and ash billows toward them. They all take shelter in a bodega, which shakes with the thunderous footfalls and unearthly bellowing of the creature. The windows are blown out and shelves collapse. Jason daringly heads out into the street that now looks like a war zone, as fires burn, alarms and sirens sound, and sheets of paper fall from the sky. Ash-covered pedestrians run or wander in a daze and we recognize one of them as Marlena, who appears to be in shock.[13] Jason again takes the leadership role, reminding them that whatever caused this destruction is still there and advising, "We get the hell out of Manhattan. Now!" Again mimicking those who walked out of the city on 9/11, they head for the Brooklyn Bridge. Unfortunately the creature has the same destination in mind, and Jason is lost when it destroys the bridge. Hud continues to film throughout, because, as he tells Rob, "People are gonna wanna know. How it all went down. . . . People are gonna need to see this. This is gonna be important." He continues to add running commentary through the rest

of his appearance in the film, speculating on the origin and motivations of the invaders.

After Jason is killed, Rob steps into the leadership role and decides he must rescue Beth, who was trapped in her apartment when the invasion of the city began. The remaining members of the group attempt to make their way to her building, but are stopped by a very direct encounter with the creature and the soldiers who are attempting to battle it. Taking shelter in the subway, they decided to follow the tracks to a stop nearer Beth's building. It is here that the most horror-film-style encounter occurs, underground, in the darkened tunnel.[14] Fleeing rats clue them in that something is amiss. Through the camera's night vision setting Hud can see that the spider-like, reptilian, Great Dane–sized creatures that drop off the larger one have followed them into the tunnel, crawling on the ceiling like orcs. They are attacked, and while bravely knocking the creatures off of Hud, Marlena is bitten. Making their way to an opening into a department store, they find it has been made over into a makeshift triage and ground operations center by the military. As with Jason, a direct encounter with an alien proves to be Marlena's undoing: she screams horribly, then spectacularly explodes. Another innocent is lost to the creatures' rampages through the city.

After finally reaching Beth's building they are shocked to see that it has been sideswiped by the big alien and knocked into the twin building next to it, where it leans, precariously supported. In seeming imitation of the 9/11 first responders who went up the towers while the occupants fled down, Rob, Lily, and Hud climb thirty-nine floors in the adjoining building, then jump across to get to Beth's apartment. Although she is impaled on a piece of steel rebar and her steeply canted living room is open to the sky, Beth is alive. As they free her, the giant creature can be seen outside the window, heading in their direction. "What is that?!" Beth screams. The only possible response is given by Hud: "It's a terrible thing." Just when they think they are safely in the other building, a spider lizard appears. After Rob disables it, Beth again screams, "What was *that?!*" Hud's almost blasé, matter of fact, "I don't know, something else, also terrible," is the perfect response to the ridiculous level of terror to which they are now accustomed.

Dodging debris from the monster, they make it to the helicopter evacuation site but are separated from Lily and put into different choppers. Her fate is unknown, but Rob, Beth, and Hud's chopper is literally knocked out of the sky by the creature. As they escape the wreckage and attempt to flee, Hud is killed by his direct contact with the alien. His encounter does provide

us with stunning close-up images of its rilled, moveable ears and face, yet we are unable to determine whether there is any real intelligence there. We are given little time to mourn Hud (though we are able to see that he is not eaten by the creature) as we follow the only survivors, Beth and Rob, who take refuge in an arched walkway tunnel. As we hear the creature's screams and the military jets' bombardment continues, warning sirens blare and they know their deaths are imminent. The tunnel collapses; the film stutters, then returns to the scene of Beth and Rob's day out to Coney Island, the barely visible crash of a space cylinder into the ocean behind them, and Beth's final ironic statement, "I had a good day."[15]

The Unopened Mystery Box

In his now-famous TED.com speech, Abrams spoke about the enjoyment he feels in deliberately holding back information.[16] Like a magician's Mystery Box, the secrets allow us to use our own imagination to fill in the gaps. Unlike what we learned about the Taliban terrorists of 9/11, in *Cloverfield* we are never told the giant being's true identity and motivation for this attack on the city, nor do we know if this is an isolated incident or something happening simultaneously all over the country or the world. Is the creature an alien or something that mutated and rose from the ocean's depths like Godzilla? Did the ocean crash of the cylindrical object (glimpsed best in a freeze-frame of the start of the final scene of Rob and Beth on the Coney Island Ferris wheel) bring the creature to Earth, or merely awaken it? Was it a government experiment gone wrong? If our definition of terrorism relies on the concept that there is a specific goal desired by the perpetrator of the violent and murderous actions, then the mysteries of *Cloverfield* leave us in the dark as to what that goal could be. In its rampage the monster comes upon Liberty Island and rips the head off of the Statue of Liberty, tossing it all the way into the Manhattan neighborhood where Rob and his friends were partying. As a special effect, it is stunning and led the mysterious trailers shown for months in theaters and online before the film's premiere. As a metaphor, this is a bit heavy-handed—American liberty goes the way of the guillotine—or is it just that the creature saw the statue as a biped threat of its own size and attacked it? Does the creature intend to take over the city for its own use or simply kill those who drew it out of the deep? Is it the first wave of an invasion force or a one-of-a-kind nightmare?

The smaller insect-lizard creatures that drop off of the monster are also

never fully explained. Are they its young? Another parasitic or symbiotic alien race? The males of its kind sent to impregnate new hosts? The equivalent of a virus, infecting each of us individually? The horrible exploding death of Marlena after she is bitten by one could be argued in any of these ways. Since we are not made aware of the creature's goals beyond destroying everything around it, despite the film's New York setting and reenactments of 9/11 visual tropes, a true analogy to terroristic acts is never fully realized in the film. The cameo appearances of three famous creature-feature monsters—the giant ants from *Them!,* the beast of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms,* and King Kong—in the film seem to argue for an earthly, albeit mutated, origin for the creature rather than an extraterrestrial one.[17] If it is a relatively mindless animal acting on instinct rather than with intelligence, its main goal is probably escape rather than conquest or revenge.[18]

The creature in the next film, *Super 8* is something completely different. It is definitely an extraterrestrial; it is large, powerful, and intelligent and can read minds. It has also been held captive by the military-industrial complex for about twenty years, sustained by consuming large chunks of raw meat, and is really, really angry.

Another Alien Movie

Though set in 1979, *Super 8* is a modern post-9/11 work. It has certain nostalgia for a time before the dawn of the twenty-first century, when kids could more safely ride their bikes at night, your film took three days to get developed, and the Soviet Union was still the biggest threat to our national security.[19] This is before people flew planes into buildings and the digital images you just captured on your iPhone could be immediately uploaded to YouTube. It was the era of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *Star Wars* (1977), when little gray aliens were technologically powerful yet benign or looked like us and battled evil empires "in a galaxy far, far away." It also references many of Abrams's collaborator Steven Spielberg's slightly later kid vs. adult adventure films, such as *The Goonies* (cowriter, 1985) and *E.T.* (director, 1982).[20] Like those films, the end of *Super 8* features a reconciliation of parent and child and the return of the "lost boy" to his home.[21] Where it differs from films of that era is not only in the thirty years' worth of sophistication added to special effects but also in the alien's search for home after he is stranded. Both ET and the *Super 8* alien have sophisticated technical skills, the ability to communicate telepathically, and strange food

cravings. Odd but cute and little, ET was lucky to have been found first by a little boy, Elliot, and to have escaped incarceration by the men with keys. *Super 8* shows how a similarly gifted but twenty-foot-tall alien captured by the U.S. military has to go rogue, exhibiting behaviors that could be deemed terroristic.

Zombies in Wonderland

In 1979 in Lillian, Ohio, six ordinary junior high kids are making a movie for a Super 8 format film contest. One of them, Joe Lamb (Joel Courtney), is still mourning the loss of his mother, who died in a steel mill accident six months before. Working on the makeup and special effects for the zombie-themed horror film *The Case,* directed by his best friend and neighbor, Charles Kasnyk (Riley Griffiths), is what's kept Joe going. As in *Cloverfield,* the film begins by setting up the ordinariness of life, this time in a small town and complete with seventies period detail in dress, cars, décor, and technologies.[22] After the opening scenes, set at the post-funeral home visitation, establish Joe's alienation from his father, Deputy Sheriff Jackson "Jack" Lamb (Kyle Chandler) and his father's anger toward another mill worker, Louis Dainard (Ron Eldard), the scene shifts to the last day of school. With the freedom summer affords them, the two boys and their three friends—Cary (Ryan Lee), head zombie and pyrotechnics specialist; Martin (Gabriel Basso), lead actor; and Preston (Zach Mills), actor and crew—make plans to finish the film by the festival deadline. However, Charles has decided that they are missing something important—mainly a plot—for their opus. He asks a girl, Alice Dainard (Elle Fanning), on whom he has a secret crush, to play the wife of the main character. Charles comes from a large two-parent family, a home that serves as a refuge of sorts for Joe, even more so after his mother's passing. For Charles, the true motivation for the film-within-the-film's protagonist should rightly revolve around his loving family relationship with his wife.[23]

In a way, the zombie scenes shot by the boys for their Super 8 contest film become the same sort of framing device for *Super 8* as the Rob and Beth romance scenes in *Cloverfield.* Alice, as Martin's character's wife, urges him to come away with her for a romantic weekend, but his investigative work is more important, so he refuses. Rob broke off any thought of a serious relationship with Beth because his new job was taking him to Japan. Martin's wife is zombified and he must rescue her by finding and administering the

one available vial of cure. Beth is trapped by the giant alien attack and Rob must rescue her. Also in the "real life" portion of the main action in *Super 8,* when Alice is taken "down the rabbit hole" by the alien, Joe becomes the hero protagonist, putting together the clues necessary to find her (subterranean creature, sinkhole by cemetery, dirt in garage windows) and is the only one who can save her.

It's a Train Wreck

If we use the United Nations Secretary General report from 2004 as our baseline, the actions of the *Super 8* alien could be defined as terrorism. Recall that it describes terrorism as any act "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act."[24] We know that the creature is a sentient being after learning of its telepathic connection with one of the scientists studying it, Dr. Woodward (Glynn Turman), who is now working at the Lillian middle school as a science teacher.[25] Because of its experience of captivity and the torturous "testing" by the government agency at Area 51, it could be seeking revenge against its captors, chiefly the head of the project, Air Force Colonel Nelec (Noah Emmerich). After its ship crashed in 1958, it was captured and held by the U.S. Air Force, which was seeking information about its technology, a spacecraft made up of thousands of small silver objects resembling a Rubik's cube that disassembles. Because of his physical contact with the alien, Dr. Woodward knows that it is intelligent and only wants to rebuild its ship so it may return home, but his pleas for its release are ignored. Dismissed from the project, Woodward later takes a job in Lillian that puts him in position to interfere with the train transporting both the alien and its craft across the country. Driving his pickup truck onto the tracks directly into the path of the train, derailing it, seems to be an act of desperation. Is it his own moral code pushing him to free the alien, or is the alien still somehow in mental contact or even control of him? This action could cause the deaths of not just the military personnel on board the train but many innocent people—the train crew and anyone in the vicinity of the careening, exploding boxcars. If fact, the young filmmakers have chosen the Lillian train depot as the site for that night's filming and miraculously escape harm in the spectacular crash, which demolishes the station. They flee the scene,

taking with them a small silver-white object resembling a Rubik's cube that spilled out of a cargo container.[26]

The alien is able to break free in the aftermath of the crash and makes itself at home in Lillian, excavating a series of tunnels and placing its nest underneath the water tower in the center of downtown. Somehow sensing its arrival (like the rats in the subway tunnel in *Cloverfield*), all of the dogs in Lillian run away from their homes.[27] It proceeds to use the cover of darkness to gather electronic and metal parts with which to rebuild its craft and to rather violently kidnap townspeople for information and to perhaps stock its larder. Those we witness being taken by it are the town sheriff, Pruitt (Brett Rice), the Kelvin Gas Station clerk and Walkman early adaptor Breen (Beau Knapp), a telephone lineman, and later, Alice. At the town hall meeting called after the sheriff's disappearance we learn that others have been taken, several of whom are seen hanging (hopefully just unconscious) in the underground lair. The *Super 8* alien is consciously using its captives to fulfill its goal of reconstructing its ship and leaving the planet. Remember, as Kant believed, because we are conscious, rational beings, persons have a "sanctified" *intrinsic* value (as ends) and not just an *instrumental* value (as a means to an end), like some object, tool, thing, or instrument of terrorist objectives. When Cary and Joe find the alien's cave and witness it eating a human leg, they and we are repulsed. Should the alien have an aversion to eating the flesh of sentient beings, as humans do?[28]

The literally subterranean secrecy with which the creature operates and the crimes of theft, kidnapping, and destruction of property may all be seen as necessary by the alien to succeed in its goal to return home. However, not everything it does is simply to reach that goal. Some of its actions seem primarily motivated by revenge. After the boys have discovered the truth about the alien in their mission to rescue Alice, they are captured by Colonel Nelec and taken onto a fortified military prison bus. While they discuss the possibilities for escape, the bus is violently struck and knocked on its side by the alien. One by one it kills the air force airmen Nelec sends out after it, until he and the boys are left alone on the bus. Nelec tries to open the door of the boys' cage, but one of the dead men outside has the key. While the alien works to punch its way into the bus's interior, frenzied in its attempt to reach the man who tortured and kept it captive, Joe breaks out a window and the boys escape. Our last view of Nelec is similar to that of Marlena's end in *Cloverfield*—a bloody splash on a translucent wall.

This incident fits the first part of Hoffman's detailed definition of terrorism—*violence, causing of physical harm or death directed toward some intended target that the perpetrator believes deserves the physical harm or death*—but may fall short on the last: *usually entails harm or death done to innocent persons that act as collateral damage.* The intended victim of the alien's wrath was Nelec, so the three airmen could be seen as collateral damage. However, the alien also made no attempt to capture and "store" any of the military men, probably because it saw their uniforms as emblematic of its captors. The boys are able to escape while it is distracted trying to reach Nelec, and it leaves after the colonel's death without harming the boys, who are still nearby. Yet they could have been seriously injured or even killed by the attack on the bus, just as they could have been from the train wreck. That those incidents did not result in harm to them is more luck than design by the perpetrators of the terroristic violence, Dr. Woodward and the alien.

Another interesting question raised by the alien's terroristic actions is whether or not it is even bound by human legal or moral obligations. To be fair, no rights, as such, were extended to it *by* humanity when humans deliberately shot down its craft with a nuclear device, captured it, drugged it, and held it prisoner for decades.[29] In an audiotape found by the boys in Dr. Woodward's storage locker, the scientist describes his understanding of the alien, achieved through a telepathic link: "Through pain and lack of compassion we have taught him to hate us all. We have turned him into an enemy." After the attacks of 9/11, people searched for answers to understand what would provoke a group of people to commit mass murder in the name of a religious cause. On the world stage, Osama bin Laden and the Islamic terrorists who perpetrated the attack put forth their belief that the "great Satan," the United States, was trying to destroy their culture and belief system through economic, social, and military imperialism. From their perspective, anyone associated with the government of the United States—*any* citizen, man, woman, or child—was an enemy combatant and deserved death. If we use Hoffman's definition of one side of terrorism as coming from an "individual that usually perceives itself as being treated unjustly or inappropriately by the larger group, cause, ideology, or other individuals that comprise the social situation in which the groups inhabit," the *Super 8* alien's actions fit the mold of a terrorist. Using a utilitarian position, a case could be made for its terroristic actions to be seen as justified. This is the crux of how we understand the final act of the film.

Otherness and Alienation

The subterranean alien in *Super 8* is physically monstrous to human eyes and capable of extreme violence, yet it has the intelligence to build and operate an interstellar spacecraft and can telekinetically move large objects and explode weapons. In designing it, creature artist Neville Page, Abrams, and consultant Steven Spielberg needed something large enough to stop a bus and toss people around like kittens, strong and flexible enough to dig a twenty-foot-tall tunnel under the city, but with hands delicate enough to manipulate sensitive electronic equipment. Their solution was a double set of arms, jointed at the shoulders with long-fingered hands, and powerful legs with clawed feet capable of digging like a badger. With touch it is also able to understand the thoughts and emotions of its human captors and, later, captives and to project its own. The alien's touch so affected Dr. Woodward that he gave his life to free it. Yet because of its terrifying physical form and its own rage at its mistreatment and torture at the hands of Nelec and the other government scientists, all of those whom it encounters in the town of Lillian (before Joe) are too frightened to try to communicate with it. Even Alice, who understands what it wants, cannot move beyond her fear to give it the same release to go as Joe is capable of doing. Joe is able to see beyond that "otherness" and recognize his own pain and loss in the creature's actions. A quiet kid who would rather make models and monster movies with his friends than go to sports camp, Joe's closest familial relationship was with his mother. Joe has been alienated from his father most of his life. Something was taken from both of them—for Joe, his mother, and for the alien, his freedom—and this allows the communion they reach in the tunnels after Alice's rescue.

After Joe frees Alice, the sheriff, and another woman, they attempt to flee but are caught by the alien, who violently knocks the adults aside (possibly killing them) and grabs up Joe. He is able to somehow stay calm and really communicate with it. "We understand. But not everyone's horrible. I know bad things happen. Bad things happen, but you can still live. You can still live," Joe tells it. We see the alien's face close up and in focus, the nictitating membranes (protecting its eyes from the dirt caused by its subterranean digging) flip back and its much more human-looking eyes focus in on the boy.[30] Understanding between the two allows Joe to be spared. When a noise indicating something is ready with the alien's device attracts its attention, it sets the boy gently on the ground and leaves.

The final reconciliation of both Alice and Joe with their respective fathers parallels the creature's acquisition of the silver-white Rubik's cubes that will allow it to reconstitute its ship and go home. The magnetic force that draws the cubes and other metallic items to the water tower pulls Joe's mother's locket out of his pocket and opens it, revealing the picture of which he symbolically lets go.

This examination of Abrams's *Cloverfield* and *Super 8* looked at the invasions perpetrated by two nonhuman "alien" beings on American soil. *Cloverfield* used visual tropes from the 9/11 attacks on New York City, which resonate in the minds of the audience because of our shared memory of that terrorist action. Its twenty-something cast would have been in junior high in 2001 (the same age as the young protagonists in *Super 8*), and so they grew up with that sword of Damocles—that expectation of another attack—hanging over their heads. Their initial reaction to the events unfolding in front of them is to automatically think that the terrorists have struck again. However, the origins, motivations, and even sentience of the giant creature attacking the city are never revealed, so even though it rains down death and destruction on the city even greater that the Taliban attack, we are left with an open question of whether its actions fit our definition of terrorism. *Super 8,* with its 1979 setting, draws on our nostalgia for the gung-ho, "let's help the nice alien get home" of Spielberg films like *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* grafted onto that same post-9/11 awareness that an attack on America is not just a possibility, it has happened.

Recall that one could argue that the terrorist act is justified if there is no avenue for addressing injustices in some social setting. Could there be other ways, besides blowing up buildings and people, to call attention to one's plight? Consider the nonviolent forms of protest exhibited by the likes of Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. And why perpetuate terrorist acts on someone else's land, as was the case with the 9/11 attacks? The alien in *Super 8* believed he had no choice. He was shot down while observing our planet, treated horribly by his government captors, and had to survive as best he could when he was afforded the opportunity to escape. Obtaining the materials and technology to recraft his ship and return home necessitated sometimes violent and criminal actions that he seemed to feel were justified. The fear sowed in Lillian by his scavenging, kidnapping townspeople, and telekinetically setting off all of the military weapons was a by-product of these actions. There are social settings—for

example, fundamentalist theocratic regimes—in which the most heinous acts are committed against good people and oppression, injustice, and frustration are commonplace. In settings such as these, it's no wonder that folks commit terrorist acts or even preach anarchy—such people are powerless and downtrodden. Taking *direct* vengeance on his captors, especially the deliberate killing of Colonel Nelec and the airmen on the bus, was where the alien truly stepped over the moral line according to our definition of terrorism. He was not in imminent danger of death, his ship was ready (as shown in his departure soon thereafter), and he didn't need them for building materials, information, or food; therefore this was pure revenge. Well, it *is* a monster after all . . .

Notes

1. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

2. "Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism," annex to 1994 United Nations Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism, http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/49/a49r060.htm.

3. Phillip Pomper, "Russian Revolutionary Terrorism," in *Terrorism in Context,* ed. Martha Crenshaw (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 63–104. Although, Nechayev's form of terrorism is closely linked to anarchism, as this famous quotation from his *Catechism of the Revolutionist* (1869) makes clear: "The Revolutionist is a doomed man. He has no private interests, no affairs, sentiments, ties, property, nor even a name of his own. His entire being is devoured by one purpose, one thought, one passion—the revolution. Heart and soul, not merely by word but by deed, he has severed every link with the social order and with the entire civilized world; with the laws, good manners, conventions, and morality of that world. He is its merciless enemy and continues to inhabit it with only one purpose—to destroy it."

4. See, for example, Nonna Bannister, Carolyn Tomlin, and Denise George, *The Secret Holocaust Diaries: The Untold Story of Nonna Bannister* (New York: Tyndale House, 2010); Peter Hayes and John Roth, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

5. For an account of the 20 July Plot of 1944 and Operation Valkyrie, see Joachim Fest, *Plotting Hitler's Death: The Story of German Resistance,* trans. Bruce Little (New York: Holt, 1997).

6. There is a debate about the extent to which ordinary Germans living in Nazi Germany were aware of the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi leadership. See Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany, 1933–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berebaum, eds., *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Washington, DC: Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001);

Eric Johnson, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany, An Oral History* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

   7. See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals,* trans. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989). A classic exposition of Kant's moral philosophy can be found in Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

   8. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals;* see also Suzanne Uniacke, "Why Is Revenge Wrong?" *Journal of Value Inquiry* 34 (2000): 61–69.

   9. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002); Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

   10. Read about this story and others in Frank Spalding, *Plane Crash: True Stories of Survival* (New York: Rosen, 2007).

   11. In the *Cloverfield* DVD special features, Abrams says that he got the idea of creating an American Godzilla movie when he and his young son, Henry, were visiting Japan.

   12. Steven M. Sanders, "Picturing Paranoia: Interpreting *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,*" in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film,* ed. Steven M. Sanders (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 65–81.

   13. As they head for the Brooklyn Bridge we find out the reason for her state of shock as she tells Lily, Rob, and Hud, "It was eating people. It was eating everyone." Just like the alien in *Super 8,* it has a taste for human flesh. It isn't true cannibalism—it's not eating its own species—but as humans we still find it abhorrent.

   14. This is parallel to a classic of the genre. See Sanders, "Picturing Paranoia," 67, where he states, "*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* internalizes [protagonist] Miles's paranoia by having him frequently advert to his fear in his voice-over narration. It externalizes his paranoia with imagery such as dark, suffocatingly small closets, narrow hallways, tunnels, and other enclosures."

   15. According to *Cloverfield* director Matt Reeves, in the DVD special features, the final line was Abrams's idea.

   16. J. J. Abrams, "The Mystery Box: J. J. Abrams on TED.com," transcription by Robert Thomas Carter, *TED.com Forum,* March 2007, Monterey, California, http://blog.ted .com/2008/01/10/jj_abrams/.

   17. In the DVD special feature "I Saw It! It's Alive! It's Huge!" creature designer Neville Page explains that he imagined the *Cloverfield* giant as a baby, motivated by fear rather than anger or conquest, a frightened wild animal intent only on ridding itself of the tiny humans who are shooting at it.

   18. If one comes from the point of view that the 9/11 terrorists were "mindless" in their use of such devastating violence to kill thousands of innocents, perhaps the *Cloverfield* alien makes more sense: a huge, mindless creature destroying everything in its path. The terroristic rhetoric of Taliban leader Osama bin Laden makes this interpretation untenable.

19. When military tanks and trucks roll into Lillian to recapture the alien, one resident says, "This feels like a Russian invasion."

20. That both Abrams and Spielberg made Super 8 films has been well documented. As teenagers, Abrams and his frequent collaborator Bryan Burke also were handpicked by Spielberg to restore his original 8-mm-format films. Director of photography Larry Fong, *Cloverfield* director Matt Reeves, and composer Michael Giacchino were also Super 8 aficionados as kids. In addition, many of the same creative team who worked with Abrams on *Super 8* were also involved in some capacity on *Cloverfield.*

21. We would argue that, like ET, the character Sloth (John Matusak), considered alien because of his physical deformities, finds a home at the end of the film *The Goonies* when he is taken in by Chunk's family.

22. Among these are the many 1970s film posters in the boys' rooms—*Star Wars, Bruce Lee, Dawn of the Dead, Halloween*—and the naming of the chemical company in the kids' zombie opus after horror master George Romero. Kodak, Western Union, and Tinker Toys also have prominent product placements.

23. Abrams actually had the young actors write their own dialogue for the scenes in "The Case."

24. "Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism."

25. The character's name is probably a reference to the crusading *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who broke news of the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s.

26. As a foreshadowing of real space tragedy, when the cube comes to life and shoots through the wall of Joe's bedroom, the poster it punches a baseball-sized hole through is of the *Columbia* space shuttle. See the poster design used in the film at http://timgeorgedesign.wordpress.com/2011/08/07/super-8-shuttle-poster/.

27. How they sense it, by smell, psychic energy, or what, is never really explained. Dogs are a traditional symbol of loyalty, and in *E.T.* the family had a friendly golden retriever, Harvey, who frightened the alien.

28. In a scene cut from the final version of the film, Joe and Cary come upon a pile of coffins from the cemetery above them in the alien's tunnels. Perhaps the leg was from a corpse and not a living captive? Those who are revived by the boys—the sheriff, the lady in curlers, and Alice—do seem to be in good shape.

29. As shown in the full version of Dr. Woodward's film on "Operation Belt trap" as part of the *Super 8* viral marketing campaign; see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4U0hgGJRxCM &feature=player_embedded.

30. According to the *Super 8* DVD special feature "The Visitor Lives," actor Bruce Greenwood did motion capture for the alien's facial expressions here.

Scene 8

TALKIN' 'BOUT A REVOLUTION

A Place for Revolutions in *Revolution*?

Marxism, Feminism, and the Monroe Republic

Jeff Ewing

In J. J. Abrams's *Revolution,* the world is a dark place. More particularly, *Revolution* takes place fifteen years after electricity all over the planet was suddenly disabled, and with it, all technology that uses it. In what once was the United States of America, the U.S. government has collapsed (divided into six new nations), and territories are now controlled by warlords, militias, and rebel gangs. The story is set in the area now called the Monroe Republic, controlled by Sebastian Monroe and the Monroe Militia, and follows the attempt of Charlie Matheson, her uncle Miles, and their friends as they attempt to rescue Charlie's brother and mother from the heart of Monroe's territory. Monroe is convinced that the Mathesons know something about the blackout—and something about how to turn the power back on. Their history in the Monroe Republic reveals a lot about its operations as a political body, and two theoretical traditions have given us a number of tools to analyze it—Marxist and feminist theory. In this chapter, I will use those tools to look at the class and gender relations of the Monroe Republic, which lead to a greater understanding of a number of facets of life after the blackout. Critical analysis shows that the Monroe Republic is hierarchical in terms of both class and gender (in ways that suggest the deep interconnection of the two) and, as we will see, without serious restructuring and a reprioritization of state policy, the republic cannot be expected to last.

When the Lights Went Out . . .

Revolution begins fifteen years after the era of electricity suddenly (and without warning) ends—electric power, all over the globe, stops working. With-

out electrical power, the U.S. government collapses (presumably along with the rest of the nation-states around the globe), and in its place rise warlords, militias, and rebel gangs. The territory of the United States is now overtaken by six separate and independent nations—the California Commonwealth, the Plains Nation, the Republic of Texas, the Georgia Federation, the Wasteland, and the Monroe Republic. The Monroe Republic was organized and built by Sebastian Monroe and Miles Matheson, the former acting as president of the republic, with the latter building the strength and tactics of the Monroe Militia as its general (until a failed attempt to assassinate Monroe leaves Miles in hiding until the events of *Revolution*).

The story told in *Revolution* starts when the Monroe Militia arrives where most of the Matheson family lives, seeking Miles and his brother, Ben. Monroe suspects they know something about the cause of the blackout. Miles is elsewhere, still in hiding, but Ben is shot and his son Danny is taken. Ben's dying words to Charlie (daughter of the Mathesons, older sister to Danny, and Miles's niece) are to find Miles in Chicago to save Danny. Miles, Aaron (a long-standing family friend), Maggie (Ben's girlfriend after being long separated from his wife), and Charlie set off in pursuit of Danny (eventually they also lose Maggie and seek out Nora, with whom Miles once had a relationship but who has since joined the rebels). Beyond Miles's betrayal, the Mathesons are of interest to Monroe as he suspects (correctly) that they know something about the cause of the blackout. Rachel Matheson, Ben's wife and mother to Charlie and Danny, had already been taken into Monroe's custody. Rachel and Ben eventually are found to be part of a small group of individuals connected to a government project (picked up by the Department of Defense) whose accidental result was the blackout. The project intended to create a source of cheap and accessible energy but instead disabled electricity within its area of operation. Each member of that group—Ben Matheson among them—has a pendant, which over time are revealed to be capable of turning electricity back on within a certain radius. Once that is discovered by Monroe, the search for a pendant intensifies.

Militias in *Revolution* have a relative monopoly of control over their respective territories and the food supply and weapons within them. The rise of the Monroe Republic was facilitated by Miles's command of often ruthless efficiency and tactical expertise. It is revealed that the territories have skirmishes with each other (also engaging in diplomacy and sometimes alliances) along their borders, and the control Monroe has over the Monroe Republic weakens outside its strongest zone—the area around Philadelphia.

Meanwhile, inside the borders of territories lie both bandits and rebels, the term reserved for groups of individuals fighting for a restoration of the U.S. government (normally identifiable by a U.S. flag tattoo on their body and/or a U.S. flag in their possession). Within the borders of the Monroe Republic, Monroe has effectively absolute power (able to decree laws, promote within the militia by command, issue penalties, and enforce his laws or penalize "traitors" at will). While individual communities within the Monroe Republic are shown to have a degree of autonomy within their borders, they are subject to the payment of taxes (monetarily or with crops) and conscription of soldiers by the republic and are required to follow the republic's various laws, which are well known. It is not explicitly mentioned how many laws have been officially decreed within the Monroe Republic (nor whether they are written or merely widely known), but a small number of laws of the Monroe Republic are known, including,

> The Baltimore Act, outlawing the purchase, sale, ownership, or transportation of any firearms by any citizen (outside loyal militia), on penalty of death (revealed in "Chained Heat").

> The Immigration and Naturalization Defense Act, allowing all militia personnel to search, detain, and question anyone whose involvement in illegal or subversive behavior is suspected (revealed in "No Quarter").

(Additionally, the production and sale of heroin is also legal, revealed in "Sex and Drugs.")

It is also not entirely clear what, if any, privileges have been gained by communities within the Monroe Republic, save for the policing function served by the militia and the protection of republic borders against other territories.

Recruits in the Monroe Militia are often abducted children, and members of the Monroe Republic are branded on their wrist with its symbol, an M inscribed in a circle. These abducted children are forcibly trained to be obedient soldiers. Upon encountering one in an attempt to rescue an abducted, conscripted child in "The Children's Crusade," Miles describes a conscription ship to Charlie, Aaron, and Nora: "It's a conscription facility . . . soldier factory. Kids go in, they're . . . reeducated. Soldiers come out. It's one thing snatching a kid off a wagon, Charlie, but this . . . you don't just

storm a place like that. It's impossible." When Charlie is captured later in the same episode, before the commander brands her wrist with the symbol of the Monroe Republic, he explains, "You see, militia soldiers aren't just born. We make 'em. It's time for you to become an official member of the Monroe Militia." The militia also commands fleets of remaining high-technology weapons and vehicles (such as military helicopters) whose use relies on electrical power (and thus were disabled during the blackout). In effect, in the world of *Revolution,* political authority is underwritten by coercive and organizational supremacy (and as of this writing we have little knowledge of the political and economic structures of the other remaining territories, as names reveal little about the structures of the territories, though we know that the Georgia Federation is ruled by a woman, President Foster). Not all the details of life after the blackout have been revealed, but can we bring the structure of the Monroe Republic into clearer focus? One critical tradition that can highlight features of the Monroe Republic, bringing greater insight, is that of Marxist theory.

Marxism and the State

The foundation of the historical and political analysis of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *historical materialism,* holds that "the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of immediate life."[1] The baseline conditions of human history, be it the history of a particular person, society, or the species as a whole, are the capacity to survive and (with regard to societies and the species in general) reproduce oneself. Beyond ideas, religions, the state, and so on thus lies the need to exist, to maintain existence through an individual's material interchange, or "metabolism" with nature, and to reproduce existence in future generations. As Marx and Engels bluntly state in *The German Ideology,* "The first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all human history [is . . .] namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history.' But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things."[2] Survival is the first premise of human history, and consequentially the "first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself."[3] Thus *production* is the base prerequisite of continued human existence, through which human labor transforms nonhuman nature into a means to meet human needs and secure human survival. Production occurs in the histori-

cally variable mode of production in which this labor is organized and in labor, "the entire productive activity of man, through which his metabolic interchange with nature is mediated."[4]

Production and reproduction thus form the metaphorical base of society, whose functioning sets ultimate limits on the successful possibilities of existing state and ideological structures. Moreover, control over the means of production and reproduction *guarantees* influence over the other spheres of society, just as an ideology must "make sense" within the given material constraints of an individual's life to be truly internalized. Marx and Engels elaborate the consequences of this insight in the famous "1859 preface":

> In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformation it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.[5]

Later formulations of historical materialism (such as Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*) pick up the complexity of *The Ger-*

man Ideology in recognizing both production *and* reproduction as ultimate factors determining human history (as production is necessary for continued existing human life, and reproduction is a precondition of *continuing* human generations and a prerequisite of current human life).

As a primary source of social power, control over production (through ownership over the means of production) grants substantial control over society, and over time classes emerge with some individuals controlling the means of production, thus able to control the activities of others through control over their means of survival, and others condemned to work for them in order to meet their needs (being themselves divorced from resources). As Marx and Engels summarize in the *Communist Manifesto,* "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."[6] Over time, this antagonistic relationship of the various class societies in history, in which some individuals own the means of production (thus reaping benefits from the labor of others), and the consequences of this antagonistic relationship reach the point of revolution, the revolutionary transformation of the mode of production.

To protect such differential power, the ruling class must isolate the primary coercive powers in an institution above society, the state, wherein "it follows that every class which is struggling for mastery . . . must first conquer for itself political power."[7] As Engels argues in "The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State," "As the state arose from the need to hold class antagonisms in check, but as it arose, at the same time, in the midst of the conflict of these classes, it is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class, and thus acquires new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class."[8] The state and its coercive power is thus a key locus of class struggle, and the laboring class struggles to overcome existing state power or use it for its benefit, just as the ruling class struggles to keep it operating in its interests. Moreover, as Marx argues in *Das Kapital,* "Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power."[9] The imposition of a new mode of production (for Marx) involves the use of coercive force in order to establish and secure the new relations of production against the former ruling classes.

This orientation toward the utility of force for protection of the new relations of production led to Marx and Engels's prescription in the *Communist Manifesto* that "the first step in the revolution by the working class, is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy. . . . The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State."[10] In other words, Marx and Engels highlight the use of coercive force in the transition between modes of production and in the spreading of one mode of production and its relations of production over new territory, but coercive capacity is ultimately underwritten by and in the long-term dependence on the mode of production from which it emerges.

Marxism and the Monroe Republic

The Monroe Republic does not trace its origins to class conflict, nor is it an unintentional result of the "forces of production" or technological development in the pursuit of profit. Instead, the blackout occurred as a pure technological accident of research whose stated purpose was the development of a cheap and efficient energy source. Upon learning of the failure of that project (and success in creating technology that disables electricity), the Department of Defense remained excited over the development (it is suggested that their excitement stems from the potential weaponization of the project). We are, however, given no explanation for the blackout that directly supports a historical materialist analysis of the state. What is clear, however, is that the world has returned to technologies before the reliance of human societies on electricity—for example, limited use of technologies controlled by steam (mainly a repaired train) and wide use of animal power. At a superficial glance, *Revolution* does not accord with the role Marx attributes to class conflict as a or the primary force behind the transition between economic systems, and moreover, it directly seems to work against the Marxian emphasis on increasing technological development under capitalism. Before we commit to those theoretical interpretations, let us first examine production as it occurs after the blackout.

With what we know thus far in *Revolution,* the first fact to contend with is that after the blackout existing political powers (and presumably corporations, which are rarely mentioned) collapsed, unable to maintain their control in the absence of high-technology military, transportation, communication, and surveillance technology. We can assume the same for corporations and

existing economic actors. Moreover, *Revolution* shows how reliance on those technologies and the world built to presuppose them offer a poor foundation for the skills necessary to survive in the new era (as shown time and again by Aaron's self-effacing commentary on his own lack of skill and his flashbacks in the months immediately following the blackout).

While class struggle did not produce the changes that resulted in the blackout, one factor that, Marx argues, generates class struggle is the way in which the *relations of production* (class structure) impede the productive potential of society and the capacity of the mode of production to meet social needs (which are deeply affected by the technology, organizational forms, and resources available to a mode of production, among other factors of production). Available technology is so important a factor of production in Marx's theory that he has written of it in language strong enough to be commonly interpreted as technologically determinist (a claim that I do not think stands on the evidence). In *The Poverty of Philosophy,* Marx argues that "in acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production, and in changing their mode of production, their manner of gaining a living, they change all their social relations. The windmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist."[11] The disabling of electricity would, in turn, disable a number of additional technologies and thus the capitalists who relied on those technologies.

The elimination of that technological capacity would also undermine the state that relies on that economic foundation. As Engels writes in *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring),*

> So, then, the revolver triumphs over the sword. . . . Force is no mere act of the will, but requires very real preliminary conditions before it can come into operation, that is to say, *instruments,* the more perfect of which vanquish the less perfect. . . . These instruments have to be produced, which also implies that the producer of more perfect instruments of force, *vulgo arms,* vanquishes the producer of the less perfect instrument, and that, in a word, the triumph of force is based on the production of arms, and this in turn on production in general—therefore, on "economic power," on the "economic order," on the *material* means which force has at its disposal.[12]

Weaponry is produced and thus ultimately dependent on the mode of production, and it rests on a technological foundation that allows the destruc-

tive potential of weapons to develop—but coercive capacity requires a technological and productive foundation. It makes sense from a Marxian standpoint that the fall of technology would result in a decline of both the ruling class factions and the state that relied on that technology (perhaps contrary to those who argue that the U.S. government in *Revolution* would have been able to maintain domination over its territory). It also makes sense that (1) the Monroe Republic relies on technological leftovers—guns have been monopolized because bullets need rationing, implying that they cannot generally reproduce them—and (2) there has been a limited reclamation of earlier technologies such as steam power. Steam power would have variable adaptation within fifteen years, as the decline of the old powers would be swift but the chaos and process of that fall in its entirety would likely take some time, and new powers would rise . . . certainly not ideal conditions to fully reappropriate steam technology, long since replaced as the primary technology, with its use foreign to many of the contemporary world before the blackout.

In that electric-powered technology has been lost and prior technology has not yet been fully reclaimed, production largely seems to be oriented toward self-sufficiency, and while shops exist, it is clear that at least the general economy is largely organized around self-sufficient production, including agriculture, and the reclamation of high-end goods from the world before the blackout (such as pharmaceuticals, bullets, etc.). The Monroe Militia utilizes its coercive capacity to exploit the population within its territory, and we don't see capitalist employment as the dominant mode of exploitation (that is, distinctively capitalist exploitation) within their borders (though certainly the sale of various commodities exists and does guarantee significant power for particular individuals, as seen with heroin production in the episode "Sex and Drugs"). We see few clear instances of individuals working for other individuals. The Monroe Republic is not yet a stable state underwritten with a stable mode of production. It remains a primarily political-military organization with a political mode of surplus extraction, neglecting its material foundations to a significant degree (especially given what seems to be a significant interest in the reclamation of electricity-based technology but relative neglect of redeveloping steam-based production).

The Monroe Republic does not seem to actively attempt to maintain the conditions of its own reproduction. In this sense, the Monroe Republic recalls Engels's commentary on Prussia during the Franco-Prussian War:

This war compelled all continental Powers to introduce . . . a military burden which must bring them to ruin within a few years. The army has become the main purpose of the state, and an end in itself; the peoples are only there in addition in order to provide and feed the soldiers. . . . But this militarism also carries in itself the seed of its own destruction. Competition of the individual states with each other forces them, on the one hand, to spend more money each year on the army and navy, artillery, etc., thus more and more hastening financial catastrophe and on the other hand, to take universal compulsory military service more and more seriously, thus in the long run making the whole people familiar with the use of arms; and therefore making the people more and more able at a given moment to make its will prevail in opposition to the commanding military lords.[13]

As of the events of *Revolution,* the Monroe Militia seems to have ignored the material conditions of its territory in a gamble to secure territorial domination as well as to pursue lost electricity. Such a gamble appears as though it may pay off, but it has not yet, and the plans we have thus far seen imply that the focus of technology would be the powering up of military equipment for increased territorial acquisition—we see no plans for factories, welfare measures, and the like. Enhanced military capacity or not, the focus on militarization and neglect of material foundations can only lead to ruin in Marxist analyses, for as Engels critiqued the militarism of the Prussian model, "the whole organisation and method of fighting armies, and along with these victory or defeat, proves to be dependent on material, that is, economic conditions; on the human material, and the armaments material, and therefore on the quality and quantity of the population and on technical development."[14] How long the Monroe Republic can exist as a coercive exploitative apparatus, neglecting its material foundations, remains to be seen. What does seem to be clear, however, is that the Monroe Republic contains a diversity of modes of production—some trading for goods, some production, little visible production *for* exchange or reclamation of pre-electric industrial technology—but society within its borders suffers the political extraction of surplus and the organization of society around the needs of the militia. The Monroe Republic is oriented toward exploitation and militarism, and as we see with its internal struggles against rebels, its legitimacy—a key element for any long-standing mode of production—is

as uncertain as its productive future. From a Marxian standpoint, it is only a matter of time before the contradictions of the political economy of the Monroe Republic rip its apparent stability wide open, ushering in a revolution in *Revolution.*

Feminism and the State

Various feminisms differ in their analysis of the precise causes and features of women's oppression, as well as their analysis of the solutions to women's oppression. While there are a number of feminist authors and texts whose influence is undeniable, contemporary feminism does not circulate around a central figure in the manner that, for example, Marxism has as a school of thought (though it should not be denied that Marxism has developed into a number of clearly distinct and sometimes widely divergent schools, e.g. structuralist Marxism vs. critical theory vs. analytic Marxism). Consequently, a number of feminist thinkers have analyzed the political with often deeply conflicting results, and any treatment of feminist analysis of "the state" is certainly reductive. Contemporary feminism does tend to have certain central insights, however, which have been put forward in a number of important analyses—and thus what follows is less an absolute statement of some unified feminist political theory and more a highly selective reading of some very important feminist political texts.

To use a loose definition, whatever their diversities, feminisms are unified in their theoretical aim to define and establish equality between men and women and in recognizing that there is no unitary oppression of some abstract category of "women," as women are divided by race, class, sexuality, and citizenship (among other factors). Contemporary feminism is increasingly emphatic on the intersectional nature of oppression and tends to fight for equality for all people along the lines of race, class, sex, sexuality, nation, and the like. A number of feminist scholars go one step further and address the degradation of nonhuman nature in human thought and practice (particularly in the thought and practice of the global North). Political theory before the feminist movement often ignored women in political analysis. Carole Pateman, for example, argues in *The Sexual Contract* that traditional social contract theory (such as that of John Locke) opposes the "social contract" to patriarchy and patriarchal right (found, for example, in the work of Robert Filmer), but traditional social contract theory ignores that: "Paternal right is only one, and not the original, dimension of patri-

archal power. A man's power as a father comes after he has exercised the patriarchal right of a man (a husband) over a woman (wife). The contract theorists . . . incorporated conjugal right into their theories and, in so doing, transformed the law of male sex-right into its modern contractual form. . . . The original contract takes place after the political defeat of the father and creates modern *fraternal patriarchy*."[15] Male power over women is manifested in the three contemporary "contracts"—the marriage contract, the prostitution contract, and the surrogate mother contract—each securing in certain ways the control of men over women. Simultaneously, contract theory divides civil society "into two spheres, but attention is directed to one sphere only. . . . The story of the social contract is treated as an account of the creation of the public sphere of civil freedom," while the "other, private, sphere is not seen as politically relevant."[16] These two spheres of civil society, however, are mutually dependent, and thus upholding the public/private separation excludes critical problematization of patriarchal servitude in marriage and excludes "the sexual contract" altogether.

A key element of feminist theory in general since the beginning of the feminist movement, then, has been the expansion of the political beyond the state in order to address problems traditionally considered part of the private, thus untouchable, sphere, as signified in the iconic phrase of the feminist movement "the personal is political." These private issues have long been subject to critical feminist scrutiny, and an early and influential theorist of many of their aspects is Simone de Beauvoir. In a male-dominated society, Beauvoir explains in the introduction to *The Second Sex,* "just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine." Indeed, "For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other."[17] This establishment of woman as Other bleeds throughout the institutions of society, including the state. As Catherine MacKinnon argues, "In male supremacist societies, the male standpoint dominates civil society in the form of the objective standard—that standpoint which, because it dominates in the world, does not appear to function as a standpoint at all."[18] The male standpoint and dominance of men over women become incorporated by the state, and "two things happen: law becomes legitimate, and social dominance becomes invisible."[19] The state "protects male power through embodying and ensuring existing

male control over women at every level—cushioning, qualifying, or *de jure* appearing to prohibit its excesses when necessary to its normalization."[20] Consequentially, the traditional definition of the state as monopolizing the means of "legitimate coercion" in a given territory, "thought to distinguish the state as an entity, actually describes the power of men over women in the home, in the bedroom, on the job, in the street, throughout social life."[21] Thus, while certainly there are a variety of feminist perspectives on the state, in a male-dominated society, male-standpoint biases become easily integrated into the functions, prerogatives, viewpoint, and leadership of the state, and such a standpoint forms the core of state activity. Moreover, such coercive authority de facto supports both the isolation of the private sphere in practice (much like it is in thought) and supports the Othering of women, effectively guaranteeing their separateness and disempowerment in a male-dominated society.

Feminists have understood the political impact of Other status in a variety of ways. As Iris Marion Young argues, there are five categories of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.[22] In precapitalist societies domination is directly accomplished through overt, political means, while capitalism "removes traditional juridically enforced class distinctions and promotes a belief in the legal freedom of persons."[23] Despite these complexities, the concept of exploitation centers around the idea that the results of the labor of one group confer undue benefits on another. In that sense, "women are exploited . . . to the degree that they are wage workers. . . . As a group, however, women undergo specific forms of gender exploitation in which their energies and power are expended, often unnoticed and unacknowledged, usually to benefit men by releasing them for more important and creative work, enhancing their status or the environment around them, or providing them with sexual or emotional service."[24] Exploitation, then, potentially affects women in a number of ways—as workers, and directly in social relations within a sexual division of labor.

Beyond exploitation, society has a number of other important forms of oppression, including marginalization, where the marginalized are individuals excluded outright from the social division of labor and participation in social life (and consequently potentially subject to material deprivation and even death). Powerlessness is a significant and general condition even in advanced capitalist societies, as "most people in these societies do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their

lives and actions, and in this sense most people lack significant power."[25] Moreover, Young also addresses the complexity of powerlessness: "Domination in modern society is enacted through the widely dispersed powers of many agents mediating the decisions of others. To that extent that many people have some power in relation to others, even though they lack the power to decide policies or results. The powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense, those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them."[26] Powerlessness is thus a complex phenomenon, and associated with powerlessness are a number of injustices, including hindrances in the full development of one's capacities, lack of decision-making power in work, and being subject to disrespectful treatment. Exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness are material forms of oppression, grounded in the social division of labor.

Beyond these, Young discusses "cultural imperialism," which "involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm," while "to experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other."[27] Finally, Young highlights *violence,* specifically how "many groups suffer the oppression of systematic violence. Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person. . . . What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable."[28] Thus Young gives us a series of tools to examine the "five faces of oppression," by which we can examine the levels of oppression in any structures or sets of social relations.

Feminist philosophers have also separated *violence* from other concepts in political theory. Hannah Arendt, for example, distinguishes between power, strength, force, authority, and violence. *Power* "corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert," and "power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together."[29] *Strength* references a singular entity and is a property inherent in such a singular entity. *Force,* on the other hand, is often used as a synonym for *violence* but should "be reserved, in terminological language, for the 'forces of nature' or the 'force of circumstance' . . .

that is, to indicate the energy released by physical or social movements."[30] *Authority* can be vested in either individual people or offices, but "its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed."[31]

Violence, on the other hand, is of a purely instrumental character. Contrasting violence with power, Arendt remarks, "Power is indeed the essence of all government, but violence is not. Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in the need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues. . . . Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow."[32] These concepts in Arendt's framework are intermingled in practice, and "power, strength, force, authority, violence—these are but words to indicate the means by which man rules over man; they are held to be synonymous because they have the same function."[33] Yet Arendt considers power and violence to be opposites, as where one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Unlike power, which for Arendt is an end in itself, violence (as purely instrumental) "can destroy power" but "it is utterly incapable of creating it."[34] Arendt then adds a number of analytical lenses by which we can analyze the elements of a political body, the means and ends it pursues, and its weaknesses in regard to circumstance, means, and ends.

A critical feminist interrogation of violence is important because violence is often a gendered phenomenon. As noted by R.W. Connell, "Violence becomes important in gender politics among men. Most episodes of major violence (counting military combat, homicide and armed assault) are transactions among men," just as "violence can be used to enforce a reactionary gender politics."[35] Similarly, in the private sphere "many members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their dominance. Intimidation of women ranges across the spectrum from wolf-whistling in the street, to office harassment, to rape and domestic assault, to murder by a woman's patriarchal 'owner,' such as a separated husband. Physical attacks are commonly accompanied by a verbal abuse of women (whores and bitches, in present popular music that recommends beating women)."[36] Connell argues that violence is both part of a system of domination and a measure of its imperfection, as a thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have a diminished need to intimidate and coerce.

The gendered aspects of state policy extend beyond the implications of its coercive and regulatory policy (which has significant repercussions on

reproductive rights, sexuality, and the like). The welfare policies of various states greatly affect and are affected by its citizens in very gender-differentiated ways. As sociologist Ann Orloff argues, "Gender relations, embodied in the sexual division of labor, compulsory heterosexuality, discourses and ideologies of citizenship, motherhood, masculinity and femininity, and the like, profoundly shape the character of welfare states. Likewise, the institutions of social provision—the set of social assistance and social insurance programs, universal citizenship entitlements, and public services to which we refer to as 'the welfare state'—affect gender relations in a variety of ways."[37] Thus feminist theorists are tasked with the development of means to analyze the impact of welfare states on gender. Feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser unpacks "the idea of gender equity as a compound of five distinct normative principles" (related to the "family wage").[38] These are the *antipoverty principle* (whose purpose is the prevention of poverty), the *antiexploitation principle* (the prevention of exploitation of vulnerable populations), *equality principles* (addressing inequalities between men and women in terms of income inequality, leisure time inequality, and inequalities of respect), *and* the *antimarginalization principle* (requiring "provision of the necessary conditions for women's participation, including day care, elder care, and provision for breast-feeding in public" and "the dismantling of masculinity work cultures and woman-hostile political environments").[39] Fraser also mentions the *antiandrocentrism principle* (involving the decentering of masculinist norms, including the revaluing of practices and traits that are undervalued due to their association with women). Just as Young provides multifaceted criteria by which we can critique states and other institutions for oppressing their citizens, Fraser gives us a set of criteria by which we can assess the success or failures of a state to adequately address the welfare and gender equality of its citizens.

Gender relations also permeate the interactions between states and between states and international bodies. Feminist political theorist Cynthia Enloe argues that *the international is personal.* She explains,

> "The international is personal" implies that governments depend upon certain kinds of allegedly private relationships in order to conduct their foreign affairs. Governments need more than secrecy and intelligence agencies; they need wives who are willing to provide their diplomatic husbands with unpaid services so those men can develop trusting relationships with other diplomatic husbands. They need not only military hardware, but a steady supply of women's

sexual services to convince their soldiers that they are manly. To operate in the international arena, governments seek other governments' recognition of their sovereignty; but they also depend on ideas about masculinized dignity and feminized sacrifice to sustain that sense of autonomous nationhood.[40]

This picture is complex, in that "while women have not been mere pawns in global politics, governments and companies with government backing have made explicit attempts to try to control and channel women's actions in order to achieve their own ends."[41] In other words, making feminist sense of the interactions of states requires looking at the use of gender relations in these interactions, the differential power between men and women in these interactions and processes, and the meanings of the struggles of various men and women in these processes.

While there is certainly a vast diversity of distinct feminist positions on issues of state and political power (and the above was, by far, less a comprehensive review than a selective archiving of various feminist lenses through which we can view the political), feminist theorists give us a variety of tools with which we can view how states and gender relations affect each other. A feminist analysis of states will allow us to look into the public-private division, male biases in the operations and understandings of state structures and policies, and the priorities of a given state. We can look at the relation of state policy to the use of violence (and the relation of gender relations to violence in a given state), both against its own population and against populations outside its borders. A feminist analysis can also look at a given state in relation to exploitation, powerlessness, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence and the connection of those to gender relations. Moreover, we can examine the relation of state policy and actions in alleviating inequalities (and specifically gender inequalities), through analyzing the existence and efficacy of antipoverty, antiexploitation, equality, antimarginalization, and antiandrocentric principles. Finally, in a given political body's operations, we can look at the use and construction of gender relations. What insight do these tools give us into the Monroe Republic?

Feminist Political Theory and the Monroe Republic

The changes in the political economy of the world after the blackout seem to have a number of repercussions, including in the sexual division of labor and

the system of gender relations as a whole. For example, a key element of the sexual division of labor under capitalism is the distinction between public and private spheres—but in the Monroe Republic, while private households exist, it seems as though economic production has predominantly returned to the private sphere and men and women share to a greater degree the duties of production at home. Thus, one significant effect of capitalism on gender relations seems to have changed significantly. Additionally, the Monroe Militia, as mentioned before, does not seem to have concerned itself with the welfare of the population or its material base in general—it has largely abandoned pretensions to welfarist distributions. But if gender relations have changed, what have they changed *to?*

The leadership of the Monroe Militia seems highly gender segregated, with men filling the visible levels of leadership. Women are conscripted into the army (as seen in "The Children's Crusade"), but are not seen to be given positions of leadership—and of course, leadership in the militia *is* leadership in the government. This may be a de facto leftover from the prior masculine military culture rather than an intent, as the Monroe Militia clearly has no qualms about regularly employing female bounty hunters (as shown with Mia in "Ties That Bind"). The rebels, by contrast, have been more amenable to female participation in their campaigns (and again significant, by contrast, is that the Georgia Federation, unlike the Monroe Republic, has a female president). In addition to being de facto excluded from equal political power and sharing economic exploitation with male citizens, women are subjected to performing domestic labor in the homes of more powerful militia members (for example, in the home of Tom Neville) and are further subjected to distinctively *sexual* exploitation, in which powerful men have access to sexual favors from women, presumably prostitutes. For example, in the episode "Sex and Drugs," upon first talking to the captive Danny, Monroe tells him, "Just remember, you're my guest. Anything you want, food, women, anything, just ask, okay?" just as the same episode introduces us to Drexel, the leading heroin dealer of the Monroe Republic, who is revealed to have a stable of "Drexel's girls," whom he uses sexually and controls by keeping them addicted to heroin. It seems as though the world of *Revolution* is dangerous in general, but it is an especially dangerous place in which to be a woman (highlighted by an attempted rape of Charlie by bandits in the pilot episode). While there is little to no indication that Monroe allows his soldiers to commit rape or sexual violence against women (and it seems rather unlikely), powerful men in the Monroe Republic do take advantage of their capacity to sexually exploit women.

The policies of the Monroe Republic, again, seem oriented exclusively toward the maintenance of military coercive power, and the official laws we are familiar with are utilized to aid militia monopolization of weaponry and to allow interrogation and arrest of individuals who rebel or otherwise resist the militia. Moreover, it is evident that forced conscription of children into the militia is an official policy and means of militia growth. It is clear that the priorities of the Monroe Militia are the maintenance and monopoly of coercive capacity, measured in strength of arms and number of soldiers, over whom discipline is readily exercised (disobedience and especially rebellion are often punished by execution). War, then, seems to be the fundamental priority of the militia and thus the republic—and the leadership will readily break apart families in order to maintain that coercive capacity. Insofar as warfare and militarism are associated with masculinity, then, and a focus on family is often associated with femininity, these tendencies are implicitly supported in *Revolution* through the sexual segregation of the militia and common emphasis by female characters on the importance of family (although male characters' focus is just as often the protection of family, as with Miles's continued efforts, and the use of family ties as tools of interrogation, such as Monroe's use of Danny to get information from Rachel). Consequently, the Monroe Republic's emphatic pursuit of greater military capacity and willingness to break apart families and use familial love as leverage to extract information can be interpreted as supporting the idea that the policies of the Monroe Republic have a distinctly masculinist bias.

Applying the concrete criteria we have unearthed from various feminist theorists, the gender relations of the Monroe Republic prove problematic in a number of ways. First of all, while the public-private split so characteristic of the gender hierarchy under capitalism has been bridged to a degree, it is largely a result of the relocalization of production, and the position of women seems to have been diminished in certain distinct ways within the Monroe Republic. Considering the five faces of oppression outlined by Young, gender relations in the Monroe Republic are still dramatically unequal. First of all, women are as subject to economic exploitation as men, but they are additionally subject to sexual exploitation (and the only domestic laborers we have seen in the show are women). Women are subject to a large degree of structural powerlessness under the Monroe Republic, for while few men have significant decision-making power, no women seem to—indeed, though we see a number of female rebels, soldiers, and warriors, the most secure women in the Monroe Republic are secure due to the protection of the men in their

life. (This is highlighted numerous times; for example, by how often Miles has come to the aid of Charlie, Aaron leaving his wife because of his inability to protect her, and the security of Captain Neville's wife as a contrast against the position of many women in *Revolution.*) We are uncertain whether this is due to mere contingent circumstances or whether it is a strict policy (and thus formal marginalization), but the effect is the same. Thus, by an account of Young's three material criteria—exploitation, marginalization, and power-lessness—women are substantively disempowered in the Monroe Republic.

By account of Young's two remaining criteria, cultural imperialism and violence, the Monroe Republic fares no better. The Monroe Militia, as a governing body, subjects society to the demands of violence, being orga-nized around warfare and using monopolization of force, conscription, and taxation toward this end alone. Violence, properly speaking, is merely instrumental and cannot construct or maintain a society (as highlighted in discussions by thinkers as diverse as Engels and Arendt), and it is associated in a number of ways with men as a prerogative of male power. Thus vio-lence and war, as men's spheres and representing masculinist priorities (as it implicitly seems to in *Revolution*), reflect Young's criteria of *cultural imperi-alism,* wherein the priorities of one group (in this case men, who control the Monroe Militia and, given the structural integration of sexual exploitation of women, seem to be predominately benefited by practice and policy in the republic) overtake the policies of an Othered group (in this case, women). Moreover, the importance of family is constantly disregarded by Monroe or used as tactical leverage, and a warfare orientation clearly dominates any suggestion of welfare measures taken by the Monroe Republic on behalf of the citizens under it (welfare measures are so far invisible). Alongside this lack of welfare policies, the Monroe Republic seems to be unconcerned with movements toward gender equality—none of Fraser's five criteria is visibly present. In terms of a feminist balance sheet the Monroe Republic stands as a male-dominated, male-focused, violent government, in which women are excluded from positions of power, commonly sexually exploited, and utilized as objects for powerful men, and which by all meaningful accounts is marked by the general domination of men over women.

The Monroe Republic: A Marxist-Feminist Revolution?

From what we know of the Monroe Republic, Marxist and feminist criticism have revealed a number of key factors. The Monroe Republic is dominated

by the Monroe Militia, which is governed by men in its topmost positions and monopolizes coercive power, which it uses to defend and expand its borders against rival territories and to secure domination over the citizens within those borders. To these ends of warfare the Monroe Republic subjects all other aspects of life—extracting taxation and crops, abducting conscripted children, and killing whomever stands in its way. The laws of which we are aware are oriented toward this end, neglecting the general social need to maintain production and reproduction. The militia seems to take no part in attempts to provide welfare or improve the productive capacity of the state, and when it does seek higher technology (such as by reclaiming steam-powered locomotion or reattaining electricity) it prioritizes military uses (using trains to move troops and electricity to power helicopters, for example). The Monroe Republic, then, clearly is both a hierarchical and an exploitative political superstructure that largely neglects its material conditions, living instead off already-produced goods (such as stockpiling guns and ammunition from before the blackout) and operating with a very gender-differentiated and patriarchal sexual division of labor, in which the rule of men is underwritten by the domestic labor and sexual exploitation of women.

By both Marxist and feminist accounts, then, the Monroe Republic is hierarchical and exploitative and, moreover, violent and neglectful of the conditions of its own existence. As highlighted by both Arendt and Engels, states oriented toward violence cannot in the long term stand—they delegitimize themselves and, in ignorance of their foundations, they cannot survive without changing. However strong the Monroe Militia could become from the reclamation of steam technology or electricity, without a change in orientation its rule could never be absolute. Three key insights from performing parallel Marxist and feminist analyses of *Revolution* thus present themselves. First, for all its insight, historical materialist analysis has been uneven in its recognition of the importance of reproduction and thus of family and gender relations as a material base of society. Second, in concordance with a vast array of existing feminist literature, *Revolution* shows that one cannot understand the class relations of a particular society without understanding its gender relations, and similarly one cannot understand its gender relations in their totality without a command of its class relations and the impact of those class relations on welfare and/or on the militarism of a particular state. Finally, it reveals that analysis of the state must recognize the uses of masculinity and male-biased policies in underwriting the coercive force that secures state and class power—masculinities, in their

often-developed capacities for violence, are necessary to support militaristic states just as they protect class relationships. This latter, often undertheorized, insight is useful in an understanding of the operations of patriarchal modes of production, and without it one cannot understand the political economy of *Revolution.* The possibilities for a humanist, class and gender egalitarian revolution in *Revolution* have yet to be seen—but as both Marxist and feminist analyses reveal, without such a revolution, the longevity of the Monroe Republic may be as unlikely as it is undesirable.

Notes

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3. Ibid.

4. Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* ed. Ernest Mandel, Ben Fowkes, and David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1990), 3:954.

5. K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 20–21.

6. K. Marx and F. Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Marx-Engels Reader,* 473–74.

7. Marx and Engels, *German Ideology,* 55.

8. F. Engels, "The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State," in *Marx-Engels Reader,* 753.

9. K. Marx, "Capital, Volume One," in *Marx-Engels Reader,* 436.

10. K. Marx and F. Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Marx-Engels Reader,* 490.

11. K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995), 119.

12. F. Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring),* ed. C. P. Dutt (New York: International Publishers), 184.

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15. C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 3.

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17. S. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 13.

18. C. A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 237.

19. Ibid.

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21. Ibid., 169.

22. I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 40.

23. Ibid., 48.

24. Ibid., 51.

25. Ibid., 56.

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A Light in the Darkness

Ethical Reflections on *Revolution*

Michael Versteeg and Adam Barkman

Electricity is the source upon which our modern technologized society is dependent. Many technologies that we take for granted every day, such as cellphones and computers, rely on this source of power. But what would happen if one day everything just shut off? How would human beings survive in a world without electricity? Such a world is realized in J. J. Abrams's *Revolution.*

Approximately fifteen years after a global blackout, modern civilization as we know it ceases to exist, and the former United States births five new political entities, one of which is known as the Monroe Republic. The story of *Revolution* takes place within the Monroe Republic and centers around Charlie Matheson, who tries to rescue her brother and mother from Bass Monroe, the head of the Monroe Republic. As her adventure unfolds, Charlie, along with her uncle Miles Matheson and others, experiences moments of loss and hardship as well as moral indecision. Charlie even discovers that her uncle was at one time a general for the Monroe Militia. It is a coming-of-age story for Charlie, who in her childish innocence soon learns that the world is not a simple place.

Within the world of *Revolution,* where murder and stealing could make the difference between life and death, an important question of ethics must be raised: How do we determine in a given situation what act would be considered right or wrong? As humans we struggle with these kinds of ethical questions all the time. *Revolution* provides us with a world filled with situations in which tough ethical questions must be addressed. Moreover, to arrive at any decision about how to answer these questions, we require an ethical theory, or some sort of ethical framework, that will allow us to navigate the ethical waters of *Revolution*. Many potential theories today try to provide a

comprehensive framework for ethical consideration. But there arises another question: Which ethical theory is best, and how do we discern this?

In this chapter we consider four ethical theories—ethical subjectivism, contractarianism, utilitarianism, and natural law theory—and apply them to *Revolution,* providing an illustration of how each theory functions. Subsequently, we critique each theory, suggesting that there are three specific criteria that a viable ethical theory must meet. These criteria will be outlined in the discussion, and the ethical theory that satisfies all three criteria may be considered the best ethical theory within the scope of our analysis.

"Man is the measure of all things": Ethical Subjectivism

The first contender for consideration is known as *ethical subjectivism,* which claims that ethical principles are arbitrarily chosen by, and are relative to, each individual moral agent. This theory perceives moral understanding as a purely subjective enterprise, which is to say, without any objective basis. Such an ethical framework could be summarized as follows: What is right for you is right for you, and what is right for me is right for me. There is no objective right or wrong; rather, there is only what one deems to be preferable. If you believe that breaking the law and stealing weapons from the Monroe Militia is morally praiseworthy, then that is true and right for you. Similarly, if you believe that taking a woman hostage and sexually violating her for fun is morally right, this would also be true and right for you. In any particular situation, the ethical subjectivist alone is responsible for determining what is, and is not, morally permissible. Certainly, such a theory would allow one to make quick and decisive ethical choices, which would be useful in a postapocalyptic world. To see how this theory would work, let's use an example from the world of *Revolution.*

In the episode "No Quarter," a flashback shows Miles and his friend Monroe (before the establishment of the Monroe Republic) walking down a road together six months after the blackout. As the two of them are walking, they stumble across a campsite and find the bodies of a couple that had recently been killed. A second flashback in the episode continues with Miles and Monroe walking down the same road, this time coming across two burly men beating a third man to the ground. Miles is disturbed by what he sees and proceeds to move toward one of the men, drawing his handgun. The man pleads with Miles for his life, claiming that they were only trying to

find something to eat. At this point, Miles realizes that it was these two men who earlier had murdered the couple down the road. "Can't call the cops. Can't put 'em in jail," Miles says. Miles looks as these men and pauses, then quickly turns and shoots both of them in the chest. With the two men dead Miles turns to Monroe, who is shocked at what has just happened, and says, "There's nobody else coming to help. . . . Somebody's gotta do something, or else there's gonna be nothing left."[1]

According to ethical subjectivism, in this situation Miles would be totally justified in doing what he did, since what is morally right or wrong is whatever an individual discerns it to be. Miles concluded that killing the two men was morally right because they, according to his own perspective, were guilty of murdering two people and beating a man senseless. On the other hand, if Miles had allowed these men to leave unharmed, this would also have been the morally right choice and would be equally permissible within his subjective ethical framework. Given ethical subjectivism, Miles's moral discernment is ultimately arbitrary: any possible choice can be either morally right or wrong as long as he deems it so. Morality is reduced to something like a groundless opinion, a nonrational feeling, or an aesthetic preference.

We can well imagine that some problems arise within this theory. If ethical subjectivism is correct and all ethical principles are relative to and grounded upon each individual's subjective choice, then what happens when two parties have conflicting ethical frameworks? Consider the example of Miles killing the two men. In this situation it seems clear that Miles convicted and killed these men based upon at least two ethical principles that he believed to be true: "murder is not right" and "beating another person senseless is not right." Now, these ethical principles would apply only to the individual in question—Miles—and are not themselves objective in any way. If this is so, it's logically possible that the two men killed by Miles did not themselves believe these two propositions to be true. In fact, we can imagine that these men could have believed two opposite propositions to be true: "murder is right" and "beating another person senseless is right." According to ethical subjectivism, Miles and the two other men are both morally "right" because there is no objective ethical standard. In such a case, these men were as justified in their actions of murder and beating another individual as Miles was in killing both of them. But how can two contrary principles, "murder is right" and "murder is not right," both be true at the same time?

They Can't Both Be Right

Two contrary propositions cannot both be true simultaneously. In this case, murder cannot be both morally right and wrong; it necessarily must be one or the other. If every human individual is entitled to his or her own subjective ethical framework, as the ethical subjectivist claims, then it follows that logical conflict and incoherence will abound. Therefore, since ethical subjectivism has proven to show signs of incoherence, the veracity of such an ethical theory is called into question. However, the problem goes further still. The basic premise of ethical subjectivism itself proves the theory to be self-refuting.

Consider the foundational premise, or proposition, of the theory ethical subjectivism: morality is subjectively defined by all human individuals. If this proposition (P) is true, then it must necessarily apply to all human individuals. But if P must necessarily apply to all human individuals, this would suggest that there is, in fact, one ethical principle—namely, P—that all human individuals hold in common. But if all human individuals hold P in common, then the content of P (that morality is subjectively defined by all human individuals) must necessarily be false, given that there is at least one ethical principle—namely, P— that is not subjectively defined by all individuals. Thus, in order for the content of P (morality is subjectively defined by all human individuals) to be true, P cannot apply to all human individuals and, therefore, must be false. Now, for P to be both true and false at the same time and in the same way is nonsense, and so the basic premise of ethical subjectivism effectively refutes itself.

It is reasonable, then, to conclude that ethical subjectivism cannot supply an ethical foundation; in addition, the theory itself is self-refuting and cannot be rationally maintained. As we saw with Miles and the two men, we cannot truly establish the rightness or wrongness of either Miles's actions or those of the two men if morality is subjective to each human individual. However, the very *purpose* of an ethical theory is to determine the ethical status of varying actions. Therefore, the following shall serve as the first of our criteria for a viable ethical theory: *a viable ethical theory is required to establish a common and agreed-upon foundation of behavior that is logically coherent and consistent in order to morally differentiate between varying actions.* Let's now look at our next contender and see if it can provide such an ethical foundation.

"By the people, for the people": Contractarianism

It seems that a viable ethical theory must establish a proper ethical foundation for coherent moral reasoning. To find a common ethical foundation, we will now consider John Rawls's *contractarianism* and see if this theory is up to the task.

Rawls's contractarianism is a form of ethical *conventionalism,* which states that morality is determined by a social body or society. Contractarianism states that ethical principles are defined by a social contract agreed upon by a special group of rational individuals who represent the general populace of a particular society or social body. Known as the "original position," this group would abandon certain beliefs about the world and themselves that might cloud or influence their judgment, including metaphysical and religious beliefs, as well as other facts about their social status.[2] This "veil of ignorance" brackets such beliefs to ensure that these individuals will determine an ethical foundation for a society without tailoring morality according to their own interests.[3] For example, if a man knew he were wealthy it's possible that he might promote principles that would advantage the wealthy.[4] Rawls argues that if people are ignorant of any details about themselves and their social status, they would then agree upon an ethical foundation that would treat each person equally and fairly, including themselves. As Rawls states,

> The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances. Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favor his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain. . . . The original position is, one might say, the appropriate status quo, and thus the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair. This explains the propriety of the name "justice as fairness": it conveys the idea that the principles of justice are agreed to in a situation that is fair.[5]

The ethical contract of contractarianism would seem to provide at least a common ethical foundation, providing us with a basis for morally differentiating between the actions of several individuals, not just one. To see how

this theory functions, let's reconsider the scenario with Miles and the two men and see how contractarianism would unfold in the same situation.

Miles considered himself justified in killing those men because he believed at least these two ethical principles to be true: "murder is not right" and "beating men senseless is not right." Now, within the context of *Revolution,* let's suppose that a group of rational individuals gather together, collectively representing the Monroe Republic. Let's further suppose that all of their individual beliefs that may influence their judgments have been bracketed behind the veil of ignorance and this group—in the original position—agrees upon an ethical contract that presumably reflects a fair society. Let's also assume that this contract either explicitly or implicitly agrees with two ethical principles: "murder is not right" and "beating men senseless is not right." Such a contract would now serve as the ethical foundation of the Monroe Republic and should provide a standard by which to judge and assess behavior between individuals.

Given this particular ethical contract, it would seem clear that the two men were indeed guilty of wrongdoing, as Miles believed they were. These men acted in violation of the ethical contract of the Monroe Republic by violating the principles "murder is not right" and "beating men senseless is not right," and therefore they are guilty of committing immoral acts. If contractarianism is true, then the conviction of these men appears to be justified and coherent. But what about Miles? Although he was perhaps justified in convicting these men of wrongdoing, Miles's actions are held equally accountable to the ethical contract of the Monroe Republic, and we are therefore entitled to question Miles's moral justification for killing these men.

If the Monroe Republic had stipulated certain laws about the use of capital punishment by certain individuals in certain circumstances, then it is possible to argue that Miles could have been justified in killing these men. On the other hand, if Miles's actions were not warranted according to the ethical contract, then one could also argue that he is guilty of murder, or unjust killing. However, this kind of inquiry would concern only the ethical contract itself, not the theory of contractarianism per se. In this case, the question of Miles's justification is not necessarily important to the discussion at hand. What is important, however, is the question of whether or not contractarianism can even provide an ethical foundation for discussing the ethical status of the actions of individuals. As we have seen, contractarianism provides an ethical foundation that allows us to coherently morally

differentiate the actions of more than one human individual—something ethical subjectivism could not do.

As-If Ethical Theorizing

Contractarianism succeeds where ethical subjectivism could not, and for that reason it is in contention to be a viable ethical theory. However, though this theory may establish a common ethical foundation, there are significant issues with contractarianism that must be considered. Let's look at another scenario from the world of *Revolution* to consider such problems.

In the episode "Chained Heat," a flashback brings us back to when a much-younger Charlie is wandering through a city with her parents. While playing with a basketball, Charlie lets the ball get away and runs after it, stumbling across a stranger who then starts innocently talking with her. When Charlie's mother, Rachel Matheson, calls Charlie to come to her, the man grabs Charlie and draws her closer to him, commenting on her "pretty face." Holding her by the shoulders, the stranger warns that he will kill Charlie unless Rachel gives him all the food they have. Just then, Ben, Charlie's father, returns from scavenging to find his family being threatened. Ben draws his handgun and threatens to shoot the man if he does not let Charlie go. The man slowly brings Charlie back to the Mathesons and proceeds to take their cart of food and supplies as he leaves. Raising his gun at the man, Ben shouts at him, "Stop, we need that food. I can't let you take it—I'll shoot!" The man stops and turns toward Ben, replying, "I don't think you will." He continues to walk away, and Ben slowly lowers his gun, watching as the stranger steals his family's food. However, before the man disappears, there is the echo of a gunshot as Rachel, without flinching, shoots and kills the man.[6]

A key ethical question is raised: Was Rachel justified in killing this man? To answer this question we would simply heed the ethical contract that contractarianism provides. Based on this established contract, which serves as an ethical foundation, we should be able to assess whether or not Rachel's actions were right. However, before we can even begin to consider Rachel's justification, an issue arises. Within the theory, Rawls implicitly assumes that fairness and equality are qualities that are good, or just, which an ethical contract should reflect. Yet this assumption raises the question of how Rawls comes to such a conclusion. Moreover, to what standard is Rawls referring when he establishes that fairness

and equality are just? Why not assume that unfairness and inequality are just, or good? By what is Rawls judging the qualities of fairness and equality to assess their goodness? Now, if contractarianism is true, then for Rawls to justify his claim that equality and fairness are just, he would require his original position to agree that equality and fairness are good things while at the same time using the presumption of the goodness of equality and fairness itself as the "standard" by which the original position will judge. But clearly this would be circular reasoning. And if Rawls is simply making unwarranted assumptions, then why trust the theory of contractarianism at all? Thus it seems that in order to claim that equality and fairness are good in and of themselves, Rawls would use a separate ethical standard, one outside of his theory of contractarianism, to make such a judgment. But this raises another question: By what standard is he judging?

Aside from the previous issue, there is another, more significant problem for contractarianism. From a practical standpoint, the theory itself is untenable and cannot be used in a practical manner. Rawls's conceptions of the original position and the veil of ignorance are part of a thought experiment: they are merely hypothetical. In the words of Rawls himself, the original position is "a purely hypothetical situation characterized so as to lead to a certain conception of justice."[7] For a group of individuals to become oblivious to all possible beliefs that may influence or bias their judgment is, arguably, most likely impossible. And even if it were possible, why *should* we abandon all metaethical beliefs? Certainly we can well imagine that metaphysical beliefs regarding reality and the nature of the human person are important and, therefore, should be involved in the process of forming a proper ethical theory rather than abandoned. Theoretically, contractarianism may be able to provide an ethical foundation, but practically speaking, the theory cannot sustain its own basic tenets.

Contractarianism, simply put, is an "as if" ethical framework. Accordingly, if this theory relies on concepts that are purely hypothetical in nature, how can it be applied to the actual world? The answer is that it cannot, and therefore contractarianism cannot be considered a viable ethical theory. And this provides us with our second criterion for an ethical theory: *a viable ethical theory must be practically applicable within the real (actual) world.* So far we have looked at ethical subjectivism and contractarianism and have seen that both have fallen short of our goal, so let's see if the next contender fares any better.

"The ends justify the means": Utilitarianism

From our observations of ethical subjectivism and contractarianism, it seems that a viable ethical theory must not only provide an ethical foundation that functions in a logical, consistent manner (the snag for ethical subjectivism) but must also be capable of being applied practically to everyday moral reasoning (the snag for contractarianism). To find an ethical theory that will work within the world of *Revolution,* we will now consider *utilitarianism.*

Utilitarianism is a form of what is known as *consequentialism,* which bases moral considerations upon the effects or consequences of particular actions. The theory of utilitarianism in particular states that ethical principles are determined by considering the degree of *utility* that results from the consequences of any action. Right or good actions are those that produce the greatest proportion of utility overall. Utility, according to John Stuart Mill, is defined by the *Greatest Happiness Principle,* which states, "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure."[8] Utility refers to that which is good in a nonmoral sense. If the consequences of an act yield a greater proportion of happiness, or good, over the "reverse of happiness," or bad, then we conclude that such an act is right. Simply put, utilitarianism promotes the greatest good for everyone considered.

Now, important to note is the distinction between two different approaches within utilitarianism. The first is known as *act utilitarianism,* in which the rightness of an act is determined solely by the good produced by individual acts on their own. This approach is concerned with specific situations and is more case-by-case in nature, whereas determining the rightness of an action is a matter of weighing the consequences of each possible act in a given situation. The second approach, *rule utilitarianism,* states that the rightness of an act is determined by how much good is produced while adhering to certain guidelines or rules. A right act is one conforming to a rule that, if followed generally within a society, would result in a greater proportion of utility overall. Even if an act produces immediate harmful effects in a particular case, rule utilitarianism considers the effects of the action generally, providing a general rule of thumb.

Having distinguished these two approaches, let's first see how a utilitarian would apply act utilitarianism to the situation with Rachel and the stranger. From the act utilitarian perspective, we need to consider this situation on

its own and imagine the consequences of each possible course of action that Rachel could have pursued. If Rachel had let the man go, surely he would have benefited greatly from his new food supply. On the other hand, that very same act would probably have resulted in the Mathesons starving to death (assuming that food was extremely scarce). Consider another action: by killing the man, even though his death would be considered harmful, Rachel ensured that the Mathesons were able to keep their food supply, and the three of them benefited and survived, rather than dying of starvation. In this situation it seems to be a greater good for the Mathesons, a family of three, to keep the food for themselves and survive, rather than for one man to take it for himself. Thus, if we follow this act utilitarian line of reasoning, the morally right thing for Rachel to do was to kill the man and keep the food for her own family.[9]

The act utilitarian ethical foundation for determining an act's ethical status (judging an act according to its consequences) certainly seems to be logically coherent, and the consequentialist methodology appears to provide a method of ethical problem solving that would prove practically applicable in the actual world. In fact, much of our day-to-day moral reasoning reflects the idea of considering the benefits and the drawbacks of a particular situation. However, even though the basic consequentialist foundation of act utilitarianism does provide a practical methodology in moral problem solving, this branch of utilitarianism retains a significant problem. So before moving on to rule utilitarianism, let's look at the problem with act utilitarianism.

The difficulty in act utilitarianism is an epistemological one. In our prior example with Rachel, to what extent must she consider the consequences of an act before she is justified in making a decision? In other words, how far along must Rachel consider the "chain of consequences," so to speak, before she can come to a justified decision? According to the consequences considered, we determined that killing the man would seem to produce a greater proportion of utility than not killing him. Yet what if, by killing him, Rachel prevented this man from bringing food to his wife and children (supposing he had a family), thereby causing their deaths? Additionally, perhaps as a result of witnessing his death, Charlie potentially could have developed a form of psychological trauma in the future. The consideration of this new information could potentially change the balance of Rachel's utilitarian calculus.[10]

Now, these considerations are hypothetical, and practically speaking, Rachel could not have known such details even if they were the case. But that is exactly the point. Act utilitarianism imposes an unsustainable burden

that is beyond the epistemic grasp of an individual. To optimally determine the yield of utility of a particular act, one would have to consider a near-infinite regression of possible consequences. In fairness, one might defend the act utilitarian position by arguing that Rachel does not need to make an *optimal* conclusion but rather only consider the relevant consequences that are readily knowable to her, thereby limiting her epistemic responsibility. Indeed, this would limit the number of possible consequences to consider. However, if this epistemological adjustment is to be established, then the determination of utility yielded in each particular case becomes more and more subjective, and the ethical basis of act utilitarianism grows increasingly arbitrary. If the ethical status of an act is dependent not only on the consequences considered but now also on the epistemological context (which varies from person to person) in which to consider such consequences, the resultant conclusion made by an individual retains an even higher degree of subjectivity. Thus, for the act utilitarian to arrive at a well-founded conclusion regarding the precise utility produced in any specific case would seem a dubious undertaking at best, calling into question the veracity of such an approach. To respond to this objection the utilitarian need only adjust his or her theory to rule utilitarianism.

In the episode "Sex and Drugs" Miles seeks out one of his old acquaintances, Drexel, a leading heroin dealer in the Monroe Republic, and requests medical assistance for Nora, a woman accompanying Miles and Charlie, who was stabbed in the prior episode. Drexel, a seemingly devious man, provides the group with shelter and gives Nora her required aid. In return, Drexel demands that Charlie do him a favor. An Irish family up the road from Drexel's mansion, the O'Hallorans, has recently burned his poppy crops, used for producing heroin. In order to get back at the O'Hallorans, Drexel gives Miles an ultimatum; either Charlie goes and kills their father, Bill O'Halloran, or everyone from Miles's group will be killed. Before Miles is able to speak, Charlie accepts the offer and agrees to do what Drexel wants. As she prepares to leave on her mission, Aaron pleads with Charlie not to go through with it, claiming that the O'Hallorans are innocent. "This is murder," Aaron protests, to which Charlie replies, "I don't have a choice."[11]

What's the Correct Course?

What, exactly, would be the correct course of action in this instance? To reiterate, rule utilitarianism states that an act is right insofar as it adheres

to a given rule that, if generally followed, would produce the greatest good, or the highest proportion of utility, overall. For example, we could imagine "do not take that which is not yours" or "do not steal" as a possible rule. If followed generally, it seems that this particular rule would probably result in a greater proportion of utility overall. Now, although there may be certain cases in which stealing may yield a greater immediate proportion of utility in a particular situation, this rule would still yield the greatest good overall and would therefore be binding for a rule utilitarian to follow.

In regard to our scenario, we could also imagine that the rule "do not kill another person unjustly" would probably result in a greater proportion of utility if generally followed. Assuming that this rule would actually apply in our scenario with Charlie, we need to discern what the term "unjustly" refers to. Recall that for rule utilitarianism an act that is right or just is one that follows a rule that would yield greater utility if generally followed. So we may translate the previous rule likewise: "do not kill another person unless there is a rule that supports such an act." Thus, in order to be justified in killing another person there must be a rule that would support that very act. Now, can we imagine a possible rule that would yield a greater amount of utility overall and also permit Charlie's killing of Bill O'Halloran? It certainly seems possible. For example, the rule "protect your loved ones from harm" would certainly seem to produce a greater amount of utility if generally followed and would also seem to offer justification in Charlie's act of killing. We may conclude, then, that according to rule utilitarianism Charlie's killing of Bill O'Halloran *could* be justified.

Now, even though rule utilitarianism is often the most preferred approach to utilitarianism, it is not without its flaws. In the situation with Charlie the rule utilitarian would need to ask the question, What rule, if generally followed, would maximize utility? But, when considering a rule in a given situation, how does the rule utilitarian discern which particular rule(s) to follow? For example, it is conceivable within our case that Charlie could have considered another rule, say, "do unto others what you would have done unto yourself."[12] Given the rule we already used ("protect your loved ones from harm"), both of these rules, if followed generally, would seem to produce greater utility in general and would therefore be acceptable to the rule utilitarian. However, these two rules would provide us with contrary courses of action, and rule utilitarianism does not seem to provide any basis to decide which of these rules is "more right." Thus, in the situation with Bill O'Halloran, which rule should Charlie follow? To overcome this issue,

perhaps we should choose between different rules based on their output of utility. But this appears to be a rehashed form of act utilitarianism, since we are deciding what is right based on the output of utility of each possible rule (instead of direct consequences) that would apply. If this is the case, then the same insufficiencies within act utilitarianism would now apply to rule utilitarianism, leaving us with no alternative approach. Thus, utilitarianism may not be able to contend any longer.

Yet there is another objection to utilitarianism that seems to be even more crucial. In general, the utilitarian ethic does not seem to correspond with everyday human moral reality. Although it is true that the consequences of an act do somewhat contribute to the rightness or wrongness of an act, there also seems to be an ethical quality inherent in the very act itself that retains moral value. When we say "murder is wrong" or "genocide is wrong or "rape is wrong," do we really only mean to suggest that these things merely produce more "negative" consequences than good ones? Although these acts could and probably do produce "negative" consequences, that fact alone does not seem to be the sole determinant of an act's ethical value; there seems to be something wrong or right in a particular act itself, regardless of the consequences. For instance, when we act kind to a friend or family member, is such an act good only because it produces "positive" effects? Most people would want to say no, since acting in a kind manner does not seem to be "right" just for the sake of the act's consequences but rather for the sake of the act itself. Certain acts seem to sustain a moral quality that is inherent in that act itself, totally independent of its consequences. However, utilitarianism cannot provide an explanation for this. For the utilitarian, ethical value is placed only on the consequences of the act, and not on the act itself, which would fly in the face of considered moral judgments. If everything we did was purely in consideration of consequences, the very nature of things such as love, kindness, friendship, and compassion would seem to lose their core moral qualities by this consequentialist attitude.

Even though utilitarianism may be able to provide practical means for everyday moral reasoning, the consequentialist methodology does not seem to correspond with moral reality as we experience it every day. Certain actions seem to have an inherent moral value in and of themselves, totally unrelated to the consequences that such an act may produce. As well, there also seem to be acts that human beings simply *intuit* to be either right or wrong. Many of us would admit a priori that certain things are wrong simply because that's the way things are, and the utilitarian cannot account for

this phenomenon of common sense. This ultimately provides us with our third and final criterion for an ethical theory: *a viable ethical theory must correspond with and provide an explanation for commonly held human moral values and the human moral reality as we experience it every day*. With our third and final criterion established we now look to our fourth and final contender for consideration.

"For goodness' sake": Natural Law Theory

As a form of deontological ethics (obligation, or duty-based ethics), natural law theory states that basic ethical principles are constituted by an unchanging, transcendent, and universal moral law that compels all human individuals to act in accordance with its ethical standards.[13] These ethical principles, or laws, exist objectively, meaning that they are true regardless of what we as humans think about them.[14] Even if all humans believed a certain unjust act was just, it would still always remain unjust—we would all simply be ignorant or morally deficient. Therefore these principles are *prescriptive* in nature and instruct how humans ought to behave, rather than *descriptive* of how humans actually do behave, and are separated within two main categories. The first category is that of *general laws,* which consists of laws that apply generally unless exceptions are warranted.[15] For example, in one of our prior cases Rachel Matheson killed a man in order to prevent him from stealing her family's food. According to the general law "all things being equal, do not kill another human being," Rachel would not be justified in killing another person under normal circumstances. However, within this particular case there were other factors to consider that would perhaps justify her act of killing the man (e.g., the man stole their food, Charlie's life was threatened, etc.). Further examples of general laws include "all things being equal, do not take that which is not yours," "all things being equal, one should speak the truth," and "all things being equal, do unto others what you would have done unto yourself." The second category of principles consists of *absolute laws,* which must be adhered to in every and all circumstances. An absolute law such as "do not kill another human individual unjustly (i.e., murder)" will apply in every situation no matter what the circumstances. To murder is to violate an absolute principle, which is considered always wrong in all cases.

There are other basic principles within the natural law, including the principle of *general beneficence,* which states, "all things being equal, do no

harm," as well as *special beneficence,* which states, "all things being equal, a person acts well or justly to favor his or her family and kin over others." And it is from these basic principles that we can deduce further, not-so-obvious ethical principles, such as the principle "parents ought to provide for their children." Such a specific principle can be extracted from both general and special beneficence. Along with these principles is the central concept of justice, which is defined as "treating each as it ought to be treated." A superior ought to be treated as a superior, an equal as an equal, and a subordinate as a subordinate. Now, although these concepts and principles of the natural law are obvious to us, they are still theoretical—that is, they are not very practical. Thus, in order to apply this natural law in a given situation, one requires *practical wisdom* to discern which principles are in play.[16] Often principles can seem to conflict with each other, and practical wisdom helps us to navigate such conflict, gathering all of the relevant principles in order to determine the decision that is likely the best. To illustrate the practical application of natural law theory, let's look back at our situation with Charlie and Bill O'Halloran.

Charlie is told by Drexel that she must kill Bill O'Halloran or else she and her friends will be killed. To work through this we must consider a principle of general beneficence, "all things being equal, do not kill another human individual," as well as one of special beneficence, "justly favoring one's family over others." If we consider these principles alone it seems possible that Charlie might be justified in killing Bill O'Halloran, since her family is being threatened and she would be obligated to save them. To discern what is likely the best course of action we need to consider the extenuating circumstances of this scenario. At least to the best of our knowledge, Bill O'Halloran does not seem to be guilty of any wrongdoing. If this is so, then unless Bill O'Halloran was guilty of a crime unbeknownst to us, or if his death was warranted in some other way, he would be considered innocent; for Charlie to kill an innocent man would violate the absolute principle "do not kill another human individual unjustly" and would therefore be considered morally wrong. Interestingly, this is the complete opposite of the conclusion utilitarianism provided, clearly demonstrating how natural law and utilitarianism are different. Natural law is concerned with the nature of the act itself, whereas the ends justify the means for the utilitarian. Even though killing Bill O'Halloran may result in Charlie's saving her friends and herself, the very act of killing him would still be considered murder since Charlie is killing an innocent man. Regardless of the potential "good" con-

sequences of such an act, the process to achieve such an end—murder—is always wrong in and of itself.

Needed Objectivity

From our example it seems clear that the objective nature of natural law clearly provides a proper ethical foundation from which to differentiate the ethical statuses of particular acts, thereby satisfying our first criterion. Second, natural law theory is practically applicable in the actual world, requiring human reason and practical wisdom for moral problem solving, thus satisfying our second criterion. And last, using the basic and general principles known to us, the conclusion that Charlie ought not to kill Bill O'Halloran makes sense according to human moral reality (following the moral truth "murder is absolutely wrong"), thereby satisfying our third criterion. Given natural law theory, we were able to work through a specific scenario while satisfying all three established criteria for a viable ethical theory, therefore establishing the veracity of natural law as a viable ethical theory. Now, as with any theory, there are objections against natural law— objections that we believe can be overcome so that the veracity of natural law theory can be maintained. For good measure, let's take a look at another scenario from *Revolution* and consider these objections.

The episode "Soul Train" features flashbacks of Tom Neville, a major within the Monroe Militia, and his life prior to the blackout. An insurance agent, Neville was a very timid man and was wary of any kind of conflict. In one flashback Rob, Neville's neighbor, is hosting a party at his house and Neville, being the timid man he is, politely asks Rob to turn the music down. Rob bluntly refuses to do so. The following flashback takes place after the blackout, showing Neville and his wife sleeping until they hear a noise from the downstairs of their house. Neville moves downstairs, only to discover that his neighbor Rob is stealing from his house. As Neville's son, Jason, comes down the stairs to see what is going on, Rob tells Neville to "walk away," claiming, "I'll beat you in front of your son." As Neville tries to fight, Rob beats Neville to the ground and starts strangling him. Seemingly helpless, Neville is able to muster courage enough to push Rob off of him and pummels him. With his son and wife now watching, Neville relentlessly continues to beat Rob until he is dead, no longer the timid man he once was.[17]

In this scenario the clear ethical question is whether Neville was justified in killing Rob. Given the basic principles of general beneficence and

special beneficence, at face value it seems that Neville would be justified in killing Rob. Since Rob was stealing from Neville's house and could have been a threat to Neville's family, his death may have been justified and would not, strictly speaking, be considered murder. And certainly if his own life were in danger Neville would be right in defending himself, killing a man if need be. Although it certainly seems Neville was justified in killing Rob, this may not actually be the case. Within natural law theory the *motivation* of an act must also be considered. In this situation did Neville kill Rob simply out of defense? Or were there ulterior motives, that is, frustration from Rob's prior refusal to "turn it down."[18] If Neville was motivated by defense and a willingness to protect his family, killing Rob would be justified. But if he killed Rob out of his own personal frustration, this would hardly seem to be just motivation for killing a man. Thus, if Neville killed Rob out of his own frustrations rather than the will to protect his family and his own life, even if killing Rob would have been the right thing, Neville's drive behind the act would render Rob's death unjust.

Once again, natural law theory is able to provide us with a satisfying conclusion that certainly seems to cohere with our common, considered moral judgments. Now, one objection to natural law theory suggests that the theory itself seems extremely vague and lacks a clearly outlined methodology, which, say, utilitarianism has to offer. We can imagine Neville trying to rely purely on practical wisdom and rational discernment to try to discern the correct course of action. In Neville's case, however, it seems that the last thing on his mind in that immediate situation would be considering whether he is killing the man for the right reasons, since he was trying to save himself and his family. Although it is true that natural law theory seems vague, such an objection does not necessarily reduce the veracity of natural law itself. Though it may take hard work to sift through the variables and consider different principles, it can still be done. This is not like act utilitarianism, where there is a seemingly endless regression of variables to consider; rather, there are certain knowable principles, and we need to discern which of those "trump" others in a given situation. And remember, natural law is based off of certain objective moral truths that really do seem to exist and derives a methodology of moral differentiation based on such principles. It is from these basic principles that we are able to deduce what might be the right or wrong course of action in a given situation. Attacking natural law theory's methodology does nothing to denounce the existence of such moral principles, which *require* explanation by any potential ethical

theory. As natural law theorist J. Budziszewski states, "The *fact* that there is a Natural Law is more important than any *theories* about it."[19] Thus a better objection to natural law theory would refer to the reality of these general, or absolute, principles. Such an objection is difficult, however, since many cultures throughout human history have recognized these certain moral principles in one way or another.[20] Of the four theories considered, natural law is the only one to make sense of the existence of these moral values/truths/principles.

This raises another objection to natural law theory. If indeed the natural law is known to all humans and is present throughout human history, then why have so many people acted against this natural law? If this moral knowledge is "written on our hearts," so to speak, then why, for instance, would Rob try to kill Neville if "do not murder" is an absolute principle? Should he not know such an act is wrong? Although this is an interesting point it still does not denounce the theory itself. Morally speaking, all humans recognize that there are certain moral truths. But, as noted before, these moral principles are *prescriptive,* not *descriptive.* It is true that many humans choose to act in violation of these principles, but that does not suggest that such objective principles do not apply or that they do not even exist. These laws are not laws of nature, so to speak, in that they describe how humans behave; rather, they describe how we *should* behave. And just because humans do not recognize or do not follow these principles all the time suggests nothing about their existence. Although many of us perhaps speed on a freeway, that does not suggest that laws regarding speed limits do not exist. These certain moral laws, or common moral considerations, do seem to exist, and natural law is the only ethical theory able to provide a satisfactory explanation for their existence.

Lights Out

Abrams's *Revolution* illustrates the human necessity for an ethical framework in which to discern right from wrong. And of the four ethical theories considered within the context of *Revolution,* natural law theory would seem to be the best candidate. This theory provides us with a sturdy foundation on which to differentiate between good and bad without logical incoherence. Although it may seem vague, the theory of natural law is practically applicable within the actual world. Most importantly, natural law theory recognizes and explains the existence of certain moral truths that humans

throughout history have widely recognized, truths that apply within the world of *Revolution* as well. Rather than trying to arrive at what is good or bad, natural law theory recognizes that there are certain moral principles that already establish what good and bad are and works its way from there. And it is these moral principles that provide us with an objective reference point—a light in the dark, so to speak, to guide us through moral uncertainty in the world around us.

Notes

1. *Revolution,* season 1, episode 3.

2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 17.

3. Ibid., 11.

4. Ibid., 17.

5. Ibid., 11.

6. *Revolution,* season 1, episode 2.

7. Rawls, *Theory of Justice,* 11.

8. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Writings,* ed. Mary Warnock (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1970), 257.

9. There certainly are other choices that Rachel could have considered. Perhaps she could have split the food supply in half and shared with the stranger or punched him and knocked him out cold rather than killing him. However, the number of potential variants to consider would be too overwhelming and destructive for discussion—a point we will raise later on.

10. These are just a few of the potential relevant factors that would need consideration. The list of variables and possibilities may be unfathomable.

11. *Revolution,* season 1, episode 6.

12. There are certainly other principles that could be considered that would disavow Charlie's act of killing, such as, "do not murder," "treat others with respect," and "do no harm," to name a few.

13. The form of natural law theory summarized in this chapter is very basic and hardly reflects the robust nature of Thomas Aquinas's natural law theory, for example.

14. The word "law" here does not refer to man-made societal laws. Such laws of society are referred to as "positive laws" within natural law theory, and in the case here "law" is referring to certain moral precepts humans can simply see as basic under the right circumstances.

15. J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 62.

16. Ibid., 58.

17. *Revolution,* season 1, episode 5.

18. Ibid.

19. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart,* 65.

20. C. S. Lewis includes an appendix at the end of *The Abolition of Man* that looks at similar moral principles throughout cultures, suggesting the existence of some sort of universal moral law.

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Robert Arp: I ditto a lot of what Pat says above, and thank her for her thank you.

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